

Chef Grzegorz Odalak

The Magician Chef Michelin Missed

By Devanshi Mody

Each time I'm embarking on a voyage, Chef Grzegorz Odalak of the Park Hyatt Chennai calls. "We're doing something new. It is very nice. You must come." I cannot refuse the most creative executive chef of all my travels. Problem is, this "something" he's doing, it transpires, is a volley of glamorous gourmet events, each miss-me-not, which detain me endlessly.

For instance, over a fortnight, Chef Grzegorz or Chef G, as he's fondly known, orchestrated a week-long festival Masters of Food & Wine, swiftly succeeded by a chi-chi Brunello Wine Dinner, a wacky Whisky Paired Dinner and, the apotheosis of them all, a Chocolate Dinner.





The hotel's new executive chef, who has redefined executive chef-hood, has revamped Masters of Food & Wine (MFW), a signature Park Hyatt event, making of it epicurean artistry. Moreover, Park Hyatt's penchant for flying over international guest chefs and produce notwithstanding, Chef G has taken to excavating world-class produce locally, ever astonishing the city's snooty gourmets who disdain the indigenous. If Indian and French cheeses seem like chalk and cheese, then Chef G sniffs out cheeses made locally (by Frenchmen, bien sûr) to tickle the snootiest French noses that wrinkle at anything but the smelliest French cheeses.

Chef G is Polish but can pooh-pooh Italian predominance in pasta realms with his silken parcels of ravioli that seemingly levitate on the plate, cushion-soft gnocchi that defies even Michelin-starred chefs and perfect pesto made with basil from his own gardens, mind you!



Brunello Wine Dinner set-up



At the last MFW, Chef displayed his global gamut with mastery over Moroccan cuisine. An executive chef who actually cooks and not just commands, he stands behind a live station dishing out tagine that flows like lava down pearly mounds of couscous. The show-stopper is his dessert "tableau"- that's what it is. Chef G and his new pâtissier, Selvaraj Fleck, splash, dash the "canvas," a half-ton slab of marble, with "paints" of creams, mousses and coulis, embellished with pastries, profiteroles and sablés to create "desserts of vast eternity" (pun on poet Andrew Marvel unintended). The ladies clap and coo with ecstasy. Thus Chef G artfully surrounds himself with damsels.

When his deputy Chef Balaji's traditional banana leaf meal Ela Virundhu, unveiled as part of MFW, proves thunderously popular, Chef G decides Sunday lunch at the hotel's Dining Room restaurant be dedicated to Balaji's sapada comprising about 28 "courses" that dot the contours of a blazing green banana leaf. Audaciously Chef G has waiters swish around in crisp white sarongs, doling out curries, traditional style, from steel vessels -- all this at the scarily chic Dining Room. More maverick still, he wishes to dispense with cutlery. "The food must be eaten traditional style, with your fingers. It changes the taste and the experience entirely," he avers, smiling boyishly. The chef who has hitherto had Chennai's considerable expat population eating from his hands now has them eating with their hands! It isn't usual for expat chefs in these parts to conserve and celebrate rather than corrupt ethnic culinary culture with that complacent sense of refined superiority.

Too often I've had to combat the stratospheric egos of chefs. Refreshingly different, this talent doesn't unbelt reels about his pedigree: Cordon Bleu, Michelin-starred training, etc., etc. Chef G is self-cultivated. Like any true artist, actually. "We put our hearts on the table," he says. A sharp mind too, surely, to effect those clever creations.

At the Brunello Wine Dinner sophisticated compositions betoken technical dexterity and imagination. Lush sweet potato and leek soup is smartened with a slap of smoked cumin jalapeño yoghurt. There's extraordinary asparagus, sunflower-seed-and-edamame risotto and five-spiced duck breast with consommé and fennel and grapefruit salad. For dessert, Chef G and Pâtissier Selva conceive dandified pumpkin panacotta accompanied by an arch cardamon crumble, witty orange textures and smug saffron-basil frozen yoghurt.

If Chef G and his deputy Chef Balaji harmonise like a double violin concerto, then Chef G conducts a gastronomic symphony with flourishes for fine-tuned individuals. At the Chocolate Dinner he highlights (in every sense) award-winning young mixologist Abhishek Shukla, who won silver at the Monin Cup 2011 in Paris.

Heralding the Chocolate Dinner is a dramatic chocolate cannelloni enrobing strident blue cheese softened by dulcet caramelised onion. Bestrewn are pert edamame, supple shimeji and gravelly chocolate soil. Chef pours over the ensemble a delicately flavoured consommé from a translucent teapot buoying with mushrooms. A seemingly discordant medley of sweet, sharp

