

Back To Bombelli's: Freddy Birdy Takes Us To Bombay Restaurants Of His Childhood



Editor's Note: The first time we read India's finest advertising copywriter, [Freddy Birdy](#)'s weekly note about his childhood and restaurants on Instagram, we were teleported to a Bombay of some other time. We found ourselves on the backseat of little Freddy's mother's car as she, having gotten her hair neatly done, bolted to Bombelli's at Breach Candy in Bombay.

Freddy, who can seem to be the perfectly oxymoronic combination of opaque yet crystalline, since he never believes in what he calls 'over-elaborating', appears in the little crevices of his own writing, as he turns the pages of a dusty, old family album and takes us to all his beloved restaurants — most that only exist in memories now.

Says Freddy, "I don't remember the [food](#) much, but what I remember is how happy and joyful it made me feel." For quite a lot of connoisseurs of good restaurant food and ambience, what truly remains of places beloved is the memory of moments. Would people still eat at the restaurants they loved as children? As [Vir Sanghvi](#) would say, probably not. However, these places assume the form of long-owned memorabilia precisely because their mere thought can teleport one back to their favourite table with their favourite person(or people) in the world.

Now in Delhi, a city he admittedly prefers to the city he grew up in, Freddy feels at home at Basil & Thyme, even though, when asked, he said that he would like to find

himself again at Touché at Breach Candy, with its dark, smoky ambience and fun crowd, and definitely, its sizzlers and burgers.

All set to teleport you to the Bombay of his childhood, here's Freddy, in his own words.

“One of my earliest joys in life was discovering that my mother didn't particularly enjoy cooking.

What that meant was that we frequently treated restaurants as our living rooms.

When I was around seven, my mother picked me up after school, and often whisked me off to Bombelli's at Breach Candy.

It was owned by a Swiss gentleman named Freddy Bombelli. It made me think that 'Freddy' was a very popular name, maybe like Rahul is today. It was where my mother met her friends for a coffee, a meal, or sometimes treated me to lunch.

I don't remember the food much, but what I remember is how happy and joyful it made me *feel*.

There were wooden floorboards that protested softly as you tread over them, and a live band that drowned it all out. There was red lamplight at the tables which seemed to turn every person into a stark, raving beauty.

It was already dark and mysterious, smelling of warm bread, fresh out of the oven and abuzz with quiet frisson of beautiful women who wore their hair long and straight, a cigarette dangling from their lips, women who threw their heads back and laughed full-throated laughs and were on the Atkins diet of medium-rare steaks and fresh green salads. It was a time when flirting was a thing, when men were men, and colognes had names like 'Drakkar Noir'.

My father was a man of simpler taste. He often muttered under his breath that he didn't have a rich husband like my mother had, and so the two of us often ate at humbler places where he loved the food.

His particular favourite was Delhi Darbar, at Falkland Road, where we would go to pick up the softest *seekh kebabs* and the most fragrant, delicious *biryanis*.

It was a choreographed ballet of the night. There was a buzz about it, a beautiful frisson, a quiet allure, a mix of tubelight glow, the reassuring hum of animated conversation, cheap perfume and grilling meats.

It was packed with an interesting mix of people. Prostitutes having a quick bite before their working hours. Blue collar workers sharing a plate of Nihari with tall stacks of naan flatbreads, on aluminium plates.

A white [Rolls Royce](#) would suddenly arrive outside, amidst all this wonderful chaos, its chauffeur walking in briskly to pick up the softest Dabba Gosht.

And with it, *roomali rotis*, fine, like Victorian lace handkerchiefs, so transparent, you could read novels through them, to be taken home to some eccentric [Parsi](#) millionaire, sitting alone at the end of a long dining table somewhere, I imagined.

What I knew, even at that young age, was that a restaurant can become as familiar as your home, your favourite table there as relaxing as your living room easy-chair in front of the telly, your favourite waiter as endearing as a favourite uncle, a dish as comforting as the familiar steps of someone approaching you from inside a home, as soon as you ring your doorbell, the memory of your favourite dish as alluring as the scent of an old lover.

