

NOBODY KNOWS THIS WORLD BETTER

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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA

THE
FOOD
ISSUE

Padma Lakshmi

ON FOOD, TRAVEL
AND WHY COOKING
IS SALVATION

Japan

GOING
BEYOND SUSHI
IN 72 HOURS

All You Can Eat

TEL AVIV • AMRITSAR • KOLKATA • CHINA • BYLAKUPPE • DELHI



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Food has the power to bring people closer, blur borders and to take us to faraway lands.

This month's theme celebrates the hunger for meals,

humble and rich, much like this berry-topped chocolate-filled cake captured by photographer **Natalia S.S.** Sit back, and tuck in.

THE
FOOD
ISSUE

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About us National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling that inspires travel. It is about family travel, about travel experiences, about discoveries, and insights. Our tagline is "Nobody Knows This World Better" and every story attempts to capture the essence of a place in a way that will urge readers to create their own memorable trips, and come back with their own amazing stories.

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ORDERING A SPECIAL



Shreevatsa Nevatia

FOOD BRACKETS
TRAVEL PERFECTLY.
PLACES, FOR ME, ARE
DEFINED BY THEIR
CUISINES, NOT THEIR
MONUMENTS

OUR MISSION

National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling, inspiring readers to create their own journeys and return with amazing stories. Our distinctive yellow rectangle is a window into a world of unparalleled discovery.

Fairy tales made me hungry. In these stories, someone was almost always famished, waiting to eat. When they weren't devouring a plate of something or another, somebody else was usually desperate to gobble them. Little Red Riding Hood, for instance, was carrying wine and cake when she bumped into the Big Bad Wolf. Hansel and Gretel too found themselves alone in the woods. Predictably, they found a gingerbread house. Sauntering into the house of the Three Bears, Goldilocks first drank their porridge. Journeys, the Brothers Grimm would agree, are more fun when there's food to snack on along the way.

Food brackets travel perfectly. Places, for me, are defined by their cuisines, not their monuments. I'd argue that taste, not sight, is the first of our five senses. As an undergraduate student in a somewhat lonely Cornwall, I began frequenting a Turkish doner kebab shop every Friday. Once my visits to the establishment had become somewhat regular, Baris, the owner, began squeezing more mayonnaise on my fries. With his half-mocking Cockney accent, he'd ask each time, "Back for your British dinner?" The joke wasn't particularly funny, but I laughed each time. This was the humour of immigrants. We'd found the one denominator that made us two foreigners equals. We both adored food. It gave us language.

In my last year in Britain, I met Baris less.

I discovered a discounted student's buffet. I had found my own gingerbread house. It's only because we intend our food issue to be the reading equivalent of a sumptuous buffet have we given it the headline—"All You Can Eat". Buffets, though, should leave you satiated, too full to walk. We hope our magazine this month makes you hungry, ravenous even. Like any ambitious eatery, we too wanted to reinvent, so we have gone and conceived a menu we believe is new.

Our design, you'll find, is the first indicator of change. It makes our content a lot easier to bite into. Imagined as the courses of a lavish meal, we trust the progress of our six sections will make you want to eat, cook and also buy yourself a train or airline ticket. In our first section, 'The Itinerary', you'll read stories whose size can be compared to appetisers. From vegan restaurants to a guided Ramzan trail, our aim is to give you a taste of the food you can sample during your own travels later. We stop in Japan, Tel Aviv and Delhi before we arrive at dessert. 'The Indulgence' showcases food so rich, it feels hedonistic.

Since good conversation is essential to good eating, we interviewed Padma Lakshmi, as also chefs such as Vineet Bhatia and Alex Moser. The real dialogue, however, we wish to initiate with you. Food, we hope, has given us language that helps communicate our philosophy—gluttony, we think, should not be a sin. ✂



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PUTTING YOUR WRITING WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS

**RAISING A TOAST TO BOOKS THAT STOKE
YOUR HUNGER FOR PLACES**



It's the beads of moisture that do it. They lie, fat and lazy, on pitchers of pink wine, drip down metal jugs of iced water kept to dilute the pastis. You can picture them, sparkling on warm days in Provence, on little tables groaning with food under chestnut trees, twinkling on counters of cosy little bars, in villages you can't help but want to see. I've been reading every Provence book by British author Peter Mayle I can get my hands on, because this is some of the most hunger-creating writing I've found in ages. And while you can excite me greatly with tales of adventure, glittering cities and fantastic people, I have to confess I spend most of the day thinking about food, so if you want me to travel somewhere, talk about what you're going to put on my plate, please. I suspect this is true for most people.

Mayle created a sensation with *A Year In Provence* in the 1980s, almost single-handedly making property prices shoot up all over the Luberon. It's easy to see why. He draws you into a life that feels absurdly wonderful, and he primarily does it by talking about meals, each of which seems to take several happy, relaxed hours.

Food is the centre of everything. Truffles take up entire chapters—not just the eating, but the hunting and black-marketeering of them, down to clandestine meetings at night and the villainy of Italians who stain inferior white Italian truffles to make them look like black French ones. Finding the right olive oil or bread is not a simple trip down to the shops, but a treasure hunt or the stuff of detective novels. The plumber advises on wine, a really serious gourmet explains why he wears a tracksuit and sneakers whenever he has a meal. Mayle

makes you want to be part of that world, makes you look up recipes and emigration formalities for France. This is food writing at its best.

