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When Olaf Niemeier, 'Chef Picasso', says he makes art that you can eat, it does not ring as a boast, but more of a conviction of an artist about his creations.

# THE ARTIST



RAJESH RAVINDRAN

rajesh.r@postnoon.com

As Olaf Niemeier walked up to us, I noticed he did not have his moustache. The man with his likeness whose picture was on the poster outside Fusion 9 had one. I asked him about it. "Oh, I wanted to buy a BMW X3 series. My wife said I may if I lose my moustache. So..."

Olaf got his BMW.

I wondered if he was kidding, for when he spoke, there was a glint in his eyes and his lips curled up a little, and when he was finished, he looked deadpan into my eyes.

"He also does not drink water," informed a friend who was with him.

"WHAT! Ever?" I gasped.

"Not since I can remember," he said.

"But why?"

"I don't like its taste."

"What do you drink?"

"Coke, coffee, beer."

Young Olaf's mother would tell him to drink water, but he would not listen. He drank juice, instead. "Apple juice... orange juice..." In fact, that is his attitude to his doctor's advice.

"Do exactly what your doctor tells you not to," he said. "I don't sleep much. I smoke a pipe. I only eat once a day. And till that meal I run on the coffee I have in the morning."

Less sleep and once-a-meal routine became a part of Olaf's life because of his work. They

don't take a toll on him because he does what he likes best — cook.

They call Olaf 'Chef Picasso', who has flown down from Germany as the main man behind THE PLATE IS HIS CANVAS food fest at Fusion 9. And when he says he makes art that you can eat, it does not ring as a boast, but more of a conviction of an artist about his creations.

Amusing that the artist had not got his calling till he was 15. "There was an internship programme at school where we had to learn to do something. Among the many things was cooking. I thought, 'Why not?' After the programme I came home and told my parents that I wanted to be a chef. They burst out laughing because till then I was never interested in what went on in the kitchen," Olaf said.



**I use old school methods and take inspiration from the present and create something new. That's what Picasso and painters from his time did.**

Olaf Niemeier

After the rigours of the lessons of his trade in Germany, he left for London. From there to New York, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Taiwan, Delhi, Boston and finally back home to Hamburg. As any chef will tell you, it was hard in the beginning — scrubbing and cleaning more than cooking. But the promise of travel and the chance to create something new kept Olaf on. And each city taught him

something apart from the cuisine. "London was a place which had a huge influx of cultures," Olaf reminisced. "At New York, everything was big — big buildings, big portions."

Olaf had his first taste of Asian cuisine in Hong Kong and was astounded by the taste: back home and the real stuff. And he discovered what they did with spices and furthermore what can be done with them. "In 2005, our restaurant was recognised for serving the finest Asian cuisine. And there was not one Asian in our team," he said proudly.

Do not count Olaf among those who say "I love spicy" and snort pepper for kicks. "Most people mistake spicy for being something that makes your insides burn. For me spicy is that pleasant feeling that sets in as the food slips down your throat," he explained.

When I tried his Thai chicken salad, I knew what he was talking about. There was fish sauce, mint, coriander, onion, chilly, salt pepper and vinegar. And after I swallowed, I felt a pleasant tingling sensation at the back of my throat, a most welcome one, as I was a bit unwell from a bad cold.

Also it was while working in Taiwan that he began to be known as Chef Picasso. "There was this American food critic friend of mine who would come often to our place. One day he asked me what would be the perfect description for the food I make. He said it was colourful, tasty and different. I told him, 'Why not liken me to Picasso?' I use old school methods and take inspiration from the present and create something new. That's what Picasso and painters from his time did. It appears crazy, but that's the exact reaction that those people got for their work then."

While speaking about the haleem experience, he said he felt it could be presented better. "Tastes good, but the look..." and he is not alone in that. So back came Olaf, made a pattie of it, giving it a covering made from flour, bread crumbs and egg. And how did the patrons, many who gave him an incredulous look when they learned it was haleem, only dressed up, like it? "It was a hit," he said.

On my way out I heard someone with him tell him he looked better with the moustache.

"I would rather keep the car."

