

Floyd Cardoz Pivots Again, for an Elusive Ingredient: Fun

By Priya Krishna

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There's one memory the chef Floyd Cardoz keeps coming back to: He's a 17-year-old student at St. Andrew's High School in Bombay, it's exam week and late one night, to escape the stress and the studying, he has biked to a nearby food cart.

He spots a street vendor stuffing pockets of naan with peppery lamb, spiced potatoes, fresh chiles and lime juice, then toasting them on a tawa, or griddle. He leans against his bike and devours the messy sandwich, savoring the deeply comforting blend of textures and spices.

That's how Mr. Cardoz envisioned the experience at his Indian restaurant, Paowalla, which opened in SoHo in 2016: accessible, craveable, nostalgic and meant for casual grazing. But the restaurant he actually opened turned out more rigid and formal, and not popular enough.

"We were only doing 150 covers on Friday and Saturday nights," he said. "I wanted a line out the door."

So he's making a course correction: Paowalla will close after service on Saturday and soon reopen in the same location as the Bombay Bread Bar. It will be, he says, a more colorful, stripped-down and affordable place, where Mr. Cardoz is hoping he can do for Indian cuisine in New York what restaurants like Ugly Baby and Uncle Boons have done for Thai food — present authentic, regional cuisine in a way that New Yorkers viscerally respond to.

The New York Times

For Mr. Cardoz, 57, who gained renown as the chef of Tabla — the pioneering Indian restaurant from Danny Meyer’s Union Square Hospitality Group that was open from 1998 to 2010 — Paowalla represented a long-awaited return to Indian food, after intervening years at the seafood-focused North End Grill, and a high-end TriBeCa spot, White Street.

Mr. Cardoz opened Paowalla with the intention of recapturing the conviviality of Tabla’s popular downstairs bread bar, with fluffy Cheddar-bacon kulchas baked fresh in a wood-burning oven, sticky-sweet pork ribs vindaloo and a fiercely spicy Indo-Chinese three-chile chicken. But that goal proved elusive, he said.



Mr. Cardoz in the kitchen of Paowalla soon after it opened, in 2016.

Jean Schwarzwalder for The New York Times

Mr. Meyer agreed. “There was something sexy about the bread bar and the way it touched all the senses that was missing from Paowalla,” he said.

In October, Mr. Cardoz was in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) to open O Pedro, a casual Goan restaurant to accompany his popular cafe there, the Bombay Canteen. “They were both these informal, experiential places where you could have cocktails and a bunch of bites and not feel like you had to sit down for an entire three-course meal,” he said.

The New York Times

Paowalla desperately needed that lively, unfiltered spirit, he realized. His investors agreed to put in additional capital to transform it into the Bombay Bread Bar. The name is an amalgamation of the two restaurants that have best represented his culinary identity: the Bombay Canteen and Tabla's Bread Bar.

The new menu is dominated by dishes that are personal to Mr. Cardoz, who grew up in Bombay and Goa. The breads, and favorites like the vindaloo, three-chile chicken and Eggs Kejriwal are staying put. But there are new snacks like onion ring bhajias, or fritters, served with his mother's cinnamon and clove-spiked ketchup; and bhel puri, a tangy, crunchy, chutney-coated puffed rice snack typical of Bombay street vendors.

A short list of larger dishes includes his grandmother's Goan fish curry, dressed in coconut and chilies; and short-rib nihari, a slow-cooked Hyderabadi stew spiced with garam masala.



To match the restaurant's breezier fare, the walls will be bathed in bright pops of blue and yellow, and the dark wood tables will be covered with loud floral tablecloths.

The most promising news of all? Mr. Cardoz has decided to re-create that braised lamb sandwich from his school days. And this time, he won't modify the recipe just to make New Yorkers comfortable with it.

"People still don't recognize Indian food for what it is," he said. "They're not celebrating it like they should. So I'm willing to take that chance here."