Of course, it's reasonable to expect good writing about food from a travel writer—it's more of a surprise when it turns up in fiction. American mystery writer Lawrence Sanders is especially good at this. His detective, Archy McNally, wastes little time on plotlines thinner than the paper they're written on, and more on gorgeous women, old bebop tunes, and terrific food. He spends a lot of time at the Pelican Club and Café L'Europe in Florida, but as much time at home. And why

**If you want me to travel,
talk about what you're
going to put on my plate**

wouldn't you, when your housekeeper-chef can make venison with cherry sauce and slivered almonds? Or a Dobos torte, "fifteen thin, alternating layers of milk and dark chocolate, all covered with milk chocolate crème"? Though of course, you might step out for a bottle of Barolo and fried calamari, or a pork loin basted in molé sauce and served with a spicy tomato and black bean tortilla. "Mild?" asks McNally. "You crazy?" asks the waiter with the Pancho Villa moustache. I've always liked Florida, but this, again, makes me want to live there. A third example is Terry Pratchett, which is even odder, because he wrote comic fantasy. The Lord of the Rings's lembas bread is parodied as dwarf bread in his Discworld books, made

to an ancient recipe involving actual grit and stones, a food that can also be used as a weapon, and connoisseurs of which go "Hot damn!" when they hear the cat has peed on it. In other places, he talks about British breakfast food—fried slices, soss and egg, chips all round, which the dwarfs again have their own take on, involving rather smaller animals than cattle and pigs and chickens. Not appetising, certainly. But there is one place where even Pratchett gives in: New Orleans. His version of New Orleans is Genua, a somewhat sinister place where fairy tales come to horrible life, and there are no real ingredients to make food from, other than whatever you get in swamps—but, as if to compensate, has the best cooks in the world. "A good Genuan cook could more or less take the squeezings of a handful of mud, a few dead leaves and a pinch or two of some unpronounceable herbs, and produce a meal to make a gourmet burst into tears of gratitude and swear to be a better person for the rest of their entire life if they could just have one more plateful."

It made me want so, so, badly to go to New Orleans. And I did, and it was every bit as good, but with added Louis Armstrong. The point is, it made me want to eat what was being written about. It's simple. Food writing should make you hungry. ✂



**YARDHAN
KONDIKAR**

is a travel, car, and humour writer and editor, who is known for road trips, generalised exasperation and far too many bathroom stops.

TASTE TRUMPS TRAVEL...

...OR DOES IT? TAKING STOCK OF WHETHER BAD FOOD CAN DISSUADE TRUE-BLUE WANDERERS



Where a person's first experience with a new cuisine occurs can leave behind a lasting aftertaste.

All of us take cues from our families on how to be or, in many instances, how not to be. When it came to food, I took from mine an open-minded appetite since much of *mi familia* was found wanting on that front. Anything new or foreign was viewed with wariness, at best, and derision, at worst. So I determined to try my damndest, like *Seinfeld*'s George Costanza, to do the opposite.

In my pre-teens, there was a moment when this contrast came into focus. It was the 1990s; a simpler time when the average Indian palate was tentatively opening up to global influences. The occasion was a relative's wedding reception with one of those multi-cuisine buffet spreads—mostly Indian and Indianised Chinese.

Sometime during the proceedings, a dear uncle of mine (I might have to reconsider that “dear” after this revelation) marched to the buffet line and surveyed his options. A native of Kerala, he had lived in the state all his life and was authoritative, opinionated and possessed of a provincial mind-set, especially in matters of eating.

At a counter that said Chinese chilly chicken, he stopped. I watched as he served himself a portion and stuck a forkful into his mouth. His head began to shake slowly and his eyes grew wider. Just like a music video playing in reverse, the fork went back in and out came the sampling.

“What the hell is that?” he barked at the server standing behind the counter. The poor man smiled meekly and blurted, “It’s Chinese, sir.” “Well, no wonder it’s terrible,” my uncle shot back. With that sweeping generalisation, he had condemned this alien cuisine as unworthy of his respect.

Needless to say, my uncle never did travel to China or, if I am assuming right, even felt compelled to visit a country whose food had produced such a violent reaction in him in the first place.

I dredge this history up because at some point in their sojourns, foodies might confront a conundrum: would they travel to a place with a cuisine they don’t care for? A good friend is not the biggest admirer of Kashmiri food or typical Rajasthani fare. *Dal baati churma*? “Overrated,” she says. Ditto the legendary Kashmiri kahwa. But neither fact will dissuade her from going back to these places, in a heartbeat.

In my family, any new cuisine was viewed with wariness, at best, and derision, at worst

I recall another friend, who had a short-lived romance with a dreamy Scot and the dreamier landscape of his country, during which, she had to fake enthusiasm for Scotland’s famously disagreeable national dish—the haggis (a savoury pudding made of meat, onions, spices and oatmeal and cooked in a sheep’s stomach). Bland Scottish food, however, dimmed in comparison to the beauty of ancient castles and her knight in shining armour.

It is significant where your first brush with a new cuisine occurs. In India, anything international is often diluted by fanciful contemporary trends or gauche local touches. And that early impression may leave some

indisposed to a particular kind of food. Or worse, if you never try the real thing, you may forever live in blissful oblivion of what you are missing out.

A few years ago, an acquaintance at whose home I had enjoyed many an Italian meal, travelled to Naples. Upon her return, I found that her white sauce-drenched penne, slathered in cheese, had changed. Her sauce was now a blanched tomato reduction, with only a hint of herbs, and plain olive oil. Over lunch, she then declared what a novice she had been all along, saying, “Things are done so simply in Italy. Indian continental places are the worst.”

The proliferation of international cuisine restaurants has understandably fuelled a horde of poor parodies, which are not the greatest gateway into authenticity. A recent trip to Pattaya altered another pal’s view of the Tom Yum Soup that was served back home. “I haven’t ordered it at all since I returned from the trip,” she told me.

Some of you, who are quite content with the native Tom Yum, may judge people like her to be purists but that is a natural side-effect of travelling extensively. The traveller’s heart hankers after genuine experiences. Cuisines will disappoint and delight in equal measure. It’s wandering into the unknown that is the real thrill. ✂



LAKSHMI SANKARAN,
Deputy Editor at
National Geographic Traveller India,
will gladly follow a
captivating tune to the
end of this world.

