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Tried and tested: the new Mustard is Goa's gift to Mumbai

North Goa's French and Bengali restaurant swims to the city that never sleeps, with a menu that packs a punch

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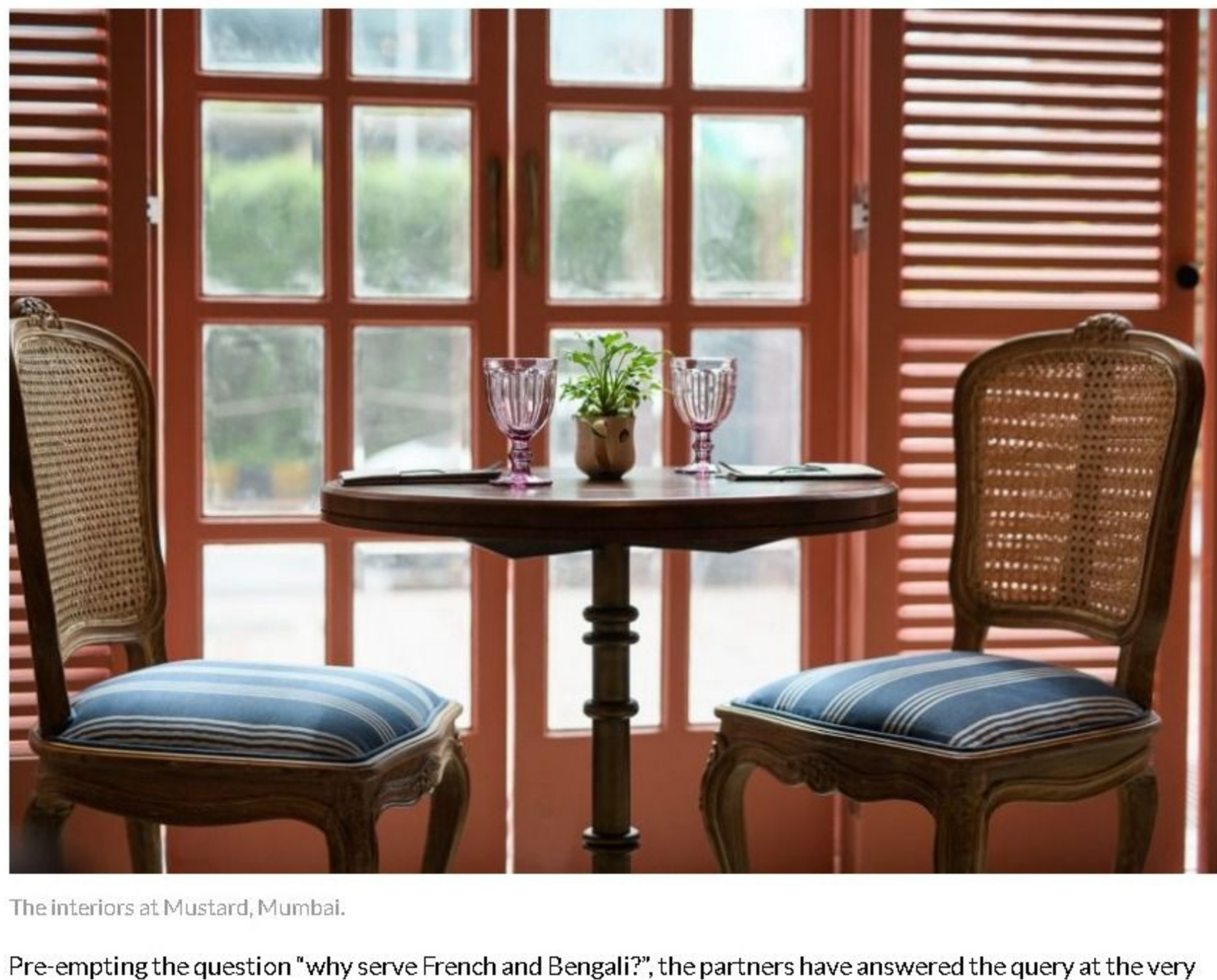


Tomato Tartare Quinoa Salad at Mustard.

Until a branch of sporting goods chain Decathlon opened in Worli's Atria Mall, the latter offered few excuses to merit a visit. Decathlon is sprawled across the first floor of Atria, which still feels like a ghost town reluctant to step into the light. Signs of its much speculated revival as a food and drinks destination are however gradually starting to show.

