

LUNCH WITH BS: Francis Wacziarg

Heritage's `non-hotelier`

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India's Left brought him here but what endured was a life-long affair with its past.



The first thing I ask **Francis Wacziarg** as we settle in at our table at Baci, a new Italian restaurant in New Delhi's tony Sundar Nagar, is how he pronounces his surname. Phonetically, it's "vagzia" — which doesn't sound French to me, writes *Kanika Datta*. "No it isn't, my father was a Polish Jew but his family had emigrated to France several centuries before," he explains.

That's only part of the variegated antecedents of a man who, together with his partner Aman Nath, took heritage tourism outside the confines of princely Rajasthan and put it on the all-India map with the Neemrana chain of hotels (or "non-hotels" as the brochure describes them).

Wacziarg's mother was born in Turkey, her family having emigrated there in 1492 — the year Columbus crossed the Atlantic — from Spain to escape Ferdinand and Isabella's Catholic fundamentalism.

So no one should be surprised if this Indian citizen was born on board a ship in the Caribbean Sea en route to Cuba where his father sought refuge from Hitler's eliminationist proclivities towards Jews.

Given that Wacziarg's birth was accompanied by so much action, I decide we'd better order before we proceed. Having arrived early, I order a glass of wine, choosing Pater Sangiovese, a dry-ish Tuscan red that improved after it was allowed to breathe a while.

Baci, which Wacziarg had chosen, is self-consciously trendy — minimalist brown and cream décor offset by ersatz Andy Warhol-type art and jazz standards playing in the background. We appear to be the only Indian citizens there.

To my dismay, Wacziarg said he didn't drink alcohol and I had a largish glass to get through (Baci doesn't stint on portions). But we briskly choose our meal. As starter we agree on Insalata Mista, a salad that turned out to be lots of lettuce in a slightly aggressive dressing.

For the main course, we hesitate over linguine with bacon and eggs, decide it sounds too much like breakfast and settle for linguine alla carbonara for him and fettuccine ai funghi misti (aka pasta and mushrooms) for me.

In Cuba, Wacziarg's father, a chartered accountant and lawyer, made a living advising the Jewish diamond merchants of Antwerp, also refugees from Nazism. So Wacziarg spent the first four and a half years of his life in pre-Castro Cuba, too young to be influenced by the Leftism emerging in that sybaritic outpost of American capitalism.

But leftism was hard to ignore for any university student in the incendiary sixties, and Wacziarg played his part in opposing French brutality during the Algerian war of independence and in the 1968 student revolt.

It was Leftism that forged the India connection in 1969. Having taken an MBA degree in France, Wacziarg served an internship in Brazil and Mexico. In the latter Wacziarg joined a committee formed to oppose the Vietnam war and study leftist movements around the world. That brought him to Bengal and

Kerala where Leftist movements were making their mark.

In Kerala, he remembers accompanying E M S Namboodiripad on his campaigns. "He was a brilliant human being but looking back, I find I don't agree with him," Wacziarg muses. In Kolkata, he met several Left leaders but remembered more strongly film makers like Mrinal Sen with whom he struck up friendships. (Later I ask him what he thinks of our current crop of Left leaders. "Not much," he replies, "they're confused.")

Somewhere through this, Wacziarg made the discovery that he was, as he wryly put it, more a "caviar leftist" rather than a committed revolutionary and he parted ways with his comrade at the railway station and stayed on in India another four months. The extension took in a trip to the Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry which he said he found "too elitist" though he appreciated the philosophy.

If India was, by his own admission, "love at first sight", it was a stay in a village in Karnataka that made him decide to deepen the affair. "I probably would never have decided to stay in India if I hadn't met people in the villages," he recalls. His discovery of India was accomplished in part on third class railway carriages and buses — hardly "caviar" but certainly close enough to the socialist creed he still holds.

Baci's service is efficient and our meals arrive almost all too soon. My fettucine looks and tastes good and judging from Wacziarg's appreciative appetite, he's enjoying his linguine.

Looking for ways to stay in India, Wacziarg approached the French consulate and soon found himself a diplomatic posting as deputy trade commissar in Mumbai (Bombay in those days) where he spent "four very happy years".

Later, Wacziarg metamorphosed into a consultant, acquiring one client and setting up a garment-buying unit (which he still runs). Now relocated to Delhi, it was in the course of an attempt to make a film on water systems in Rajasthan that he met Aman Nath, with whom he struck up a friendship and business partnership that has endured more than three decades.

Neemrana, which they bought on a whim from the local maharaja in 1986 in a state of grave disrepair, was not the first of their collaborations. "We had no idea it would be a hotel," Wacziarg recalls. Before that, they collaborated on a coffee table book on the frescos of Shekhavati (1982) and later, one on the art and crafts of Rajasthan.

These books proved handy when Wacziarg decided to apply for Indian citizenship, a process that took several years. Contributions to India's cultural heritage strengthened chances of citizenship, so the books were duly submitted as annexures to the application. Only, Wacziarg discovered to his amusement, that the annexures kept being "misplaced". "I had to submit six or seven of these in the course of my application," he remembers.

Finally, on December 31, 1990, Wacziarg was summoned to swear on the Constitution that he would be a loyal Indian citizen — "so you see, I am more Indian than you are," he jokes.

For all that, Wacziarg's avoids, for instance, the deliberate Indianisation that inexplicably makes foreigners phoney to Indians. Though he can speak and read Hindi and Tamil, he doesn't wear Indian clothes for example. "It's what my friends say they like about me," he agrees when I mention this.

So what drew him to India? "I don't know, maybe it was a feeling that India was going to take off," he muses, adding, "Though it turned out I was 25 years too early!"

Neemrana is now a 14-property chain that almost stretches the length of India — from Tranquebar in Tamil Nadu to a property in Patiala in Punjab that is slated to open September. Over the years, it has developed a reputation for chic domestic tourism — 85 per cent of its visitors are Indian. Yet the turnover is just Rs 20 crore or so. That's because the duo own just four of the properties under the brand, the rest they manage.

Wacziarg explains that they work on a model in which the owners are paid a percentage of the turnover rather than the profit so that they don't have to wait for a return, since profits typically take three or four years to materialise.

Ever peripatetic the hotels and the garments business are just a few of the things that prove an outlet for his palpably restless energy. Wacziarg's new enthusiasm is the Neemrana Music Foundation which recently staged an Indianised version of the Bizet's opera Carmen featuring his daughter who is an opera singer (he also has a son who teaches in UCLA).

As we leave, Wacziarg, who appears to know India's who's who, discovers a friend at the next table and stops for a chat (in French). Downstairs, there's another Frenchman and a further exchange of pleasantries. As we exit, Wacziarg greets the owner of a nearby handicraft shop like an old friend — he lived in Sundar Nagar for some years — and I leave this unflappably amiable citizen of the world exchanging yet more reminiscences.