THE MANGO JAR OF MEMORIES

**FOOD CONNECTS US TO STRANGERS,
BUT LIKE PHOTOGRAPHS, IT ALSO
GIVES US THE FACILITY TO REMEMBER**

Ripe mangoes in summer remind me of my father. He was a “mango aesthete”. During the season, he would go to the market every Sunday to stock up on his weekly quota of mangoes. He would hold the fruit in his hand, as if trying to figure out how many kilos of memories it can cart. He would gently press the fruit trying to gauge its ripeness; inhale its sweetness with eyes closed. He’d then pick the ones, which I always believed, called out to him.

Back home, he’d wash the fruit, dry them on freshly laundered blue and white chequered cloth. He’d meticulously shave off the skin of the fruit with a gleaming knife. He’d then reverentially hold the mango, the bright yellow fruit striking against his dark brown hands, and make a slow vertical slash—top to bottom; then a horizontal cut. Sticky mango juice would coat the web between his fingers. With the tip of the knife, he’d coax the squares of ripe mangoes onto the stainless steel plate. The process would be repeated on the other side.

After three decades, I can still hear the soft thud of mango slices falling into the plate, skidding gently on the juices on its back before settling down—waiting to be consumed; its sole purpose in life. Throughout this entire ritual of cutting and eating mangoes, dad would tell me stories—how he hitchhiked a ride from a remote village in Kerala when he was 17 with just ₹10 in his pocket. How he met my mother; his journeys to the land of sheikhs in the Middle East; encounters of his communist soul in Russia and so on. To this day, mangoes remain my greatest memory-keeper.

Research says that smells are connected to autobiographical memory. The hip-

pocampus in the brain, which is responsible for long-term memories, has a connection to the digestive system. Each of our taste buds consists of up to 100 gustatory receptor cells. These cells send the chemical information about the food we eat to the gustatory cortex in the brain. Humans also have 12 million smell receptors in the nasal cavity that are responsible for actually isolating and identifying different food smells. While these intangibles are at work within our bodies when we are chomping on chow, it is the tangibles unfolding outside that turn into memories associated with food.

Stories of love and hate, joy and sadness, and dreams and hope. The taste, smell, col-

Food transports you to places and reminds you of life’s copiousness

our and texture of food can hold within its banks a treasure trove of memories for us. As they eat the foods of the land they travel to, people are collecting, consciously or unconsciously, narratives to be stored in their memory box. That’s why even after aeons, a whiff of chicken satay can evoke memories of trading anecdotes with a stranger in Singapore. The taste of freshly baked pizza can remind you of the first solo trip to Italy. Hot *bhajis* could transport you to that time when you played cards with unknown people under a banyan tree, or a cup of masala chai could take you back to that train journey when you sat by the door and felt a connection with a wanderer while sharing a ciggie. Momos, for me, will always call to mind a



78-year-old cook, Inchung, who escaped Tibet four decades ago with only a few possessions; amongst them was a bag of special herbs for cooking Tibetan food.

The best thing about travelling is food. It allows you to connect with people without inhibitions or prejudices. Deep fried prawns remind me of prawn-hunting with strangers in a remote part of Kerala. They also taught me how to catch a frog with a hibiscus flower and torchlight, and they gave me my first taste of toddy. I hitched up my sarong, piled up my hair and pretended to be a cook and waitress in their little *kallu shaap* (toddy shop). I fried prawns and shared stories with people I know I will never meet again in my life. I was my truest self that day.

Foods can carry so many compelling memories that when it’s time to hang up your boots and rock on a chair, the plate of food in front of you can transport you to places and remind you of the copiousness of life. Food becomes a way of capturing an image, a setting or a feeling for posterity. I have always wondered whether Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, was reminded of his historical journey whenever he ate a bacon square—his only meal on the moon consisted of bacon squares, sugar cookies, peaches, pineapple-peach drink and coffee. Just like a photograph! ✂



SUDHA PILLAI
is an artist,
photographer and
writer. She writes
about her
encounters with
people, places,
art and culture.

THE ITINERARY

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OFF THE BEATEN TRUCK

Food trucks are Dubai's new cool, and Indians have joined in the ride



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FISH SOUP FOR THE SOUL

WHEN IN THE PORT CITY OF MARSEILLE, SAVOUR WHAT THE FRENCH DO—A BOWL OF BOUILLABAISSE BY DEBASHREE MAJUMDAR

In little more than the three decades of my unremarkable albeit fast-changing life, eating fish has been a constant. I have licked the tender Hilsa's thick mustard gravy off my fingers at home and at celebrations. I have savoured the rich, creamy sauce of a baked salmon, seeking comfort on a dank European winter afternoon in a land far from home. That's just how much I love fish. So, on our visit to the French port city of Marseille, it was obvious for my spouse and I, a pair of Bengalis raised on a healthy diet of fish, to go hunting for the famous Provençal fish soup—bouillabaisse (pronounced: *booyahbase*). As a precursor to settling to a lunch of this traditional multi-fish broth, we decided to start our day with a visit to the fish market at the Old Vieux Port, along the Mediterranean coast.

To get there, we picked our way through the quiet, gritty Marseille streets that looked somewhat like a *grand-mère* (grandmother) dressed in sequins. This, mainly because of the newly installed sleek tram network zigzagging through Marseille's arterial roads. The transport network's revamp was undertaken to celebrate the city's inclusion in the European cultural

landscape. In 2013, Marseille was recognised as the European Capital of Culture along with Košice, Slovakia. It's safe to say that Marseille is not Paris. But it does serve as France's primary port, which opened up to the Mediterranean almost 2,600 years ago with the arrival of the Greeks. Eventually, Algerian, Corsican, Moroccan and Italian communities settled here, creating a melting pot of sorts. And the flavours of this bubbling pot are more evident in the Massalia kitchens than on its streets.