A large board announcing Starbucks's imminent launch occupies the ground floor right next to the pink arched doors of Mustard, North Goa's French and Bengali restaurant, slated to open here in the first week of July. While punters are betting on Starbucks's saccharine and frothy lattes to revive interest in Atria, we wager that it's Mustard's spectacular mustard-spiked whisky sour that will draw crowds to the ill-fated mall.

From its charming Goan bungalow digs in Sangolda, Mustard has adapted well to its mall setting in Mumbai. Spread over 2,800 square feet, the fine dining restaurant and bar has a decidedly feminine appeal with its chintz-splattered interiors, ornate chandeliers and pretty cocktails. This is not surprising considering that women make up 3/4th of the Mustard team. French chef Greg Bazire completes the quartet made up of founders Shilpa Sharma and Poonam Singh and food historian and chef Pritha Sen, who oversees the Bengali part of the menu.



The interiors at Mustard, Mumbai.

Pre-empting the question "why serve French and Bengali?", the partners have answered the query at the very outset on the cover page of their menu. They wanted to give folks in Goa a choice that wasn't necessarily multi-cuisine and showcase a cuisine that had something in common with Bengali food. Mustard, the ingredient that is integral to both cuisines, presented itself as the answer. While mustard is central to their menu and the restaurant makes most varieties in-house, they notably haven't abused it but in fact have showcased it in versatile ways across the drinks and dishes.

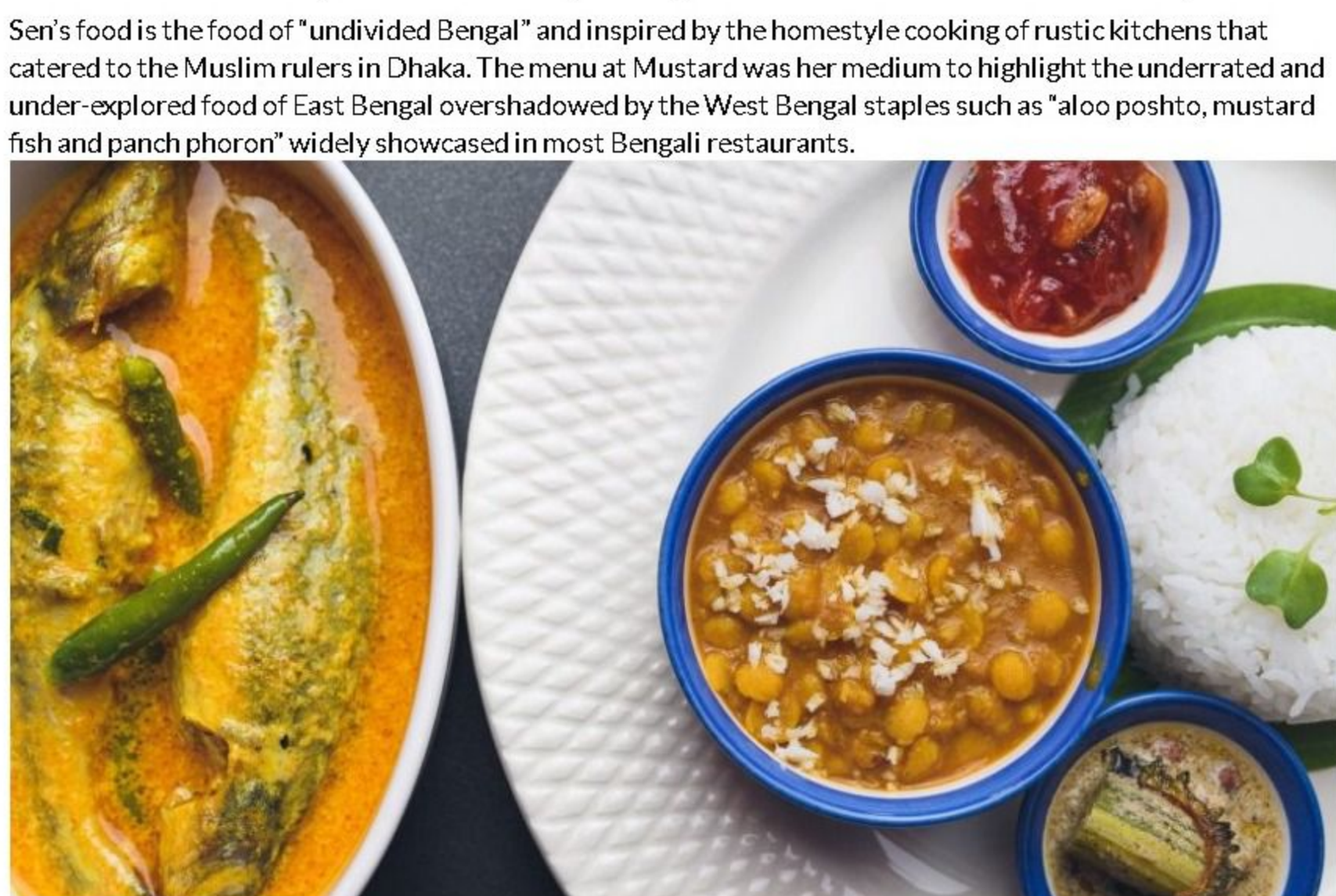
The frothy mustard sour, freckled with whole grain mustard is a fine example of this. The refreshing beverage has adequate tang and a pleasant bitter finish from the mustard infused with the whisky. Mustard favours gin drinkers as evident in their cocktail selection. The Bees & Flowers, a gin cocktail infused with bee pollen and crowned with a generous cloud of camomile foam is dessert masquerading as a drink. Rich in acai honey and lemon, it's the perfect entry level tipple owing to its sweetness. The aloe vera and thyme infused gin tastes like a tall glass of liquid liquorice and is not likely to win the popularity contest. If you can't muster courage on a date, get the lavender gimlet, a potent floral libation that facilitates conversation.