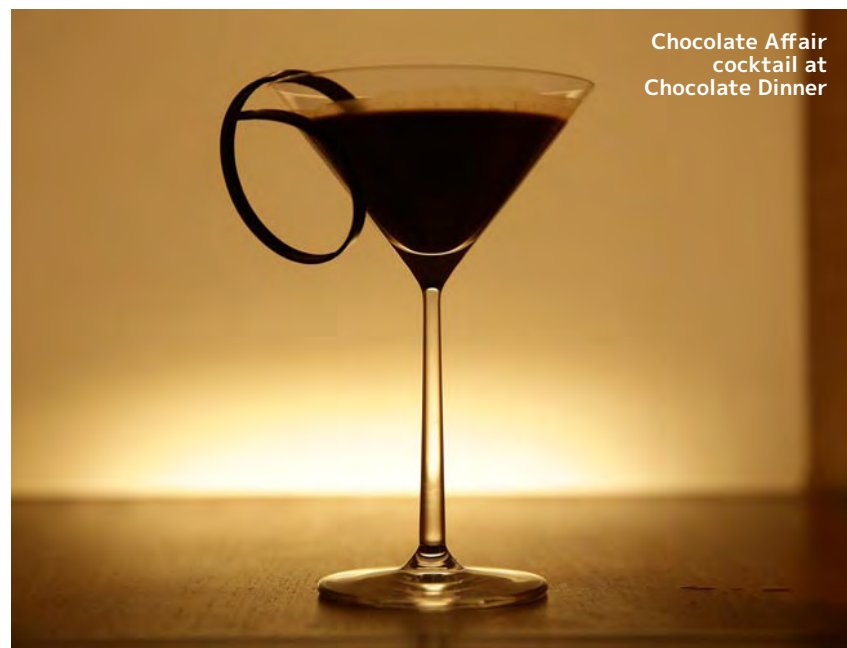


and flat notes and motley Italian, French and Asian influences resolve in what must be called a supremely impressive piece of culinary art. The controlled suave interplay of flavours is like a fleet-footed dance of fairies

on the palate. Invigorating this ballet is Abhishek's molecular cocktail, Chocolate Mimosa (champagne with bobbing beads of burst-in-your-mouth chocolate served with flimsy chocolate-orange ravioli).



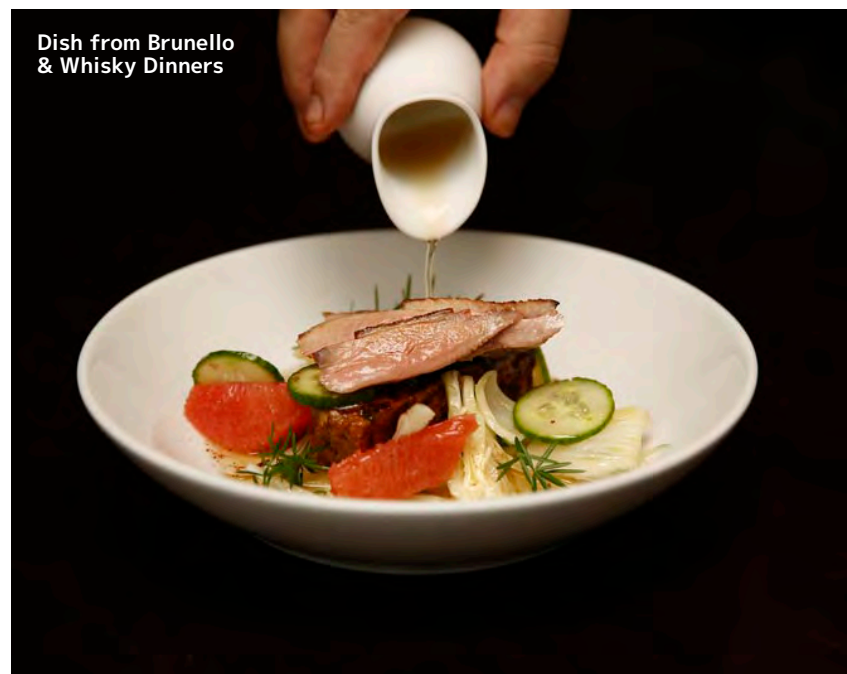
Chef Grzegorz Odalak



Chocolate Affair cocktail at Chocolate Dinner



Dish from Brunello & Whisky Dinners



Dish from Brunello & Whisky Dinners

Course II: palm heart and zucchini salad in an aureole of orange carpaccio blazing through chocolate snow complemented by Abhishek's velvety Chocolate & Mandarin Mojito.

With Course III Chef G beams, "This is homemade ricotta with homemade caramelised yoghurt slow-cooked for 12 hrs." If chocolate & red wine gastrique and coffee & hazelnut crust aren't heady enough accompaniments, Abhishek lands me with Chocolate Affair, but I'm soon succumbing to Chef Selva's dessert with its prissy pouts of chocolate profiteroles and knock-out whiskey truffles. Eternally though, Chef G's compositions linger on the palate and reverberate on the mind's fine epicurean strings.

Too often chefs with little prowess and much pomposity venture the exorbitant, unleashing grandiose menus better on paper than on the plate. Chef G's precision strikes. But panegyrics weary. Let's just say he ever renders me speechless.

I must only add that after reviewing Italian restaurant Allegro at the Four Seasons Prague, I wrote it would be "Eastern Europe's first Michelin-starred restaurant." Six months later when, indeed, they got starred, the hotel wrote me: "Perhaps Michelin heard you." I await Michelin's concurrence that Chef G is Michelin material. Executive chefs don't get Michelin-starred. But their creations might yet have Michelin seeing stars.

Until then Chef G, enamoured of Chennai's great culinary heritage and remarkable local talent, is forsaking his family in Poland to exhibit gastronomic fireworks over New Year's Eve in Chennai.

I'm once again about to depart. Once again Chef G says, "We're doing something different for New Year's Eve. It is very nice. You must come." Once again I find myself changing my flights. Chef G's culinary credentials are many. He has the further distinction of being the only man for whom I've changed my flights!