OFF THE HOOK

The sea rushes into the heart of the city at the Old Vieux Port. Here, each day begins

with the seafarers selling their freshest catch. Take one look at the motley collection and you can tell they were scooped out of the blue waters less than an hour ago. The air is heavy with the smell of sea, the sound of screeching gulls and the fishwives' boisterous calls. Brimming with enthusiasm, they are eager to sell. And locals are eager to buy, but not without a bargain. They haggle over a variety of sea bass, sea bream, dorade royale, and the hideous monkfish and crayfish. Simultaneously, they also exchange notes on the best way to prepare their purchase in their kitchens.

Given that the French spend as much time eating as they devote to cooking—two hours per activity to be precise, especially on weekends and holidays—it's unsurprising to see them indulge at the port. As tourists, we tried to fit in by whetting our appetite for the bouillabaisse. It's a must-try, we were told, for an authentic Marseille experience. But the recommendation came with a warning. The dish must only be tried at specific local joints. Chances of disappointment and neglect run high at restaurants that don't specialise in it, we were told. We therefore booked



Bouillabaisse, a multi-fish broth.



Most fish varieties that go in the soup can be found at the bustling Old Vieux Port. Scooped out of the blue waters, they pack such a punch and have made bouillabaisse so popular that it has literally left a stamp (bottom) on Marseille's food map.



ourselves a table at Chez Madie's for a presumably happy meal.

THE SOUP STORY

The origin of the bouillabaisse is linked to bands of tired and hungry fishermen returning from sea with two immediate needs—sate a ravenous appetite and utilise the catch they were unable to sell. This, of course, was centuries ago. To accomplish both tasks with minimal effort, the men most likely built a fire on the beach and boiled the useless batch in seawater in a cauldron to enjoy a hearty, communal meal. Despite its humble beginnings though, the bouillabaisse has evolved to become a specialty and a mainstay on the Marseille food map.

The transformation of this ordinary soup into gourmet fare began in the 19th century. With flourishing trade and prosperity, restaurants began serving it to wealthy patrons passing through the city. The simple recipe, so far used by fishwives for making the unpretentious soup, was therefore refined over the years. Fresh fish stock replaced boiled seawater. Exotic and expensive ingredients such as saffron got tossed in. Gradually, this fisherman's staple spread beyond Marseille. Today, versions of the bouillabaisse are found in Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy. Although it has adapted local flavours and ingredients along the way, what makes the bouillabaisse exclusive is the use of Provençal herbs and spices.

The luscious flavours are imbibed from onions, garlic, tomatoes, parsley, leeks, orange peel, basil, thyme, bay leaves and potatoes. Wild fennel and saffron are thrown in at the end. The Charte de la Bouillabaisse Marseillaise—a 1980 charter compiled by some chefs to preserve the dish's quality by standardising ingredients—lists a variety of fish that must be included for the dish to be considered authentic. According to the charter, bouillabaisse must include at least

four of the following fish—scorpionfish (*rascasse*), red scorpion fish (*chapon* or *scorpène*), weever (*vive*), spider crab (*araignée*), red mullet, and conger eel (*congre*). No self-respecting restaurateur in Marseille, they say, would serve the soup without at least four of these fish.

BOWLED OVER

At lunch, we finally relish the much-touted bouillabaisse. The sun-tinged soup brims with the rustic, languid Provençal flavours. It is served in two steps. First, the soup bowls are brought to the table to be enjoyed with rouille-dabbed crunchy garlic toasts. Once we're through, the cheery waiter brings us a fish platter comprising rascasse, red mullet, conger and chapon and potato, ladled in the rich, warm stock exploding with punch.

The meal is more than a stomachful. We are forced to take breaks. It's then that I can't help but draw parallels between the golden broth and the indispensable *machher jhol* (a traditional Bengali fish stew). The French staple, I conclude, would pair exceedingly well with steaming rice. And with that comforting thought, I nestle in the contentment the bouillabaisse brings. ✂



The smell of the sea, the sound of screeching gulls and the sight of locals bargaining with fishermen make a visit to the Old Port worth it.

FIVE FOODS TO EAT IN MARSEILLE

1 Finding good bouillabaisse in Marseille can be a tricky affair given the complexity of preparation, and the quality of fish required. The soup is available as a lunchtime staple at most touristy restaurants for €20/₹1,440—simply avoid. The gourmet Michelin-star version can be extravagant at €160/₹11,545 per person. Chez Madie les Galinettes offers a good bargain at €45/₹3,250, with fresh fish, friendly service and lively atmosphere overlooking the Mediterranean. (138 Quai du Port, 13002 Marseille; +33-4-91908677; book in advance.)

2 Stop for fresh mussels, oysters and peculiar local specialties such as sea anemones and *oursins* (sea urchins) at La Boîte à Sardine. This *poissonnerie marseillaise* (French for fishmongers) also doubles as a restaurant with a dozen odd tables booked out every day of the week. This zesty place doesn't

Aïoli



have a set menu. What is available at sea determines what you eat. From juicy lobsters to scallop carpaccio, this genial restaurant is a fish lover's paradise if you're not too fussy. (2 Boulevard de la Liberation, 13001 Marseille; +33-4-91509595; main course from €35/₹2,525 per person.)

3 In case you get tired of the panoply of seafood all around you and fancy a break, try the pizza at Chez Étienne. Authentic, local stuff served warm and fresh. They deal in cash only. (43 Rue Lorette, 13002 Marseille; +33-4-91547633; pizza at €13-15/₹940-1,085, mains from €15-25/₹1,085-1,800.)

4 Make time for the Provençal speciality aïoli. Often mistaken for flavoured mayonnaise, aïoli is made from a heady mix of garlic, lemon juice, eggs and olive oil. It is served on a platter of cod and vegetables. The dish is

mostly served on Fridays. (*Au Cœur du Panier*, 18 Rue du Panier, 13002 Marseille; +33-4-91916580; €15-35/₹1,085-2,525.)