As children, we went to Cafe Naaz perched at the very top of Malabar Hill, with its magnificent views of Bombay and Marine Drive, and we laughed as we drank tall foamy glasses of Cold Coffee and ate towering Club Sandwiches the size of our heads, layered with chicken and tomatoes and eggs, with lettuce for sound effects, dripping with mayonnaise for extra oomph. We went for the food, but what we were really feasting on was the city.

At Gaylord's, my mother would order extravagant sounding dishes like Lobster Thermidor and waiters flambéed Crepes Suzette tableside with a grand flourish. But what I was mesmerised by was the decor, by the scalloped ceilings that danced in tandem with the chandelier light and how a room was transformed magically when the

lights dimmed, and the waiters cleared off the tables and the band went into overdrive and the tiny, postage-sized dance floor transformed within minutes into a mini stadium of crazy revellers.

Restaurants were our quiet family time together. Sometimes, mother would get her hair done at Dolfré and then take me to the Sea Lounge at [the Taj](#), where sailboats bobbed quietly in the Arabian Sea as we fished out croutons from round bowls of steaming hot tomato soup and languorously ate *sev puris* off celadon green porcelain, while at tables around us, rich Agrawal families nervously began the formalities of arranging marriages of beautiful brides to prospective millionaire grooms. It was when being a millionaire still counted for something.

Then, there was Thursday afternoon Dhansak at Victory Stall with my parents and sister, overlooking the waters at the Gateway of India. If the dhansak (with its confetti of sweet, crisply caramelised onions) wouldn't send you gently off to sleep, the grey swaying waters outside would. The food was what we went for, the ambience is why we lingered on.

There was the Rippon Club, with its framed portraits of beloved ancestors who had noisy roads, not so far away, named after them. Now hanging in pin-drop silence from the enamel painted walls, over super-comfortable Fornicator chairs where you slept for a quick twenty minutes, with your legs up in the air, perhaps like at the gynaecologist, especially designed for long post Parsi lunches.

My father's particular favourite was the Yacht Club, a Miss Havisham's bungalow of treasures and ludicrously evil Caramel Custard, wobbly like the elevators of the old Parsi owned buildings in the Fort area, always under some dispute.

Later, there was the Cafe Samovar, a long railway carriage of a space overlooking the wild unkempt museum gardens, at the Jehangir Art Gallery, cozy, homey and always buzzy, where the artist Hussain often glided through barefoot and the simple home cooked fare outshone the ritziest of five star coffee shops.

What I knew then is that we went to soak in the atmosphere at Cafe Military, as much as we went for its flaky chicken patties and bun maska, punctuated with crystallised cherries.

At Britannia & Co. in Ballard Estate, the peeling green walls, the slightly uncomfortable bentwood chairs, the chandelier with a few pieces missing, and stairs gently climbing up to the second floor balcony, combined with the sweet, smiling old waiters, were what lifted the Berry Pullau from merely a dish on the menu to culinary icon.

At Café Mondegar, it was Mario Miranda's cartoons that repaired our aching hearts along with ice-cold glasses of draught beer.

At Bade Miya, where my father was at his happiest, mid-bite of the softest seek kebab, just slightly singed at the edges over crackling charcoal flames, that fell apart almost upon contact, eaten pavement-side, under immediate lamplight and the distant moonlight, I learnt that no decor is also decor.

Sometimes, though my mother is far, far away, in some beautiful heavenly place, having her hair done at the Dolfré in the sky, and my father is up there beside her, muttering under his breath, and looking in the refrigerator for a light snack to eat after dinner, and somewhere in an age just a few minutes away in memory, but many days, months, and years away, a school bell is ringing, and my mother is downstairs, waiting.

She has her hair done, and her foot is on the accelerator and just like that we are flying down together, defying, age, gravity, space, life and time, and suddenly we are back again at her favourite table in Bombelli's."

Freddy Birdy is India's most awarded advertising Copywriter of the Year (13 times). He co-owns a design and advertising agency based in Delhi. He is also a bar and restaurant designer and a part of Architectural Digest magazine's prestigious AD100, a collection of India's best architects and interior designers. The bars he has designed are The Kimono Club, Whisky Samba, The Wine Company, Bohca and The Wine Rack.

<https://homegrown.co.in/amp/article/804505/back-to-bombellis-freddy-birdy-takes-us-to-the-bombay-restaurants-of-his-childhood>