Remaking MADRAS

The capital of Tamil Nadu has been quietly but surely shaking off its conservative image, and embracing all that's globalised, progressive and effortlessly on trend.

TEXT CHARUKESI RAMADURAI PHOTOGRAPHY VINOBHA NATHAN

A Goli Soda reimagines unwanted fabric into eye-catching bags.

Centuries ago,
The Bard wondered breezily what difference a name could possibly make. Well, if you look at this city, lots, apparently. Something seemed to have snapped in its psyche when its name changed from Madras to Chennai in 1996. It was as if, after grappling with the initial surprise, it decided that a new name deserved a new face. And it has never looked back since.

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Certainly, the Chennai of today is not the Madras I grew up in over three decades ago. One of the largest cities in India, it had always been comfortable in its label as one of the more conservative ones.

And then the name change happened – in a sudden bid to shake off the legacy of centuries of colonial rule, several Indian cities reverted to their pre-British names more than two decades ago. And just like that, Bombay turned into Mumbai overnight and Madras found itself a new avatar.

As it turns out, Chennai has been quietly ditching its old-fashioned image – but like everything it does, it has been doing so discreetly.

THE PARTY HAS BEGUN

My first reintroduction to this uber-cool city takes the form of a night out at Sudaka (*www.facebook.com/BeSudaka*), a pub that invites Chennai-ites (as locals are known) to experience South America. And the city has been responding to its smoked cocktails and tequila shooters with great enthusiasm. Its Nancy Sinatra, in particular, is a hit with its fusion of black and white rums and vanilla syrup, and the lingering flavours of smoked spices. Its menu – from Argentinian braised lamb turnovers to a Peruvian ceviche of pink salmon and prawns in a lime, watermelon, red onion and cilantro marinade – is a far cry from those of filter coffee and masala dosa (rice and lentil crepes with a potato filling) in the Madras I remember from my youth.

A few evenings later, I feel a bit like Alice going down the rabbit hole as I walk down the narrow steps leading to The Velveteen Rabbit (*www.facebook.com/TheVelveteenRabbitLoungeBar*), a new bar in the heart of town. This cosy space in the basement of L'amandier, a popular restaurant, is strewn with mismatched tables and chairs. Owner Nidhi Thadani shares that the casual space has gone down well with locals, who like the idea of a place where they can kick back and be themselves. And it can only help that its walls are lined with quotes – life lessons, really – from Margery Williams' popular children's book about a stuffed rabbit, after which it is named.

Just a 10-minute walk away is the Radio Room (*www.radioroom.in*), the latest gastropub to arrive in Chennai. While there's less room to sit and unwind – a dance floor occupies most of the space – locals swear by the music played here. Think bluesy, rock-and-roll crowd rousers by The Rolling Stones, with more recent tunes by singers such as Adele and Sia occasionally thrown into the mix. The vibe is peppy yet laid-back, with beautiful vintage radios lining the bar counters, and vintage Pink Floyd, The Beatles and Simon & Garfunkel posters adorning the walls.

UNCOMMON TASTES

Clearly, I am caught in a time warp, for I am still chowing down on masala dosa for lunch while Chennai's young and old alike are merrily tucking into injera (sourdough-risen flatbread) at Abyssinian (*www.abyssinian.in*).

B The Velveteen Rabbit's hushed lighting makes it a choice spot for lounging over a tipple.

C A craft cocktail is the drink of choice at The Velveteen Rabbit.

D Abyssinian's colourful decor takes inspiration from Ethiopia.

E Meat platters, served with injera, are a speciality of Abyssinian.

F Freshly picked organic produce is sold at The Farm.

SLOW DOWN AND LIVE IT UP

UMA KRISHNAN, director at Chennai-based tour company Footprint Holidays (*www.footprintholidays.com*), shares a short and sweet itinerary for enjoying her fast-paced city.

