



# Queen of the Court

Sania Mirza rules, not just on tennis courts, but also in the hearts of the sports-loving people of India and there are many who swear by her. With 27 international tennis titles under her belt she is still as grounded as ever. A chat with the World No. 1 over a sumptuous Hyderabadi meal

Sania Mirza is no enigma. We know everything about her that we need to know. She has been right there in front of us, in full view, since almost a child, or at least a teenager of 15, when she won the Mixed Doubles bronze medal in the Busan Asian Games. Today, after 13 years, she continues to stay in our view, in full glare, larger than life, on the international tennis courts, doing India proud.

When I saw her confidently walking towards me, in her four-inch high heel shoes and trendy distressed designer jeans, at Hotel Sahara Star near the Bombay airport, my first thought was, 'Hey, is she svelte!'

"You are a lot thinner than how you appear on the TV screen in your tennis clothes," I told her, in greeting, to which she smiled and replied, "But believe me, I eat well, I love good food."

That is good to know Sania, for we do think enjoying and appreciating good food equates with the good life.

Having just returned from Wimbledon where she had won her 27th international title with doubles partner, Martina Hingis, Sania was all aglow. But there was nothing in her demeanour that was over the top. Like a mature and level-headed young woman she seems to take success in her confident stride. "Yea, not that I have got used to it, or anything like that, but it's been so long that I have been at the courts. I had no clue how my life would unfold, when I was training and playing as just a five-year-old. But yes, it's been good," she

Text & Photographs:  
**Farzana Contractor**





If we didn't know who she was, we'd think she was a model

says. But it was not all hunky dory for this spunky lass. She thought her career was quite finished, in 2010, when she suffered an awful wrist injury. “It was so bad,” she says, demonstrating, picking up the fork from the table, “that I could not even pick up a fork, like this!” Yet, with good doctors, caring family, supportive husband and a great deal of perseverance, she ‘done’ it! Was back in the tennis circuit, with a vengeance, adding more feathers to her cap. Two medals at the Commonwealth, two at the Asian Games and on it went. And how long does she envisage she will continue to play? It’s anyone’s guess, for she doesn’t know. Life just continues to happen to her. She says if she happens to wake up one morning with the knowledge that she has stopped playing competitive tennis, she will not sigh and be regretful. “I am honestly, completely fulfilled. I feel truly blessed, *Masha’Allah*. My achievements have gone beyond my dreams, so there

Sania confesses she can’t cook. “Look, I told Shoaib, before we were married, that I can’t cook!” Obviously that don’t matter to the good-looking Pakistani cricketer, for he pretty much dotes on her.



would be no room for regret...” As comfortable as she appeared in front of my camera, and knowing that she has umpteen friends in the film industry of Bombay, I asked her the obvious question, “You see yourself ever acting in a Bollywood film?” “Nooo,” she counter questions, “Why would I?” I am Number 1 in my chosen field, why would I spoil that

by being any less at something else! No. not my cup of tea. I won’t do anything else.” True winner, this. Well, she would give a run for their money to any professional model and knowing how much of a role model she could be to millions of aspiring young sports women in our country, I do hope she will take up suitable assignments. But coming to food and wine and travel, the nature of this magazine, I asked Sania, “Do you cook?” Amidst peals of youthful laughter, she responds in the negative. “I have never cooked. Not a thing, ever. But like I said, I can eat!” I am not surprised that Sania has never cooked. I mean, where was the time? She was busy sweating it out, outdoors, on the tennis courts, right since she was a child and until she got married and now five years after marriage, she is still chasing the ball! I don’t blame her for not sweating it out in the kitchen. “No time, to cook, but do you have the inclination?”, I ask.

The answer may have been lost in the commotion caused by an underwater swimmer, in full gear, complete with oxygen tank on his back appearing in the water tank surrounding us, at the beautiful PDR (private dining room), with a placard in hand, welcoming Sania and Team *UpperCrust!* Sania seemed pretty delighted with this charming gesture from Sahara Star, a hotel she quite favours to live in, when in Bombay. But as regards cooking, I did learn that Sania attempts to make tea and eggs for her husband in her *avatar* as a dutiful, loving wife, now and then, like Sunday mornings! But she is quick to confess, “Look, I told Shoaib, before we were married, that I can’t cook!” Obviously that don’t matter to the good-looking Pakistani cricketer, for he pretty much dotes on her. “He is not the flowers kind of a guy, but yes, he brings me lovely chocolates, all the time!” So what does Sania like to eat when she goes dining out? Which cuisine does she favour most? Hyderabad food naturally tops the list, but she likes to try every cuisine. She says she likes tasting new food everywhere. She is as comfortable with *sushi* and *sashimi* as she is with *haleem* and *paya*. But the one dish that is her ultimate weakness is the Hyderabad *biryani*.