5 The locally available pastis, a sweet, complex, herbal liqueur is to France, and in particular to Marseille, what the aperitif is to Italy. Commercialised first in 1932, the anise-flavoured drink succeeded the then banned absinthe. There's a wide variety of pastis available at most supermarkets. However, if you're keen on learning the origins and intricacies of drinking the pastis, drop in at La Maison du Pastis on the Vieux Port. (108 Quai du Port, 13002 Marseille.)



Pastis

FRENCH FINDS

SIX DELICACIES TO BRING BACK TO YOUR PANTRY **BY SUSAN O'KEEFE**

Extra room in your new Longchamp bag? American chef and author David Lebovitz, who lives in Paris, recommends some of his favourite edible souvenirs to stock your larder or give as gifts. And though these goodies hail from different regions in France, they typically are found in Paris food shops at affordable prices (check any Monoprix grocery store), evoking a taste of the country long after you arrive home.



CHOCOLATE

THROUGHOUT FRANCE

Anything from the bean-to-bar chocolate maker Bernachon in Lyon is worth the two-hour train ride from Paris (www.bernachon.com).



FLEUR DE SEL

BRITTANY

Standard in French kitchens, this flaky salt is formed by the sea and sun, and hand-harvested from marshes.



PRUNES

AGEN

Nothing like grandma's, these partially dried prunes from Gascony are "deeply chocolaty in flavour," says Lebovitz.



LOCAL HONEY

THROUGHOUT FRANCE

Sample varieties of this golden treat at local markets. Brittany's musky, buckwheat flower honey is the crown jewel.



ESPELETTE PEPPER

ESPELETTE

Ground from chilli peppers grown in the Basque countryside, these mild, fragrant flakes enhance most dishes.



DIJON MUSTARD

BEAUNE

Not all Dijon mustards are made with seeds from France. Artisanal Edmond Fallot's Burgundy mustard always is (www.fallot.com). ✂

GOOD FOOD TRAVELS FAST

CHEF RANVEER BRAR PLATES UP HIS RAMZAN MEMORIES, GARNISHED WITH NOSTALGIA BY HUMAIRA ANSARI

The art of ordering food in the cramped alleys of Mumbai's Minara Masjid mandates two things—a gluttonous appetite and, most of all, tremendous patience. Also, note that it's a cash-only place.



At TAG-GourmArt Kitchen, celebrity chef and food show host Ranveer Brar's swanky restaurant, the food is modern vegetarian; the decor part vintage, part pop-culture; and the vibe uppity. The single-storey structure is nestled in Mumbai's repurposed Kamala Mills. To reach the restaurant, one must first navigate through an art gallery. When I reach at 4 p.m., Brar is behind the kitchen counter. When he exits, we discuss his favourite Ramzan foods over a *gulab jamun* cheesecake. Interestingly though, the dishes that come up seem like total misfits in the avant-garde setting we are. There's a slim chance that Marilyn Monroe, sprawled on a canvas across our table, would approve of fatty *haleem* in Hyderabad, greasy *kachoris* in old Delhi, or Lucknow's *tala gosht*. "But this is exactly the kind of Ramzan food I have grown up eating and exploring," says Brar.



For the next two hours, the chef animatedly encapsulates the different Ramzan celebrations he has experienced across Lucknow, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Delhi. From *sehri* (the pre-dawn meal) and *iftar* (the evening meal with which a fast is broken) to midnight food walks, he's done it all.

LUCKNOW

"In the city of nawabs, the spirit of Ramzan is felt more in people's homes than the streets. And that's what makes Ramzan unique here. Also, *Lucknowis* love a wholesome sehri... fried beef, brinjal *pakodis*, rose petal-infused chai."

Every dish's name seems to be evoking a memory, of iftars had with nawabs and of sehris at a friend's humble apartment. Brar, for the uninitiated, is from Lucknow. Before joining the Institute of Hotel Management in his hometown, he trained



In Lucknow, home is where the spirit of Ramzan truly thrives. Neighbours often get together over lavish *sehris* and *iftars*.

under a local kebabwala. “Scouring the city’s labyrinthine slaughterhouses for the best cuts along with my mentor, Munir Ahmed, is one of my first memories of Lucknow’s Ramzan.”

He adds that the city’s sehri favourites are *tala gosht* (fried beef) and *nihari* (slow-cooked lamb stew). “Unlike the red nihari served elsewhere, Lucknowi nihari is yellowish in colour because it’s made with yellow chilli powder and in mustard oil.” Another sehri staple is the *kagzi* samosa, a kind of puff pastry but without any filling, typically had with Kashmiri chai. “The Kashmiri chai is essentially milk tea with rose petals,” Brar explains. “The rose petals were added to give the regular milk tea a pinkish tint, influenced from visiting Kashmiri traders.” Like his food, Brar’s responses come well-seasoned, peppered with anecdotes.

Iftar, too, is heavy, and is often clubbed with dinner. Besides fruits and dates, there’s mutton korma and *band gosht*, a turmeric-infused lamb stew; *shahi tukda*, a sweet made of fried bread; and milk *lachha* or vermicelli soaked in lukewarm milk. “Another popular dessert, especially when Ramzan falls in winter, is the creamy *makhan malai*. *Halwai*s (confectioners) from Varanasi brought this snack here,” says Brar. “Like makhan malai, many dishes have traversed across geographical and religious boundaries to make it to Lucknow’s Ramzan menu.”

DELHI

Brar insists that if there’s one place in India where you must experience *chand raat*, which is the last night of Ramzan, it should be old Delhi. “Muslims in this part of Delhi love eating out. Even those who break bread at home parcel something.”

The reason, he reckons, is that the 1.5-kilometre patch around

Jama Masjid is a bustling bazaar dotted with numerous food stalls. “This stretch—

with Muslims settled in the lanes surrounding the mosque, and Hindus dominating the Chandni

Chowk and Sita Ram Bazaar areas—is also what constituted Shahjahanabad, or the old walled city of Delhi, during Mughal emperor Shahjahan’s rule,” he adds. By now I have realised that Brar loves trivia, and this brief history lesson will lead somewhere.