Begin your day at an urban oasis: farm-restaurant The Farm (*www.thefarmchennai.com*). To get there, you'll have to trundle down a dirt road off Old Mahabalipuram Road in the Semmancheri neighbourhood, before coming upon some rustic buildings, and plenty of cows and buffaloes. I vote for The Farm's garden-side breakfast of home-baked breads, farm-fresh eggs, preserves and crisp dosas, all of which are organic.

After that, go shopping at The Crafts Council of India (*www.craftscouncilofindia.org*) in Egmore. It has a wonderfully curated collection of Indian crafts and textiles, all made with an unusual twist; there is miniature art and beautiful woodwork, as well as hand-woven, traditional ikat, Bandhani and Banaras silk.

End your mini excursion by cooling off with a sweet treat at Amadora Gourmet Ice Cream (*23, Wallace Garden, 3rd Street, Thousand Lights West; tel: 91 44 4232 3482*). Everything here is all natural and delicious. Try the salted butter caramel and filter coffee flavours.

Occupying the upper floor of a bungalow in a leafy neighbourhood, the Ethiopian restaurant – the country's first – serves up meat and vegetarian tasting platters, of which the spongy bread made of fermented teff batter is the star.

The decor is unmistakably African, with Ethiopian artefacts dotting the restaurant. "Apart from the food, people love the conviviality and bonhomie at an Ethiopian table that we've tried to recreate," says Vikram Mohan, partner at the restaurant.

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The bungalow is also home to two other restaurants offering speciality cuisines: Meena Tai's (*www.meenatais.com*), which serves regional dishes from the state of Maharashtra (of which Mumbai is the capital), and Batlivala & Khanabhoy (*www.batlivalaandkhanabhoy.com*), which specialises in the cuisine of the Parsis, a Zoroastrian community that migrated to India from erstwhile Persia between the 8th and 10th centuries. Try the latter's Dhansak, Brown Rice & Kachuber – Chicken / Mutton: dal simmered with vegetables, spices and chicken or mutton meat, and served with brown rice and an onion-tomato-cucumber salad.

Across town, luxury hotel ITC Grand Chola Chennai's (*www.itchotels.in*) restaurant Pan Asian has been winning over Chennai palates and hearts with its melange of South-east Asian flavours, from Sichuan to Singaporean. Expect a staggering variety of dishes such as steamed lamb dumplings and pad thai (stir-fried rice noodles, usually served with seafood). Clearly, diverse cuisines, delivered in an authentic manner, are making a splash.

G Spanning 29ha in the countryside, The Farm boasts a restaurant and store.

H Can you take the heat of The Farm's spicy bird's-eye chillies?

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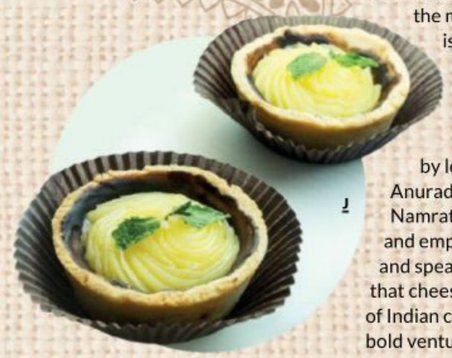

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GROWING WITH CARE

There is no doubt that Chennai is a city with a big heart, evident by its social enterprises that have gained cultural acceptance. The bustling Writer's Cafe (*www.facebook.com/writerschennai*), for instance, is a cafe-cum-bookshop-cum-co-working-space that employs acid-attack survivors and teaches them to bake cakes – their trainer is a Swiss chef – as well as other life skills. One of the most popular items on its menu is the flammkuchen, a type of thin-crust pizza.

Then there is Käse (*www.eatmorecheese.in*), a small cheese-making unit run by local female entrepreneurs Anuradha Krishnamurthy and Namrata Sundaresan that trains and employs women with hearing and speaking disabilities. Considering that cheese is not an intrinsic part of Indian culture or cuisine, this is a bold venture.

