

LOOK WHO'S COOKING?

A celebrity chef with Australian roots and a cosmic Indian influence, Sarah Todd has been very busy, preparing for one of the biggest culinary events to come.

BY CHITMAN KANWAR AHUJA

Former *MasterChef Australia* star and International Celebrity Chef Sarah Todd has been based in India since the past five years, running three successful restaurants including Antares in Goa, The Wine Rack in Mumbai, and The Wine Company in Delhi. Taking her trophies of success forward Chef Sarah will also be a part of an all-female line-up of food icons for the *Australian Open 2020 Chef Series*. Chef Sarah is focused on bringing the best flavours of the Indian cuisine using Australian produce. In an exclusive interaction with *L'Officiel India*, she talks about her career as a restaurateur and entrepreneur in India, her more talked about collaborations, and her love for Indian spices. Edited excerpts...

You were a model before you decided to make cooking a career. What prompted this switch?

After having my son Phoenix, I realised that if work was going to take me away from him, it had to be worth it. Modelling had become monotonous and I needed a creative outlet. The travel was exciting, and I enjoyed learning about new cultures and cuisines. I had developed a love for cooking and decided to enroll in *Diplôme de Cuisine* programme at the critically acclaimed *Le Cordon Bleu* in London. After topping my class, I decided to give myself a year to prove myself in the culinary world. The rest as they say, is history.

What made you enter *MasterChef Australia Season 6* and how has it changed your style of cooking?

I was working 16 to 17 hours a day with minimal breaks in a Michelin star restaurant. It was exhausting, and fortunately working conditions have changed since. *MasterChef Australia* seemed like an interesting avenue and I decided to apply. The auditioning process was daunting,



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1. Chef Sarah Todd
2. Herb crusted rack
3. Chicken roulade with fig jam filling
4. Sautéed mushroom and soba noodle salad with chilli oil

and I couldn't believe it when I got through. I gained a lot of confidence and loved the mystery box challenges as they allowed me to experiment with different flavours and textures to create innovative dishes. Being thrown into intense circumstances during this prestigious competition quite literally forced me to grow and learn further.

You have travelled a lot in India. What has been your most unforgettable experience here involving food?

I've had tons of unforgettable experiences in India. Every city I visit



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“WOMEN WILL SOON BE SEEN DOMINATING THE PROFESSIONAL KITCHENS, AS YOUNGER AND TALENTED CHEFS JOIN FORCES.”

is unique and I fall in love with everything it has to offer. One of my favourite experiences was, when I was invited into an extremely welcoming home in Rajasthan. I sat on the floor with the local women and cooked a meal over an open flame. Together we made *bajre ki roti*'s topped with tons of white butter.

You are now a successful restaurateur who manages to combine flavours of Australian cuisine with a hint of Indian influence. How did this phase come to be?

Before launching Antares, I initially prepared the entire menu sitting in my home in Melbourne. It wasn't until I explored Goa that I realised that I had not catered for the Indian palate at all. A 'light bulb' moment for me occurred when I visited a home for young girls. I had made *frankies* for them and they polished them off in no time. Some of the girls then picked up a piece of lime, sprinkled it with *masala* and began sucking on it. I knew at once that I had to create a more appealing menu, and drawing inspiration from these beautiful little girls, I set about to do just that.

Your dishes look avant-garde, but are typically constructed with simple ingredients and elements. How do you champion humble produce in such a modern aesthetic?

I believe in the quote, 'you eat with your eyes'. It's the first sense that hits the plate and therefore, I feel food not only has to taste good, but it needs to look beautiful. I love being creative and take great pride in presenting my food with an artistic flair. However, you'll never see me add anything to my dish which doesn't add value or flavour to it.

What do you think might be the top food trends that are changing the way we eat today?

No longer am I, and many other chefs keen on flying in produce from

another country. Cooking with seasonal, local produce ensures that you are getting the most out of your ingredients in terms of flavour, colour and texture. You will often find the provenance of local ingredients on menus. This practice supports local growers and sustainability.

With international ingredients now so easily available, how do you see the Indian market growing? Is the food scene changing in India?

Indians are becoming increasingly health conscious and there is a huge demand for organic produce. Even in the five years that I have lived and worked in India, I have noticed a change in consumer's tastes. With over 50 per cent of the population under 30, they love to eat out and have a good time. There has been an increase in the number of restaurants and cafés to cater for this demand. Young people today are discerning when it comes to food and entertainment. They demand high quality food, good service and ambience.

What new things are you working on at the moment, and what's next for the future?

Currently, I'm busy writing my next cookbook and the idea behind it is to take Indian food to a global audience through a westerner's point of view. Essentially, it will teach people quick, light, refreshing, simple, healthy and flavoursome Indian dishes with a spin on them of course. My aim is to show my readers that the thought of cooking Indian food shouldn't be a daunting one.

Secondly, I'm looking forward to the *Australian Open Chef Series 2020* where I will be one of four female chefs showcasing our unique menus. I feel I have a huge responsibility to get behind the sport and showcase to those attending, that this magnanimous event has way more to offer than what meets the eye.