“I love food folklore,” he chimes in, reading my mind. “The point is, centuries later, this stretch has evolved into a melting pot, assimilating cultures and cuisines of both the communities. Today, Muslims sell tikka, tandoori and kheema samosas. Hindus sell fruits, chaats and kachoris. Brar’s recommendation is the aloo kachori served at Kamaal Sweet Shop opposite Jama Masjid. For desserts, his pick is the kheer at a hole-in-the-wall stall below actress Meena Kumari’s old house, and opposite the Badal Beg Masjid. “These are the only two landmarks. Here, the milk is reduced on a wood fire until the kheer turns light-brown. And this shop only sells kheer. In fact, the sincerity with which the place is run is what prompted some food bloggers to chip in and put up a signboard outside this previously nameless shop. It’s now called Bademiyan Kheer Shop.”

HYDERABAD

A must-try sehri dish in Hyderabad is KKK. It stands for *khichri kheema khatta*. It is yellow

khichri served with dry kheema and topped with a mixture of curd mixed with tamarind, sesame seed, and groundnut paste. *Palak gosht* (spinach-mutton curry)

with barley roti is another must-have sehri staple. Brar also recommends a trip to Barkas, a town in old Hyderabad whose first residents were the Nizam’s Yemenite soldiers. “The Arabic influence here is clearly visible. Shawarmas, for instance, are marinated in an onion-cashew paste.” As for the famous Hyderabadi *haleem* (in picture), a lentil-minced meat dish, Brar’s favourite is the one served at Shah Gause in the Moazzam Jahi Market. “He uses the most obscure cuts and the fattiest parts, and I love that,” Brar says, laughing.

For iftar, his favourite is the *jouzi ka halwa* at Hameedi’s. “This wheat germ halwa tastes outstanding,” he says. His picks for savoury dishes are *chana dal* topped with raw onion, chilli and tomatoes, and *kheema lukmi*, a samosa-like snack with minced meat filling, sold outside Charminar.

MUMBAI

Of the two popular Mumbai Ramzan haunts—Minara Masjid and Bohri Mohalla, both in south Mumbai— Brar prefers Bohri Mohalla. “Minara Masjid is too hyped,” he says. “I only go there for the *malpua*. I love the showmanship that goes into the making of one. It’s enthralling to watch men beat up eggs ferociously and fry the malpuas in giant woks or *kadhais*,” he says. Another of Brar’s Minara Masjid recommendation is *sandal*, a steamed, slightly fermented rice pudding that’s finished with cream. “Everyone talks about the more popular *phirni*, but sandal, which is only available in Ramzan, is a must-try,” he says.

In Bohri Mohalla, which is more understated and easier to navigate, he loves *patrelia*, a semi-dry gravy of cocoyam leaves and mutton, served at a stall called Feroz Farsan. For desserts, Brar likes heading to Tawakkal Sweets for their mawa-filled flaky puff pastry known as *malai khaja*. ✂



Brar is a huge fan of the showmanship that goes into the making of a malpua.

SUNSHINE ON MY PLATTER

FROM CUBANO TO URUGUAYAN, FIVE SUPERB EATING OPTIONS IN FLORIDA **BY PHORUM DALAL**



Many of the flavours at Azucar Ice Cream are inspired by seasonal fruits.

A day after my arrival in Miami late last November, I stepped out of my hotel on Collins Avenue, walking along Ocean Drive in South Beach, the city's busy central neighbourhood. A vibrant blue reflected off the waters. Soapy white waves rolled out a carpet on the wet shore, chanting a rejuvenating hum on loop.

October to May is stone crab season in Miami. During these months, harvesters pluck one or two claws off the crustaceans and release them into the sea. The claws are a delicacy relished cold, preferably with mustard sauce.

Cold crab claws apart, Floridian cuisine is a wild fusion of divergent styles. Miami, especially its foods hotspots along Ocean Drive, offer modern-progressive choices that also acknowledge the city's Latin-American influences.

Around three hours away in Orlando, the tastes are less international. Cuisine culture here is still rooted in classic American fare, with steaks and burgers dominating menus in most restaurants. A true foodie is spoilt for choice in Miami as well as Orlando but here's a shortlist of must-try spots in case you are visiting either place:

AZUCAR ICE CREAM COMPANY, LITTLE HAVANA, MIAMI

Home to Cuban exiles and immigrants from Central and South America, Little Havana is Miami at its liveliest. Most visitors make a beeline for Ball & Chain, an all-day pub and live music venue on SW 8th Street. I was here on a sweltering afternoon as a veteran was swinging his hips to energetic salsa music.

After watching him sweat and swivel, I walked into Azucar, an artisanal ice cream parlour two buildings away. Azucar's scoops are renowned for packing in the freshness of local produce. My top picks: the **abuela maria**, rich with guava, cream cheese and Maria crackers, or the **café con leche**, which blends Cuban coffee and oreo cookies. (www.azucaricecream.com; Mon-Wed 11 a.m.-9 p.m., Thur-Sat 11 a.m.-11 p.m., Sun 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; \$4.50/₹289 per scoop.)

CANTINA LA VEINTE, BRICKELL AVENUE, MIAMI

A reservation at this Mexican restaurant is an occasion to dress up. Chef Santiago Gomez's forte is South American food with an eclectic twist. From the mains, highlights are ceviche de camaron roca (\$19/\$/₹1,226), which is a **rock shrimp ceviche**, and the **short rib braseada**, a beef dish, oven roasted and served with jus (\$36/₹2,305). Vegetarians can opt for **quesadillitas stuffed with mushrooms** (\$12/₹774). (www.cantina20.com; Mon-Thur noon-midnight; Fri noon-1 a.m.; Sat 1 p.m.-1 a.m.; Sun 12.30 p.m.-11 p.m.)

