

# Full of Zest

Earthy and natural, the LEMON GRASS CAFÉ in Mumbai has the mood of a lazy wind by day and a warm and fiery ambience by night.

**IT** could be small wake-up call, this bamboo-fringed, shady cafe on the corner at Turner Road (Bandra) in Mumbai, to the line of restaurants it stands in. Actually, the line it stands out from. Like a rebel in a cadet line-up, it will hopefully nudge them in the ribs, rescuing them from their well-worn and all too comfortable *chalta bai* existence.

Welcome to Lemon Grass Café. Done up by the young duo, Ahsan Ansari and Shabnam Gupta of projects like Bijon Das Gupta's home and Koyla, this is a relaxing place with a fresh throb and pulse to it, promoted by Kishore, Nitin Tandon and Leena.

A low wooden gate — the kind you'd expect to open into a verandah — opens into the cafe. Next to it stands a dark wooden plank scooped out to give it a rough surface, with raised letters that proudly announce its presence.

Stone steps lead me to well-planned seating laid out on a green-grey streaked slate stone: one large table at the centre with other seating skirting the walls. Long benches in sleeper wood and slatted chairs in teak huddle around basic yet sturdy tables. All finely finished to give them the sheen of age.

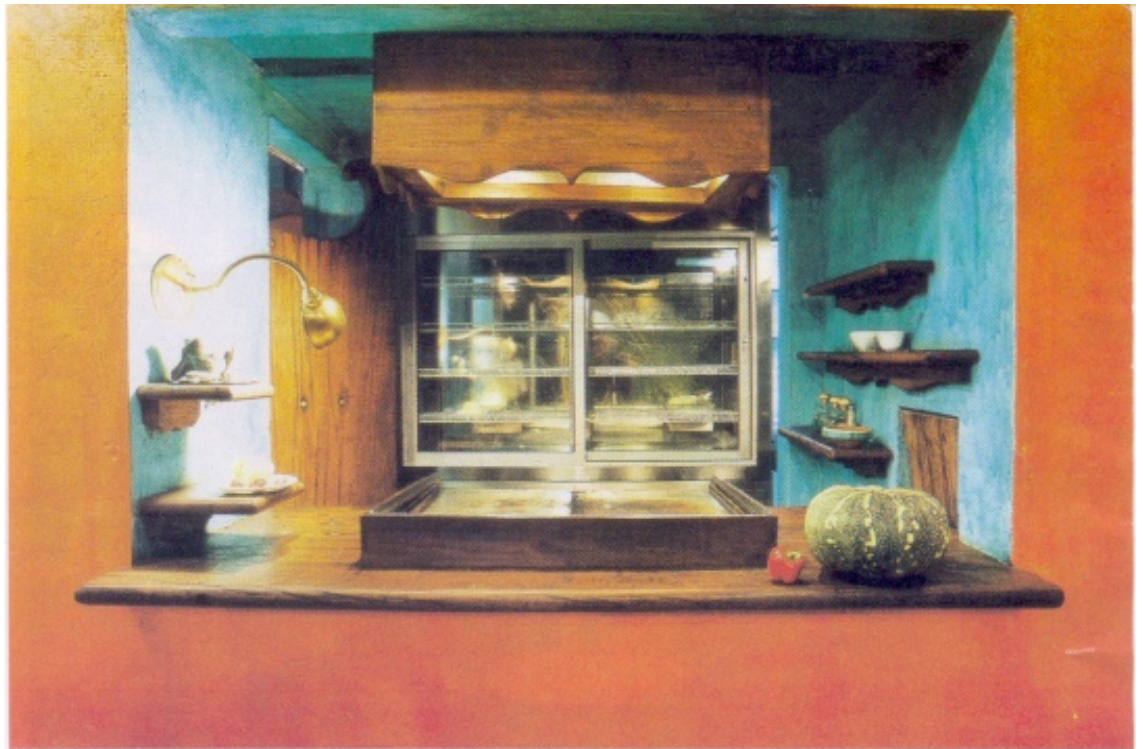
I take my place in the scattered seating and ponder the bookshelf laden with coffee-table books. The sweet perfume of joss sticks spirals soulfully to the ceiling. Once in a while a manic driver hits the horn, but being a street-side cafe, it's easy to ignore the occasional cacophony in this cosy rectangle.

The brief for Lemon Grass

The rice paper-inspired fibreglass roof lets in daylight, while criss-cross beams paint a chiaroscuro over the furniture. In an unconscious way, the hanging stones subtly allude to the South-East Asian reverence for the earth.

Joyful nuances lend delightful dimensions to a small space. (top) Sturdy benches in sleeper wood carry the Oriental motif, while white stone pebbles soften the look. (centre) A perfect foil to the hanging stones: the unevenly spaced niches house tea lights. (bottom) The door to the kitchen: a study in rustic simplicity.





marble bowl and baton — that once used to be a Thai grinding stone. Now it idles on white pebbles while a soft hymn of water from a bamboo streams into it.

But through all this what deservedly knocks for attention is the kitchen door — which is a study in fusion. The rustic simplicity of the beam over the door, the lotus motif, the palm etched into the wood, balanced by the sponge wash of the brash vermilion paint on the wall around it and the boldness of the cobalt-blue glass window, create a visual element that is hard to miss.

The kitchen itself is a closed area. But the open satay bar right next to it, helps retain the feeling of space. The display counter allows a preview of what you're going to eat. Besides, it lets the sizzle of cooking and the sensuous aromas wander through the restaurant, hunt you out like dragons and make your taste buds crank up in anticipation of the meal to arrive.

Tucked away at the other end of the section is the cash counter whose functionality is disguised by bamboo wind-chimes hung at uneven heights. Nudged by the wind, they produce the gurgling sound of a hidden stream.

Just beyond is the loo. Past a small window that thoughtfully opens up the small alcove. But mind your step. A sudden shift in the flooring level jiggled my bones a bit. However, the washbasin I was hurrying to see quite made up for this little oversight. This rustic-looking piece of work, the rectangular washbasin, started out as a normal, rectangular block of old Burma teak. Befuzzled carpenters scooped out the wood from the inside to create a hollow, then chiselled it at the surface to create a textured effect, a worn look. They treated it, soaking it in oil for nearly four days. And now it looks like they air-lifted it from some little rice paddy hut near Ho Chin Minh city.

Despite the budget constraint, they enjoyed the experience. And yet there's something they'd like to change about it. "The rubber sheet used for a framed 'Menu of the day'. It doesn't work," Ahsan tells me regretfully. "The chalk is difficult to wipe off, so it will be replaced by green slate. And yes, the location," Ahsan laughs. "To a quieter place." Bali, maybe? ¶

**Text: Joan Pinto**

**Photographs: Sameer Chawda and Anand Dhumale; courtesy Ahsan Ansari and Shabnam Gupta**

The open satay bar is meant to make the place look airier. A lamp and carved shelves lend it an Oriental character.