

# Fuse it like the chef

**FOOD** Fusion is what excites chef Olaf Niemeier. Think chocolate *samosa* with mint-lemon curd and yoghurt ice-cream!

I'm eating chocolate *samosas*. Watched carefully by chef Olaf Niemeier.

We're at Fusion 9's 'Art You Can Eat' festival, and Niemeier's not pleased with my technique. I'm spearing each mini-*samosa* with a fork, so it spurts dark chocolate sauce. He shakes his head sadly. "Dip it in the mint-lemon curd," he says. "Then add lots of yoghurt ice cream," he adds, pointing at two plump snowy scoops.

There's an expectant silence. Two PR people pull their chairs closer to gape anxiously. Waiters gather politely in the distance.

Feeling a little like a circus performer, I oblige, promptly splattering my notes with chocolate sauce. Olaf doesn't even crack a smile. "Try again." I do. The alchemy is startling, searing chocolate set against the cool crispness of yoghurt, sweetness spiked with the fresh flavour of mint and lemon, chewy *samosa* crust against softly melting

ice cream. The PR guys look relieved. Still no change of expression on Chef Niemeier's face. "A good blend, huh?" he says. "Very nice, smooth flavours that run into each other." It's this unshakable confidence, based on years of experimenting with global ingredients, that defines his style of fusion.

## Art on a plate

At a time when fusion's being dismissed as dated, Chef Niemeier's bravely building his career on it, styling himself as a 'Chef Picasso'. According to the effusive PR docket, it's because his creations have a lot in common with Picasso's paintings. He's quoted stating that Picasso changed art by playing with distorted lines and unusual abstractions, just like he updates dishes into "modern, fused opposites".

Fortunately, Niemeier's nothing like his press release. Modest, grounded and



## BLEND OF FLAVOURS Lobster salad; Chef Olaf Niemeier

straight-talking, he explains why he cooks the way he does. Fusion, he maintains, can only work if you understand each component thoroughly. "You have to live in a country and work in a country if you want to cook its food right," he says, talking fondly of his stint as executive chef of the Oberoi in Delhi, where he learnt Indian cooking. "Even now, at home, I like cooking Indian food," he says, "Especially *aloo parathas*!"

"You have to watch the chefs, try each dish. Ask ques-

tions. Find out if and where you are going wrong. I was never afraid of doing that," he says. "With fusion, influences must be gentle, not overpowering. Spices must have impact, but not burn... Many chefs get it wrong. They call it fusion, I call it confusion. It's not just adding lemon grass to everything."

After working in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Shanghai, his individual style involves adding an Asian twist to what's usually perceived as continental food. "I take a Eu-

ropean meat such as a tuna steak, and add potato risotto with banana tamarind sauce. Or potato salad, which is traditionally German, and serve it with a miso paste. In Taiwan, I made a wasabi ice-cream with pan-fried melons. When I lived in Boston, I ran an Indo-Western fusion restaurant. We had *tandoor* lamb rack served with galangal mashed potatoes and vegetables. And *dosas*!"

## Spice route

With about 3,000 recipes in total, he's got an arsenal of spices up his sleeve. "Hong Kong got me interested in spices – ginger, garlic, chillies... I use ingredients I have picked up from all over the world – China, Japan, Korea, India."

His favourite Indian spice? Curry leaves. "I love them. I even have my own line of chutneys, all made with curry leaves, which I sell in Hamburg, where I now live. Mango curry leaf chutney with saffron, Cranberry ketchup with curry leaves. Mint chutney..."

(Chef Niemeier is at Fusion 9 till August 29. Call 4266-4299/95001-22780 for reservation)

SHONALI MUTHALALY