The Mustard Bloody Mary

Mustard's food menu prompts a fair bit of indecision as both cuisines are equally represented. There's surprisingly only a 25 per cent overlap in the Goa and Mumbai menus as the founders and chefs found a plethora of produce to play with here. While Mustard Goa is set in a pretty bungalow and scores high on ambience and cuisine, the Mumbai menu is a lot more thrilling. As such our meals in Goa, where we're regulars and Mumbai—where we intend to be once they open—felt vastly different. Both chefs have notably upped their cooking game for our city, presumably also because they expect a tougher crowd here. Ordering a mix of French and Bengali lead us to choosing sides. We leaned toward the Bengali fare, which packs wall of flavour like good mustard. Our vote, it should be mentioned, was swayed in part by Pritha Sen's presence, a prolific food writer and consulting chef obsessed with providing diners with the context and detail of every dish.

Sen's food is the food of "undivided Bengal" and inspired by the homestyle cooking of rustic kitchens that catered to the Muslim rulers in Dhaka. The menu at Mustard was her medium to highlight the underrated and under-explored food of East Bengal overshadowed by the West Bengal staples such as "aloo poshto, mustard fish and panch phoron" widely showcased in most Bengali restaurants.

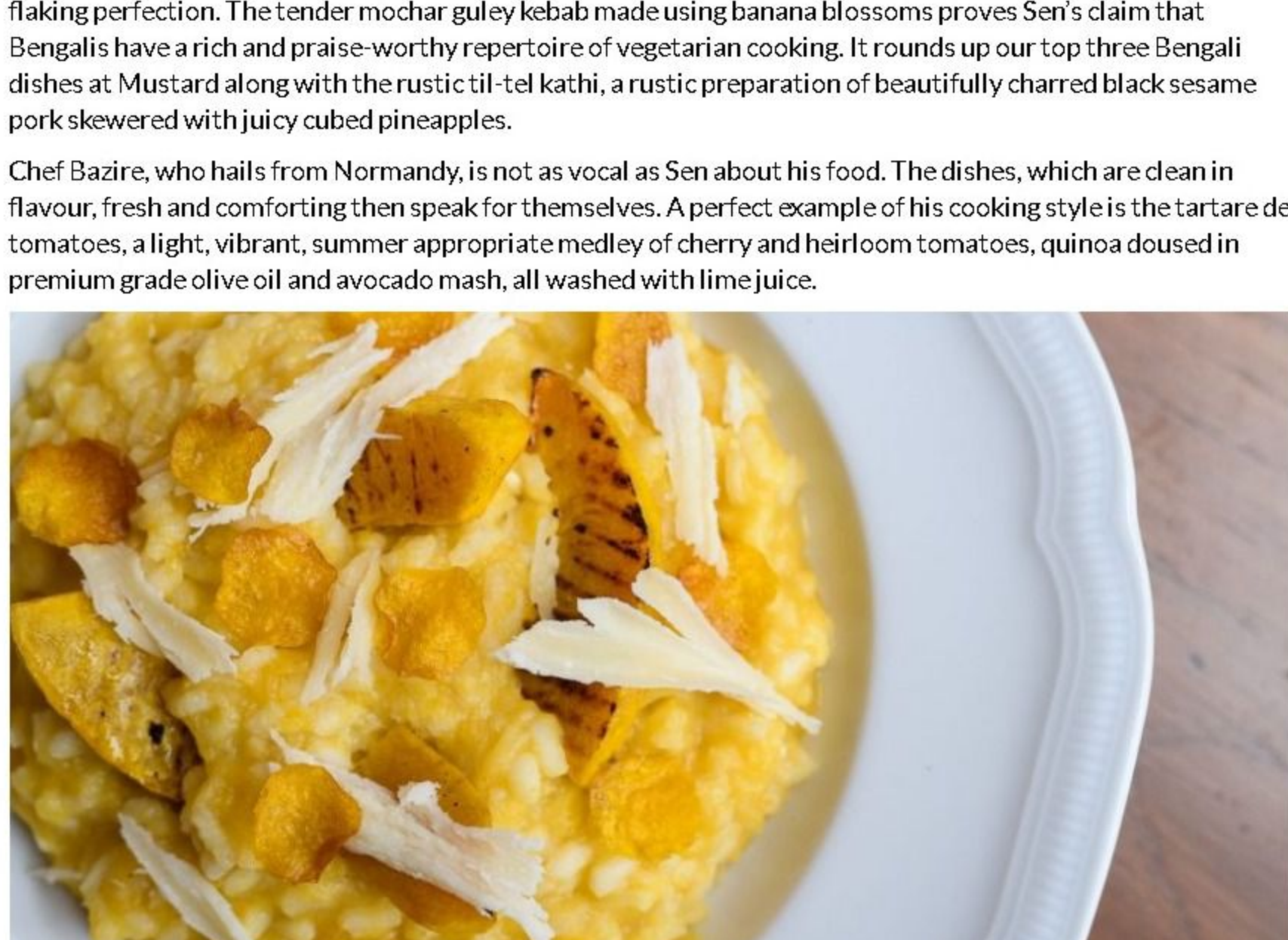


Doodh Tyagra at Mustard

The cooking traditions of Dhaka takes centre stage on her menu. Thanks to its synergy with South-East Asia, soupy curries, steamed food, nose to tail eating of animals and root to leaf consumption of plants were also rampant in the East Bengal capital. Sen's Bengali mezze platter, they call the Banglar ghorowa niramish thala, is delicious proof of some of these practices. From the vegetarian selection, we tried the begun pora (roasted brinjal flavoured with onions, chilli and mustard oil) and the palong sager bhorta (steamed spinach with fried garlic).

