

# Cafreal Central **Florentine**

In Goa, the search for Chicken Cafreal begins and ends at Florentine, the pioneering restaurant that put this Goan fried chicken on the global food map

Words VIVEK MENEZES Photographs ASLESH KAMAT



Florentine has come a long way since its beginnings as a shack

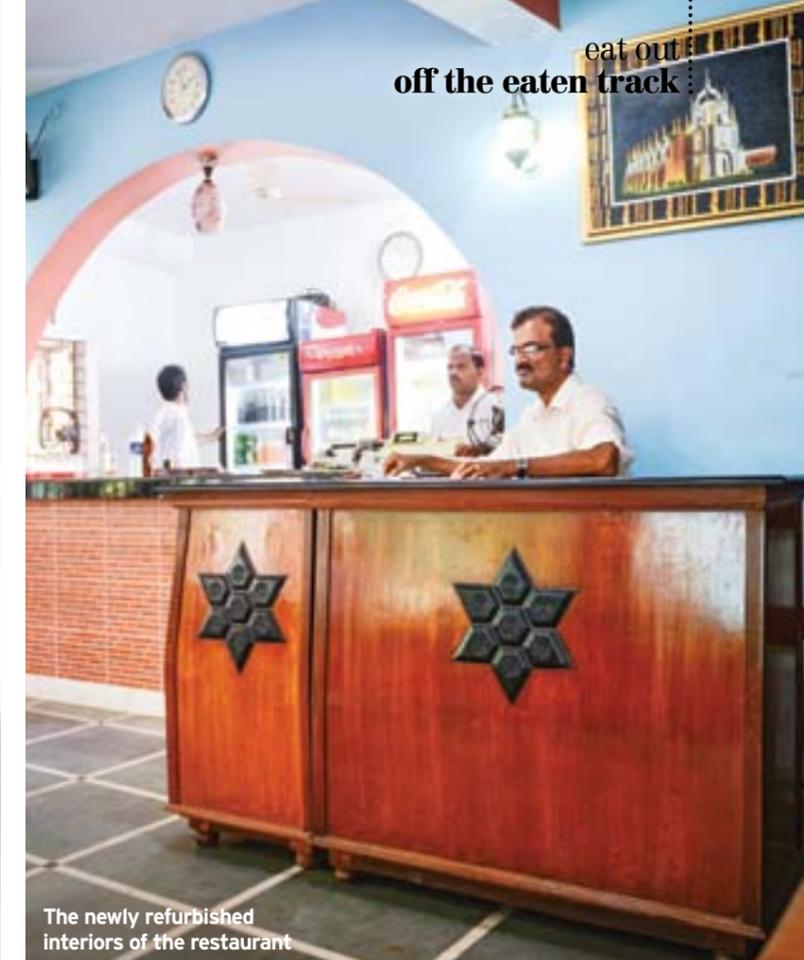
**C**aetano D'Costa first encountered Chicken Cafreal in the early '80s. At the time, he was working in the kitchens of the Mandovi Hotel in Panjim, under the tutelage of a senior chef, Caridade Alfonso. D'Costa's parents had a tiny *taverna* in a bylane of Saligao, selling cashew and palm *feni* distilled by a relative. His mother added homemade snacks to go along with drinks, and the little *taverna* immediately became a hit with the motorcycle-pilots of the region who operated a local taxi service on their bikes. They brought their customers in increasing numbers.

In 1985, the then 24-year-old D'Costa left his job at the Mandovi Hotel and the *taverna* turned into Florentine. On its menu was Chicken Cafreal. Today, this richly aromatic, long-marinated fried chicken that's smothered in a spicy, coriander-heavy sauce is ubiquitous on restaurant menus across the state, and widely known across the world as a signature Goan dish. But in fact, until the 1970s, Chicken Cafreal was unknown in Goa.

Chicken Cafreal is a wonderful illustration of the Goan penchant to make instant classics out of new dishes. While storied traditions of the past are as prized as ever, the state's culinary canon remains broadmindedly open to reinterpretation. "I love the way we



Florentine's signature Chicken Cafreal



The newly refurbished interiors of the restaurant



Old-timers flock to Florentine for its laidback charm

## eat out off the eaten track

accept new things, and make them our own,” enthuses Fatima Da Silva Gracias, the state’s best known food historian and author. She points out how *rissois*, the wildly popular stuffed pillows of dough derived from Portugal, are made in crescent shapes only in Goa, a clear influence of the traditional Hindu *neuri* pastries that are made both savoury and sweet for special occasions. Another newly invented item that has become established in Goa’s culinary repertoire is Panjim city’s favourite snack: the ‘mushroom samosa’.

