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On the cover: Sea Cloud II

Adding a touch of spice

Chef Atul Kochhar brings a new flavour to on-board dining, reveals **Phil Davies**

By the time Atul Kochhar added the sixth spice it was difficult to keep up with the recipe, so intricate was the preparation. "Don't be deterred, there's no mystery," he says. "Spices are nothing but seasoning. I use more because I like to show off."

The celebrity chef is hosting one of his regular cookery master classes on board P&O Cruises' superliner, Azura. On this occasion he is preparing mackerel with apple and tomato chutney as well as a delicate-flavoured chicken korma, while explaining in detail his use of the likes of cardamom, cumin, coriander, turmeric, tamarind and, of course, chilli powder.

The first Indian chef to be awarded a coveted Michelin star, Kochhar started treating cruise-goers to his modern Indian cuisine with a twist following the launch of the 3,100-passenger Azura last April.

His family background and unerring sense of ambition have combined to produce one of the UK's most adventurous but unassuming chefs – the antithesis of the self-obsessed image adopted by some of his more high-profile contemporaries.

Kochhar trained at the Oberoi School of Hotel Management in Delhi and gained a catering degree in Chennai. His early insight into global gastronomy came from influences as wide-ranging as classic French and Italian and contemporary Chinese and Japanese cuisine. "That helped me carve my way into fine dining and greatly changed my perception of food. It was an education par excellence," he recalls.

Perfection is the watchword for Kochhar's cuisine whether at one of his three restaurants, or while working at sea, which he does regularly as the face of modern Indian dining at Sindhu, his speciality restaurant on Azura.

It is no wonder he is dubbed the master of spices, given the different tastes he is capable of fusing to create dishes that are a far cry from a typical high-street curry house. For example, his chicken biryani, served at Sindhu, comes to the table inside a pie crust, while chicken-fillet lollipops with basil and lime jelly are among top sellers on the "Nashta" Indian tapas menu. "Most of the passengers are British and used to Indian food, but we offer a different kind of spin," says Kochhar. "The way we do it is very modern, while retaining the authentic flavours."

Three menus are offered in rotation at Sindhu – where a supplement of £15 to £20 per person applies for dinner – to ensure guests on cruises of a fortnight or more have ample variety. "We tweak things all the time," says Kochhar, who spends



Zest for travel: Atul Kochhar oversees a restaurant on P&O Cruises' Azura

at least 20 days a year on board, overseeing his restaurant. "There are a lot of repeat passengers, so we don't want them to come back and think they're getting the same menu."

Kochhar is the latest celebrity chef to be taken on by P&O, following in the footsteps of Gary Rhodes and Marco Pierre White. He admits that it is a challenge overseeing a restaurant on a cruise ship, given the planning involved.

But he adds: "It's a proper restaurant, where you can cook and look after diners the way you want to. I have shied away in the past from being involved in airline catering, but I love this cruise-ship set-up – it's like having a whole new restaurant."

Kochhar uses culinary references not only from his native India, but also from other parts of Asia, including Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. His greatest influence, however, was his late father, a caterer in the Punjab, who was passionate about using local and seasonal food – a belief Kochhar has inherited. "My father was the inspiration behind my career, and I got into food at a very young age, eight or 10 years old," he says. "It stems from my Punjabi family and East-Indian upbringing, along with working across India when I was older.

"We travelled around India quite a lot; my father took us on holiday to Kerala, Kashmir and many other places. That inspired me to find out about the different kinds of food in my country."

Kochhar moved to the UK in 1994 and opened his first restaurant, Benares, in London's Berkeley Square. He gained his Michelin star in 2001, aged just 31. Since then his empire has expanded to encompass Vatika in Hampshire and Ananda in Dublin. As if that wasn't enough, he also ran a pop-up restaurant in London's Soho in May this year, serving what he describes as a casual tasting menu.

Married with two children, Kochhar loves being at sea because he can jettison his laptop and BlackBerry and relax with his family. He says: "Travel has helped me become a great chef. Every time I go away I learn about new flavours, combinations and dishes."

"My favourite destination is Greece. I find Greek people exactly like Indians. They're loud, they talk a lot and eat a lot. All their traditions centre on family and food and that's what I like. For inspiration, I love South-East Asia, Thailand in particular. I'd go time and time again."

© P&O Cruises offers a 12-night Baltic cruise from Southampton on Azura, with Atul Kochhar on board, departing July 3, 2011. From £1,548pp. (0845 355 5333; www.pocruises.com)



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