The standouts from the non-veg mezze named the Banglar ghorowa maacher thala are the kumror chhyanchra, a mildly sweet pumpkin and fish head paste and the equally appetising loitty maacher jhuri or the fresh Bombay duck pate. Both are heirloom recipes and a tribute to the "zero waste" tribal cooking that employs each bit of the plant or animal. The bhetki paturi wrapped in steamed colocasia leaves is one of Mustard's finest preparations. The fish, massaged with a smooth and not too pungent kasundi, is cooked to flaking perfection. The tender mochar guley kebab made using banana blossoms proves Sen's claim that Bengalis have a rich and praise-worthy repertoire of vegetarian cooking. It rounds up our top three Bengali dishes at Mustard along with the rustic til-tel kathi, a rustic preparation of beautifully charred black sesame pork skewered with juicy cubed pineapples.

Chef Bazire, who hails from Normandy, is not as vocal as Sen about his food. The dishes, which are clean in flavour, fresh and comforting then speak for themselves. A perfect example of his cooking style is the tartare de tomates, a light, vibrant, summer appropriate medley of cherry and heirloom tomatoes, quinoa doused in premium grade olive oil and avocado mash, all washed with lime juice.



Pumpkin Risotto at Mustard.

Like Sen, Bazire favours rustic cooking traditions as seen in the moules gratinées à la Dieppoise, a comforting appetiser of crumb-baked mussels cooked in cream and white wine; the homestyle pumpkin risotto studded with pieces of roast pumpkin; and the lapin à la cuillère or slow-cooked rabbit with olive oil mashed potatoes, spinach and rosemary jus.

To round-off the Bengali meal, get Sen's daab sandesh mishti paturi, a light, judiciously sweetened tender coconut sandesh. Whereas Bazire's financier aux pistaches et framboises, a financier adapted as an almond cake and dressed with a red wash of fresh raspberries and raspberry jam, makes for a fitting French finale.

Meal for two with alcohol: Rs3,000 Ground floor, Atria Mall, Dr Annie Besant Road, Worli