At home at Sahara Star





So what's her pick going to be? *Nalli Gosht, haleem, Chicken 65 or biryani?*

She is as comfortable with *sushi* and *sashimi* as she is with *haleem* and *paya*. But the one dish that is her ultimate weakness is the Hyderabadi *biryani*. Anywhere, anytime.



Anywhere, anytime. But not during tournaments, at least not before matches. During those days she indulges in careful eating. It's all about a balanced diet. Proteins and carbs. So usually it is pasta, which she otherwise is not partial to. And of course there is the fast energy tubes which offer quick energy releases and the recovery shakes. Meals have to be carefully spaced out. But it is tricky, she says, when she is scheduled to play the second match of the day, which is usually at 12.20 pm, since one simply can't say when the first match will end. So generally speaking she would have ate a moderate meal half an hour before a match. If that takes care of the role food plays in Sania's life, how about travel, does she like to travel? The answer should not have

surprised me; she hates to travel! "Travel for me is a job!" It is, I guess, when out of 52 weeks in a year, you spend 30 weeks, living life out of a suitcase. "Believe me, I would rather be pulling out my clothes from my cupboard at home! A holiday is a painful idea. I am a homebody. I'd much rather be lazying at home in my tracks, reading a book." Well, I can't wish her anything better than reading an autobiography – which is her preferred reading, lying in a hammock in one of the three homes that she shuffles between; Hyderabad, Lahore and Dubai. Fortunately for Sania, her multiple entry, long term visa poses no hindrance to visiting her in-laws' home in Pakistan as often as she likes. "I must say the visa authority personnel are most kind and cooperative." Is there anything that Sania misses in her life, or anything that she would like to change? After some contemplation she says, "You know, I did get decent coaching as a kid, my father, mother, were very supportive, in fact it's their encouragement that got me where it did, but the facilities, the infrastructure was not that adequate. And so to rectify that, with combined family effort we set up *The Sania Mirza Tennis Academy* and we all contribute towards that goal in good measure. It would have been nice if I had enjoyed this kind of set-up when I was growing up," she concludes.



Why, *biryani* of course! Chef Vishal Singh Kunwar offering it to the tennis star





Chillies, says Sania, she can even eat raw

*The Sania Mirza Tennis Academy, considered the best in the subcontinent, is situated in Hyderabad, on four acres. It has 12 courts, 13 coaches, with two senior ones. It has about 70 kids being trained. And anyone from age five to 55 can join the academy to enjoy a spot of tennis and learn to play the game. “The legacy of tennis must go on in India,” she smiles disarmingly. Her uncle, ex Ranji Trophy cricketer, Fayyad Baig is the CEO of the tennis academy.*

There is another pet subject, something else that is close to her heart. Namely that of woman empowerment. And Sania, who incidentally is the UN Women’s Goodwill Ambassador, has just the opportunity to do so, in that capacity. She works at creating awareness on gender equality and helps motivate young women. She is passionate about inspiring girls to be strong and determined. Says Sania, “It is a man’s world, for sure. But women have to boldly carve out a meaningful niche for themselves. I feel, since I was 18 I have had all kinds of questions thrown at me. It used to be difficult dealing with all of that, but I have dealt with all the ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ and come through strongly. To be a woman was already tough, to be a woman celebrity was even tougher. Sometimes I feel far older than my 28 years because of the limelight that I have had to live under, if you know what I mean. So I certainly try to make a difference in the lives of girls I meet, in helping them face challenges, in teaching them about inner strength. Empowerment is not about what you wear or where you go or the entertaining life you lead. Empowerment is about feeling and believing you are equal to all beings.”

Attagirl, Sania, we need more like you. In the meanwhile, live it up! Feel young (you are), always be the fun person that is inside you, which one sees surfacing now and then, whether you are going for a night out, or indulging in a spot of *Dubsmash*. Work on making your husband more romantic, so that along with the chocolates, he brings you flowers, too!

# UpperCrust

Food, Wine  
& the Good Life  
[www.uppercrustindia.com](http://www.uppercrustindia.com)



**'Tis The Season**  
Of Plums!

**UpperCrust Food**  
Beers & Burgers  
Bhajiyas  
Warm Cocktails

**UpperCrust Travel**  
Portugal, Goa, Mahabaleshwar

**Celebrity Bites**  
Kintu Bajaj

**Health Wise**  
Dash Diet, Granola  
Samir Kocchar

**UpperCrust People**  
Jasmit Tibb, Pavithran Nambiar,  
Pablo Alvarez, Dr Jehangir Sorabjee

**Sania Mirza**  
Our very own 'Shahi Tukda'

