

FLAVOUR OF THE SEASON

Given the concern around sustainability, the consumption of locally-sourced, organic produce is seeing an upward swing

BY VINITA BHATIA

Gresham Fernandes, culinary director at Impresario Entertainment and Hospitality, which owns the Smoke House Deli and Social bars and cafés, support local farmers. So does Prateek Sadhu, head chef at Masque restaurant in Mumbai. Buying local fare from suppliers following organic practices is their contribution to the sustainable way of doing business.

So, let's talk about just one ingredient here – capers – those pea-sized buds that lend a salty and pungent flavour to dishes. Fernandes says that he prefers buying it from Ishka Farms, as they provide it in four sizes and these are of good quality. The produce is grown organically in over 10 acres of land at Niravi Pudhupatt part of Tamil Nadu's Tuticorin district and is freshly cured at source.

"While it is difficult to shift to this local produce for all our 45 restaurants in the country, we are using them in our cafés and delis in Mumbai," he said, hoping that these will be economically viable as compared to the bottled varieties in the future.

Sadhu is currently using only the Ishka produce in Masque even though he maintains that they are not necessarily economically viable. "That said, I would rather spend a little more on quality than save money by using an awful product. They taste fantastic and by using them, I'm always confident of the quality that I'm getting," he emphatically says.

REDEFINE EDIBILITY

Chefs are now leading the conversations about organic and sustainable food not just with their guests but also with their suppliers. This is putting the onus on the latter to follow the right farming practices to retain the high quality of the produce – even though it raises the price of cultivation. Suppliers are now willing to go the extra mile, as brands and chefs are willing to pay for it.

"Anything grown in a sustainable organic way will be priced higher. The choice one needs to make is whether they want the flavour enhanced chemically



Fiona Arakal, director, Ishka Farms.

or organically. There is no comparison, as freshness is something that goes beyond rupee value on an invoice," says Fiona Arakal, director of Ishka Farms.

Knowing that organic is a term that is loosely thrown around, it is important that local suppliers work closely and collaboratively with chefs to ensure there is no trust deficit when it comes to quality or processes. The latter should be able to visit the farm to review how the produce is being grown and whether it adheres to established sustainable norms.

Also the produce should be periodically tested to ensure they are preservative and chemical-free. Usually, if it is tested in reputed laboratories, any chemical poured into the ground or on the plant will show up in trace tests.

"At Ishka, random samples are subjected to such trace tests at Interfield Laboratories. Restaurants also reserve the right to test random samples from the produce supplied to them. Moreover, since we follow a farm-to-fork model, the chefs know the source and there is constant feedback on the sustainable practices being followed," says Arakal.

Today, chefs are not looking at commodities when they cook, they seek resources that will delight their customers, but not at the cost of hurting the environment. And they are happy to tap into the growing ecosystem of suppliers willing to fulfil their need for organic produce, even if it means taking a slight hit on their margin. ■