The first man to serve Cafreal was Gines Viegas, long-time proprietor of what was once Goa’s only standalone restaurant, O’ Coqueiro. A devoted food enthusiast who had travelled across the world, Viegas tried to make a local version of the ‘African chicken’ he’d encountered in Macau (where it is buried under a thick layer of

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satay-style peanut sauce). His own coriander-flecked version became popular with tourists (gangster Charles Sobhraj was a regular too, before being arrested in Viegas’ restaurant). Soon, other eateries began to put their own spin on the dish.

However, it is Florentine in north Goa’s Saligao that can claim the greatest credit for popularising the dish. Most Goans remember their first taste of Chicken Cafreal there. It became a widespread favourite in just a few decades, and in popularising the dish, Caetano D’Costa and his family have changed the face of Goan food in no insignificant way. When I first visited Florentine in 1992, it was still a proudly unlabelled shack (albeit with a restaurant licence). But its Chicken



Cafreal had already earned a reputation across the state.

By then D’Costa had established the routine of personally marinating each piece of chicken in a secret blend of fresh spices, chillies, lime, vinegar, and ground coriander paste. All those hints come to your nostrils when the Cafreal appears on your table, but they in no way prepare you for the first bite. The D’Costas fry the hefty chunks of chicken, with plenty of marinade, for far longer than you might imagine, but always under cover. This lends the

dish its blackened look, and steeped, piquant taste, but also leaves the meat wonderfully moist and tender.

It is a wonderfully addictive dish. I know many people who’ve gorged on Florentine’s Chicken Cafreal for lunch, then gone home (or back to their hotel) to nap, only to wake up craving it again, and return like homing pigeons for dinner. Others pack it in coolers to take back to Mumbai, or even Manchester. “I immediately loved Florentine’s Chicken Cafreal,” says Da Silva Gracias. Her husband would drive to the restaurant several times a month to pick up the dish for dinner. “Unlike some of the versions I have tried before, it has a delicious, tangy gravy that goes really well with the Goan *poe* [a robust, pita-like local bread].”

“That is how this restaurant grew from a four-table little room,” says a visibly proud D’Costa, now 51. “We never ever take shortcuts with the food, and have always remained consistently focused on our local customers. They have been loyal to us from the beginning, and they know that Florentine will remain loyal to them.”

And so, while Florentine’s premises itself have transformed radically from a shack to a multi-storeyed building that includes a paved children’s playground at the rear, its laidback charm and emphasis on fresh ingredients has remained unaltered. As for the staff, several familiar faces from the shack days are still around. D’Costa and his wife personally visit the markets at daybreak to select the day’s offerings: all the seafood on offer is correspondingly fresh and well prepared. The drink of choice is still unlabelled *feni* straight from the distillery.

While D’Costa is less of a fixture at the restaurant than he was in the early days, his philosophy has not budged from the days when he scorned the idea of the simplest signboard on the nearby highway to the beach belt. “Word of mouth,” he used to say. “If my food is good, they will come.” (Directions pointing to Florentine are still sparse; first-timers looking for the restaurant often lose their way, while others happen to chance upon it.)

The place remains packed with locals all year round, even at the height of the monsoons. Despite the fact that visitors to the state now come in unceasing droves, and Florentine is singularly associated with one of the most famous dishes in Goa, D’Costa is uninterested in franchising or expanding the restaurant any further. That’s not Florentine’s style. In a state that has long since lost most of its once-prized, laidback *sussegado* vibe, D’Costa’s restaurant remains an oasis of contentedness and simple Goan food.

**CHOGM Road, Saligao, Goa.**

**Tel: +91 832 227 8122. Tuesday to Sunday, 11.30 am - 3 pm; 6.30 pm - 10.30 pm.**

### WHAT WE LIKE

Only a smattering of places across the sunshine state can offer the authentic laidback atmosphere and the quality of food that made Goa the global tourism hotspot it is. Florentine, tucked away in the bylanes of sleepy Saligao, consistently delivers on both counts: its Chicken Cafreal mopped up with fresh *poe* justifies its legendary status.