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Perfect Recipe For A Camaraderie

Sick of home food, hop on to Manali, which offers a variety of food and beverage outlets set up by expats in the most unexpected corners

WE all go to Manali, once, maybe twice, either shepherded or shepherding. In between snowboarding at Rohtang and paragliding at Solang, we also get some R&R (rest and relaxation) and soak in the amazing variety of food and beverages that Manali has to offer.

It takes a strange kind of madness to set up a Korean restaurant in the higgledy-piggledy midst of Manali Village, right amongst other villagers' houses, and their cattle that make their presence felt most emphatically, but that's what Kim has done and it's called Hung Cafe. Hung is just before the turn to the Manu temple and you may miss it as you walk back from the temple, fresh from the tales told by shopkeepers. Our hunger for Korean food was strong, so we walked a considerable way back, eschewing the charms of the Cafe Manalsu.

Global Flavour

On the lane in to the cafe, Kim the young proprietor appeared behind us, carrying a bottle of whisky. Kim has leased a village house and turned its first floor into a low-seating restaurant with an indoor and outdoor area. We ordered the sushi (Kim explained that Korean sushi was different from Japanese through its use of sesame oil) and a stone bibimbap.

The food, when it came, was excellent. Koreans believe in communal meals, with the food served in large bowls placed in the centre of the table with numerous accompaniments flanking it and that's how we devoured the bibimbap.

Eating well in Manali is contributed to by the numerous expats who have set up shop, serving their own brand of food and beverages, with their economic models sometimes seeming strange to us, unless Manali Cream also features in their diet. A misconception we also had was that these places are



ON THE MENU :
Korean food with
cocktails go down well



Moscow Mule Recipe

- ▶ 45 ml Vodka
- ▶ Ginger beer (to top)
- ▶ 15 ml lime juice
- ▶ Fill 3/4 th of a glass with ice
- ▶ Pour lime juice and vodka
- ▶ Top it with ginger beer
- ▶ Garnish with a long cucumber slice

closely-held secrets and if you land upon an outlet's door, the crusty proprietor is likely to tell you that she's out of pizza crust, but au contraire, these places are widely advertised and in a spirit of true co-operation you will find posters advertising them in other F&B outlets.

We had been told about a Briton who runs a bar and is mad about football. We tracked down Alchemy on a rather foul night. It's on the left bank of the Beas, an area poetically called the Left Bank, but you couldn't get any further than the Seine than here. This came home to us as we drove through the dark by the banks of the winding river searching for Alchemy, which we finally found tucked away in the village of Jagatsukh, just past the bus stand.

If in doubt, ask any local where the bar run by a *gora* is. Alan claims to have made his monies in trading objects d'art back and forth between the East and the West. He then proceeded to buy a house in the hills and set up Alchemy in the middle of nowhere. He's being helped in this quest by a motley crew of locals, who have helped him get his licences and appear to be paid in kind as we saw them drinking in the bar.

We settled down at a table and checked out the menu. It was a pleasant shock to see cocktails like Sea Breeze, Madras and the Moscow Mule on the menu, so we ordered a Sea Breeze and a

Moscow Mule. His bar is well stocked and he's got an impressive array of aerated waters, juices and liqueurs to give weight to his cocktail claims.

The cocktails were quite good and we made a promise to send Alan some of the original Moscow Mule mugs.

What's Cooking At Home?

Manali's not just about the knockabout expats setting up their places and we were looking forward to sampling some local produce which leads us to our next couple of places. An early evening recce had revealed Khyber in the main bazaar and I trudged thirsty from my hotel to see what pleasures Khyber had to offer at 11 pm. I avoided the temptation of a Himalayan Breezer (Bacardi, Sprite and Strawberries) and instead chose to order the Waterfall Cider made by Sutter House who is also responsible for a range of fruit-based wines.

Further on up the road on the way to the Hadimba temple is the first of the two Johnson Hotels you'll find in Manali. The first one is a little further up and was started by a Colonel J in the 1920s. Currently there are two, each run by a different relative. The first one has a nice outdoor bar area and a cosy bar inside. A blackboard on the road outside advertised fresh fruit cocktails and I stepped in on my way down to the market, but sadly, the fresh fruit was finished, so the bartender had been reduced to making what looked like rather uninspiring cocktails. The second and original Johnson Cafe is further on up and has a superb al fresco area with a large inside bar cum restaurant. Spurred on by signs of fresh trout everywhere, I ordered the fresh oven baked trout, which arrived a while later, simmering in but-

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ter and absolutely delicious, especially when washed down with some ice cold beer, as the wines on the menu were far too expensive for my budget.

But by far, the combination of stunning location, great food and value for money has to be Il Forno (the oven), run by an Italian called Rebecca and apparently staffed by half a dozen expatriates who kept disappearing into the first floor of the bungalow which houses Il Forno. Il Forno is situated on a bluff, on the winding road, which leads to the Hadimba temple. The location gives it an amazing view of the town beneath and is stunning at night with the valley all lit up. Il Forno, as press reports suggest, is also a favourite of most visiting politicians, including Mr Vajpayee. We ordered a mix of pizzas and beer, with the pizzas justifying the hype and the Tiramisu quite literally taking the cake.

Apart from all the many things you can do here, Manali is probably one of the best holiday destinations in India for food and drink. As you can see, I can personally vouch for it, and the trout bone in my left mandible is evidence ■