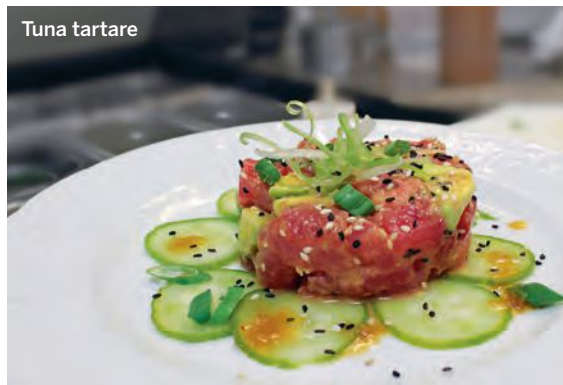
Short rib braseada



PEACOCK GARDEN CAFÉ, MCFARLANE ROAD, MIAMI

The best part about this café, which has a cosy al-fresco seating, is its tropical garden. Chef Javier Quintana uses microgreens from here to garnish dishes. My meal here included a delectable **burrata** (\$16/₹1,032), a salad of roasted baby veggies, sundried tomatoes and pear tomatoes in raspberry vinaigrette, and the zesty **tuna tartare** (\$14/₹903), topped with sesame and avocado. (www.peacockspot.jaguarhg.com; Mon-Thur 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sat 9 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sun 9 a.m.-10 p.m.)

Tuna tartare



QUINTO LA HUELLA, BRICKELL PLAZA, MIAMI



Verduras asadas

Chef Alejandro Morales at this Uruguayan hotspot uses a special fire cooking method that employs a wood fire parilla (grill). The **verduras asadas** (\$9/₹580), an earthy preparation of smoked fall veggies, is a definite winner. Morales is also masterful with sushi, especially **table nigiris** (\$18/₹1,161), which is wild salmon, and yellow fin tuna sushi, and **pulpo a la plancha** (\$21/₹1,355), octopus tentacles on a bed of potatoes confit and paprika. (www.east-miami.com/quintolahuella; Sun-Wed 7 a.m.-midnight; Thurs-Sat 7 a.m.-1 a.m.)

THE TOOTHsome CHOCOLATE EMPORIUM & SAVORY FEAST KITCHEN, ORLANDO

A trio of milkshake



Inside Orlando's biggest tourist attraction, Universal Resort, is a *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*-inspired dessert fantasia. The restaurant has a savoury menu but its showstoppers are the sweet treats. My recommendation: the **brownie milkshake** (\$13/₹838), a gooey chocolate brownie cake in a jar and the **peanut indulgence** (\$12/₹774), an avalanche of Snickers, Reese's peanut butter cups, peanuts and cream. (www.universalorlando.com; Sun-Thurs 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Fri-Sat 11 a.m.-midnight.) ✂

PASTORAL POTBOILERS

CHANNEL SURF 'N' TURFING THROUGH RURAL INDIA **BY SONAL SHAH**



YouTube star Masthanamma has garnered fans worldwide on a channel started by her grandson and his friend (bottom). Her favourite 106th birthday gift was from Pakistan.

The sight of early watermelons, piled up like cannonballs along the roads, had worked its way into my brain, and I found myself searching for recipes that incorporated the ingredient. One thing led to another, and there I was in Gudivada, Andhra Pradesh, watching 106-year-old granny Masthanamma cooking chicken in a hollowed out watermelon over an open flame.

YouTube took me there, of course, via a channel called **Country Foods**, which has since gone predictably viral, with over 3,00,000 subscribers and 54 million views. However, Country Foods—launched by Srinath Reddy and Laxman K. last August, and featuring Laxman's rheumy-eyed, sharp-tongued great-grandmother—is only one of over a dozen rural recipe channels from India, most from coastal states, particularly Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

"Watermelon!" exclaims Ravi V.,

founder of **My Money My Food**, down the phone from Chennai. "Everyone is doing watermelon chicken, watermelon juice, this, that." A transcriptionist on weekdays, Ravi travels to nearby villages to cook on weekends. After having kids, he wanted them to experience the flavour of his own rural childhood and started uploading videos of these outings in October 2015.

"I'm a vegetarian," Ravi tells me. "Six days a week." The remaining days, he could be cooking or watching friends, relatives, and others, who've heard of his project, prepare anything from field rats to stingrays, against a bucolic backdrop of paddy and thatch. "I wasn't sure about the shark," Ravi says, referring to the video "Cooking a

40 Pound Shark in My Village". "But then, it was just in the market one day. It's dead, it's for sale. I'm not going with the fishing net to the ocean to get it."

What his channel shares with the others is a sense of lush abundance, filtered through the philosophy that in the village, ingredients are less a matter of choice than of availability. Almost anything can be devoured, from sea snails (**My Village Food Recipes**) to unlaidd chicken eggs (**Food Money Food**), and every part of the animal is used, from brain to balls.

A hobbyist, Ravi doesn't mind the blossoming competition: "It is nice, people going back to their villages, caring about grandmother and granddaddy," he says.

One of the first, and most popular



YouTube channels, **Village Food Factory**, was founded in May 2015 on this very premise of supporting family. Gopinath A., a young director in the Tamil indie film industry, felt bad that his father Arugam didn't command as much respect in his home village of Nochipalayam, near Tiruppur, as his uncles. "His brothers are rich, but he is in a poor condition," explains Gopinath's cousin, who speaks a bit more English than him. But viral videos (the channel has over 81 million views) of Arugam meticulously preparing "2500 EGGS and 10 KG Chicken cooking in single pot!!!!!" and so on, have garnered the family a tidy side-income as well as world-wide fame.

