

## Wok of Art

Joyce William John - Sat Aug 24 2013, 05:05 hrs

Chef Olaf Niemeier is upfront about what he is — open-minded, experimental, lover of spices and good at what he does. He is also as clear about what he is not — fussy or afraid. A master of fusing Asian flavours and European styles of cooking, he waves off any fancy assumptions of being born with a flair for cooking. "I had no clue about cooking; I never cooked at home and never even took interest in what I ate. So when I told my family that I wanted to train as a chef, they laughed at me," he says.

Visiting Pune for a Fusion Food Festival at Incognito Restaurant & Cafe, he relates the story behind his famous name. "A

journalist who often came to eat my food in Taiwan, was discussing what name would best suit my cuisine. We threw up words such as fusion cuisine and world cuisine but they were boring. Then, I mentioned 'Cuisine Picasso' since my food is basically taking traditional dishes, giving them a bit of a modern flavour with a little bit of craziness — much like Picasso's art. A few days later, I saw it in the headline — Chef Picasso — and it stuck on," says Niemeier, who is settled in Düsseldorf, Germany.

Thirty five years into his job — in which time he has worked in India, Hong Kong, China, the US and Germany — the chef's cooking principles are to break even between old and new, have fun and get people talking about it. "Cooking relaxes me. I do cooking at home too. Ideas roll when I travel, eat different things, meet local chefs and ask around. I try out my ideas for fun, and they often end up on my menu," he says.

Niemeier goes on to share how he ended up serving Haleem patties to guests in Hyderabad, where he was during this Ramzan season. "It was the first time I tasted haleem and it was very nice but I didn't like the way it looked. So I decided to give it a minor twist. People loved it," he says.

Giving the city a sneak peek at how he plays around with food, he served an assortment of signature dishes that could raise the eyebrow, surprise the palate and impress the gourmand. Appetisers included the likes of Crabmeat popcorn with apple and melon chutney and baby lettuce, while soups section had delectable Duck and potato coconut milk cappuccino with thyme flavoured petit duck confit and cranberry samosa. In the main course, dishes such as Pork chop with Asian crust on sweet and sour bellpeppers and cous cous took the definition of fusion food to another level, while desserts such as Cardamom-flavoured chocolate curd crème brulee with exotic fruit salad acted as a grand finale.

But combining flavours needs to be done with caution, he says. "Many chefs end up creating confusion in the name of fusion. It has to be a marriage of ingredients," he says.



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