

Condé Nast Traveller

Is Auroville the next hotspot for Italian cuisine in India?

The spiritual town now serves up hand crafted pasta, cured meats, artisanal buffalo milk cheese and traditional Italian gelato

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L-R: An Auroville signboard. Photo: Hugh Mitton / Alamy Stock Photo. At The Gelato Factory.

Auroville, the international township located outside [Pondicherry](#), was founded in 1968 by Mira Alfassa (known as “The Mother”), as an experimental community with a focus on attracting people from all over the world and achieving human unity. An unpredicted yet delightful by-product of this ambition has been the emergence of a vibrant and diverse food scene that makes the Auroville of today worthy of serious attention as a culinary destination. I grew up as a child in Auroville during the nineties and early 2000s; there were hardly any options for restaurants and fine cuisine. The emergence of this international food scene is recent and today the community (and its visitors) have access to Israeli, Korean, Japanese, and French cuisine. But the most thriving food scene is without a doubt, Italian.

Auroville’s Italian food scene was kickstarted in 2008 with the opening of **Tanto’s Pizzeria**, which quickly became nationally renowned for wood-fired pizzas. The scene has grown quite dramatically since back then. More recently, four Italian chefs have been cooking up a storm on a single lane in Kuilapalayam, a dusty village neighboring Auroville. They serve what is arguably some of the most genuine, delicious Italian cuisine in India, balancing the imperatives of being both indulgent and healthy. Whether you’re in the mood for classic pastas, pizzas, Italian cheeses, or gelato, —Kuilapalayam has it all. As Francesco Carboni, owner of The Gelato Factory tells me, recently, these restaurant owners have been joking that they should speak to the village panchayat about changing the name of their lane to “Little Italy”.



Pasta, pizza and more on offer at Gastronomica. Photo: Ayesha Kapur

Umami Kitchen, opened in August of this year, is the latest addition to the cluster of Italian eateries. Operated by Leonardo Seghi—or Leo—and his wife Bidisha Samantaray, it is a small restaurant and deli that invokes the inviting atmosphere of a living room, with a handful of coffee tables, cozy chairs, and book-lined walls. Leo

is from Tuscany, developed a love for cooking from his family, and furthered his expertise by training as a chef at Le Cordon Bleu in Florence. While the focus is Italian food, the menu also includes a wide variety of Asian dishes, including Thai curry, tom kha, hoisin chicken and more.

Despite being forced to delay their opening plans due to the pandemic, Bidisha and Leo tell me that it gave them time to stabilise their operations and scale up gradually to handle full demand when the situation improves.

Leo personally prepares each dish with the help of a small support team, using mostly organic ingredients that are consciously sourced from local vendors. The roast beef and chicken are cooked sous-vide, allowing them to tenderize perfectly. They also sell cured meats, sausages, and products such as ragu bolognese sauce, chicken liver pate, and marinated chilies under their brand Il Toscano.

Gastronomica is a gourmet food outlet just up the road from Umami Kitchen. Gastronomica derives its name from the Italian word, “gastronomia” which is the moniker for small stores in Italy that sell fresh, high-quality, preservative-free ready-made foods along with some packaged products.



Antonello at Gastronomica. Photo: Ayesha Kapur

Walking into the store, the smell of freshly baked bread hits the senses. Artisanal products such as hemp flour, organic capers, and their handmade pasta line the walls.

At **Gastronomica**, which opened last year, Antonello offers roast chicken, square [pizza](#), focaccia, and ciabatta bread on a daily basis. Once a week, he will cook and prepare a leg of pork over seven hours and slice the meat in front of the customers. On Tuesdays and Saturdays, he makes his famous Napoletana pizza with his colleague Antonio Scirocco. Antonello started his culinary journey as a child, learning how to make pasta the traditional way with his family and with an Italian “big mama”. After working in kitchens around Europe, he came to Auroville six years ago and volunteered with the community before starting his own business. Although Gastronomica does not have a sit-down area for customers, it maintains the friendly and welcoming atmosphere of an authentic Italian “gastronomia”.

If you’re looking for dessert after your meal, **The Gelato Factory**, located around the corner from Gastronomica, is the place to go. It is a spacious and relaxing place with a colourful design scheme. There’s an assortment of packaged coffees and teas for sale, and a gelato freezer displaying a wide variety of flavours such as tiramisu, hazelnut, pink guava, pineapple ginger, and vegan chocolate.



Francesco Carboni of The Gelato Factory

With a designated corner for children to play in and an easy laid back vibe, the Factory is a social and cultural place for people to meet and interact. Owners Francesco Carboni and Silvia Latini, are both from Italy, and received their training

in gelato-making from a master in the traditional Italian way. The gelato here is made without preservatives, chemicals, artificial colours or thickeners. They have over 16 vegan ice creams and offer healthy alternatives to refined sugar such as unrefined coconut sugar. Taking a bite of their fruit-based ice cream is like chomping into fruit itself, with all its lovely nuances of flavour. It is clear that the efforts they make to not compromise on the quality of their produce and their process has paid off.

M&M Cheese Factory Store is a clean, brightly lit store with a minimalist, functional interior design. Behind a glass counter, rows of delectable cheeses are displayed next to neat, handwritten labels. Massimo Bovi, who runs the store together with his partner Monica Pau, has over ten years of experience studying cheese making in Italy. He grew up in the mountains in Italy, next to the French and Swiss border, where he began learning about cheesemaking before receiving formal training.



The counter at M&M Cheese Factory Store. Photo: Ayesha Kapur

With minimal equipment and help, Massimo and Monica now sell a variety of cheeses made out of goat, buffalo, and cow milk. Some of Massimo's famous cheeses include his mozzarella, burrata, aged goat cheese, ricotta, scamorza, and caciotta. He is passionate about experimenting with different ingredients rather than exclusively working with cow milk like many other cheese makers in the area. The couple also sells tomato sauce, pesto, and their own jams and chutneys made to pair well with cheese. It is evident that aside from Massimo's skill in cheese making,

he is also a practical and self-reliant man. Much of the interior furniture and the container building behind the store that houses the factory— were made by the cheesemaker himself. The personal care and attention Massimo and Monica put into the store and their products are evident—everything here tastes authentic and artisanal.

When I grew up in Auroville, sous vide cooking, hand crafted pasta, cured meats, artisanal buffalo milk cheeses, and traditional Italian gelato were all unattainable and inaccessible luxuries. These were treats that I associated with travelling abroad, and to this day, the food from these restaurants on that dusty lane in Kuilapalayam still makes me feel like I am somewhere in Italy. For residents of Auroville and tourists from across the country, this small village today offers a truly unique culinary experience, shaped by the eclectic cultural mixing of rural South India, Italy, and Auroville.



Employees at The Gelato Factory