

# FOOD

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ts cook their

recipes. Even though he was under real pressure, Pravin made time to talk to this geeky chef wandering around with a clipboard and getting in his way. What shone through was his enthusiasm – he was so inquisitive – and the fact that he was doing something really quite different. Some of his techniques were new to me, which was very exciting: he'd brought along a piece of charcoal and this box, and he put some shredded veg in the box with a little butter, and then smoked them. He later told me it was how they often cooked vegetables back home in India. And when it came to the eating, his dish didn't disappoint – the spicing was really very complex indeed, but there was a true balance at play.

The final round presented an altogether different challenge: the chefs had to cook a specific dish, a coulibiac of salmon, which is a fancy name for fish cooked in pastry. Pravin came up to me and said,

"Look, chef, I've never even heard of a coulibiac, let alone cooked one." But that didn't put him off. He just looked at the ingredients, worked out what the important elements were, and took it from there. He was so unflustered, which was very impressive. As was the dish he came up with.

It was pretty clear to the judges who should win the scholarship, part of which involved a three-month stage [placement] at a three-Michelin-starred restaurant. Pravin chose to do one of those months at the Fat Duck, which is how I got to know him better. His enthusiasm and temperament are exactly what you look for in a chef. He's very reserved and polite, but he asks a lot of questions – all the time. He just soaks up information.

I can't wait to see what he's going to achieve. If every chef who came to me asking for work was like Pravin, I'd have a big problem – it would be impossible to turn any of them away.

**Pravin Sharma**  
Sous-chef at Silk, the Courthouse  
Hotel Kempinski, London. Aged 30.

I started cooking when I was seven, when my father died. We all had to pull together. We lived in Bombay, and both my grandfathers were chefs, so it seemed a natural choice of career. My family was against the idea – like every other Indian family, they wanted me to be an engineer or doctor. But at 12, I started work in the kitchen of one grandfather's restaurants in Bombay, and from the outset I was expected to cook. My first job was to make the samosas, breads and kulfi, all of them from scratch. I loved it. One of my uncles was particularly encouraging, and it was he who convinced my grandfather to sponsor me through college.

When I went in for the Roux Scholarship, I had just one motivation: Indian food has no real standing in the international culinary world, but it deserves one. Just getting through

## A LITERARY Love affair...

Le Pigeon at No. 26 Grand'Place was home to the artists' guild and Victor Hugo took refuge here when he was exiled in 1852.