"There is a movement towards clean eating in Chennai, with many giving up packaged stuff in favour of fresh, organic products," says Sundaresan. Add to that a thriving expat community and well-travelled foodies who know their Gruyère from their Gouda, and it's not tough to see why there's a niche for Käse in Chennai. The shop offers a wide variety of cheeses, from the popular feta and camembert to Italian scamorza and middle-eastern halloumi.

Krishnamurthy, a lifelong Chennai resident, adds, "Having tags like 'safe' and 'culture capital' attached to the city means that more people have been attracted to move here from other parts of the country. As a local, I can definitely say that this is a healthy, sustainable growth, unlike the explosive kind of change that caught residents elsewhere in the country off guard," she says, referring to cities that have inadequate infrastructure to deal with a sudden influx of newcomers.

The slow and steady change in Chennai also means there's a lingering demand for old flavours in the midst of experimenting with new ones. "We love our cheese with some milagai podi," she says. That's the shop's best-selling aged cheddar, coated with the spicy chutney powder that usually accompanies traditional breakfast dishes such as idlis (rice and lentil cakes) and dosa.

Proof of how far Chennai has come in terms of sustainability can be found in its shopping scene. One of its coolest new shops, Goli Soda (*www.golisodastore.com*) is known as the uncrowned king of upcycling. Named after a popular local beverage, it has taken the term 'eco-friendly' to new heights with its range of gorgeous stationery, jewellery and home decor products made from unwanted fabric and sustainable materials such as palm leaves.

Clearly, people's mindsets are changing, and perhaps it is Sriram Ayer, co-founder of cultural centre Wandering Artist (*www.facebook.com/wanderingartistchennai*), who sums up the city's evolution best: "Chennai, although always a rich centre of classical arts and culture, has been typically slow to embrace contemporary trends and ideas. But the growth of sectors such as information technology and auto manufacturing has brought an influx of people from across India and around the world, adding to the cosmopolitan mix."

Evidence of how Chennai embraces both the old and the new can be found in Wandering Artist's roster of events, which includes lessons in Bharatanatyam, a traditional Indian dance, as well as world music workshops and stand-up comedy performances. It's fitting in a city where you can still enjoy a simple meal of dosa with sambhar (a spicy stew) before hitting the hip new bar across the road. ■

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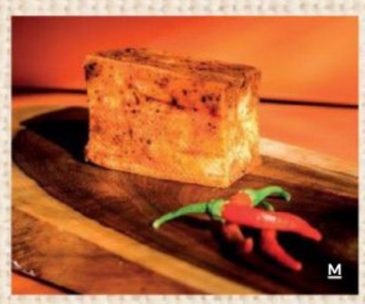

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PHOTOS 123RF.COM

I Not-for-profit bookshop-cum-cafe Writer's Cafe is staffed by acid-attack survivors.

J Nibble on freshly baked tarts and other pastries at Writer's Cafe.

K Snag a tongue-in-cheek souvenir at upcycling boutique Goli Soda.

L The owners of artisanal cheese shop Käse are proponents of clean eating.

M Käse's top seller: aged cheddar coated with spicy chutney powder.

Fast Facts

CURRENCY
Indian rupee
US$1 = INR63.70

VISA
Requirements vary. Visit *www.boi.gov.in* for details.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
Chennai tends to be hot throughout the year, but the slightly cooler months are between November and February. January, in particular, is a lively time to visit, with the month hosting both Pongal, a harvest festival celebrated with culinary events, and the Madras Music Season (also known as the kutcheri season), an annual music festival.

HOW TO GET THERE
Singapore Airlines flies once a day non-stop from Singapore to Chennai.

EARN MILES
KrisFlyer members can earn 1,816 miles with a direct flight from Singapore to Chennai, on eligible fares. Visit *www.krisflyer.com* for more information.

MORE INFORMATION
www.tamilnadutourism.org

Feeling restless for Chennai's spice markets, British historical sites and temples? Discover the city's best walking trails on **www.silverkris.com**