Srinath, a video editor, and Laxman, a graphic designer, have both quit their jobs at the media company where

An irreverent mix of tradition, ambition (army-sustaining portion sizes), and inventiveness, are common markers of rural cooking channels

they met to work on Masthanamma's recipes full-time. Like Gopinath, their videos are strengthened by a central character focus, as well as by their technical backgrounds. "We're from Guntur district", Srinath points out, alluding to the area's famous spices, "our parents taught us to cook, so we also know this subject." The two sometimes suggest ideas to "Granny" as well. The moment when she saucily waggles two cans of Coca-Cola at the camera, before decanting them over a whole chicken in a *kadhai* for one of their recipes, can only be described as, well, canny. Her "VFC"—Village Fried Chicken—one-ups the KFC versions featured in such channels as **Healthy Village Food**, **Desi Kitchen**, and **Food Rangers India**.

This irreverent mix of tradition, ambition (army-sustaining portion sizes), and inventiveness, are common markers of rural cooking channels. So too are the use of blunt, basic utensils and simple tacky graphics; al fresco kitchens and cheesy scores; banana leaf plates and long relaxing takes, with perhaps a slow, tactful pan to the



Arugam (top), the star of Village Food Factory, loves cooking huge quantities of food and distributing them; It was to explore outdoor cooking that Ravi V., founder of My Money My Food, began taking weekend trips to the villages around Chennai (bottom).

underbrush while an animal is being slaughtered. Some focus more on capture and cleaning (**Fishing Hunting Fishing, Village Food Village**), and probably all of them could at this point benefit from updating their SEO-friendly, copycat names to ones that refer specifically to a distinguishable person or place. Though it's kind of fun being oblivious at first, I wonder which side of the India-Pakistan border is represented by **Punjabi Village Food Factory** and **Village Food Secrets** or whether **Food Village** is shot in Bengal or Bangladesh.

These channels also echo similar ones from Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries—a buffet of countryside food habits from places otherwise unremarkable, or so off the beaten track that I'll probably never visit them. Ravi tells me that before he was married, "when dish TV came, my hobby was watching these food and travel channels. I thought, I'm not going to the U.S. or Europe, so let me watch these." For urban Indians, channels like his are the next best thing to savouring the village hearth, whether with nostalgia or a sense of fresh discovery. ✂

THE KNIVES ARE OUT

WHO OWNS HUMMUS? WHERE IS RASGULLA'S HOME? FOODS THAT LIKE A FIGHT BY KAREENA GIANANI



WHOSE HUMMUS?

It is difficult to imagine that the creaminess of hummus that wraps around the crunch of falafel makes two countries cry foul.

Disputed land and guns aside, both Lebanon and Israel claim the chickpea dish as their own. In 2009, Lebanon broke the world record by making the largest tub of hummus weighing 2,055 kilos. In January 2010, Israel fought back and cooked 3,630 kilos of hummus. Months later, Lebanon retaliated by making a 10,450-kilo vat of the humble food, tried to sue Israel for branding it as their national dish, and wanted to register the word "hummus" with the European Union, with a protective designation of origin.



SWEET STRUGGLE

The rasgulla, that moon-white ball of cheese dipped in sugar syrup, has left a bitter taste in the mouths of some people from West Bengal and Odisha.

In 2015, Odisha sought a Geographical Indication (GI) tag for the sweetmeat, claiming that it was invented in Puri and was first offered to the gods during the Rath Yatra in the 12th century. This story is widely contested and it is believed that it was the Portuguese who introduced Indians to the idea of curdling milk into cheese in the 15th century. The modern preparation of rasgulla is credited to a Calcutta-based gentleman, Nobin Chandra Das, who also marketed the sweet in the mid-1800s.



HOT POTATO AND PISCO

Chile and Peru find little to cheer over the provenance of pisco, the unaged brandy. Both countries claim naming rights over the grape spirit, and both consider the tart, egg-and-lime-flavoured cocktail, pisco sour, as their national drink.

It doesn't end there. The two countries don't see eye to eye on the origins of the potato either. In 2008, Peru claimed that the spud grew in Peru and that the "Peruvian potato saved Europe from hunger." This was in response to a Chilean minister, who claimed that 99 per cent of the world's potatoes have some kind of genetic link to potatoes from Chile.



SLICE OF HISTORY

Covered in whipped cream and fruit, the pillowy meringue-based dessert, pavlova, brings out some stubborn sides of New Zealand and Australia.

The dessert is named after the gravity-defying grace of Russian ballet dancer Anna Pavlova who visited both countries in the 1920s. Since then, both countries passionately claim to have invented the dessert. "I can find at least 21 pavlova recipes in New Zealand cookbooks by 1940, which was the year the first Australian ones appeared," Dr Helen Leach, author of *The Pavlova Story* told *The Daily Telegraph*.

In 2010, it was the Oxford English Dictionary that (sort of) put the debate to rest by announcing that the first recorded pavlova recipe did indeed appear in New Zealand in 1927. ✂



LOLOSTOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK (KNIVES); BRENT HOFACKER/SHUTTERSTOCK (HUMMUS); ESPIES/SHUTTERSTOCK (RASGULLA); BY ANA IACOB PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK (POTATO); GMYOZD/ISTOCK (PAVLOVA).

THE YELLOW PLATE ROAD

LOVE STREET FOOD? THIS INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT IS ALL YOU NEED TO FOLLOW BY HUMAIRA ANSARI

Dig into an Instagram account called My Yellow Plate, and instant hunger is guaranteed. Even if your last meal was minutes ago.

Wonder why? Well... picture these.

*In the foreground is a yellow plate loaded with *rajma-chawal*. Raw, purple-rimmed onion rings sit on it. Far away, in Himachal's postcard-pretty Kangra Valley, ant-sized parachutes float against the blue sky.

*Laping, a traditional cold-spicy Tibetan noodle dish, again in a yellow plate, is juxtaposed against a food stall in Delhi's Majnu Ka Tila. The background is hazy but you can see the Tibetan stall owner, a woman in a pink *kurta*, dish out the next order.

*An Assamese *thaali*, transferred

onto a yellow plate, at a *dhaba* in Nagaon bypass, looks straight out of a MasterChef kitchen—too manicured and pretty. In the centre of the plate sits a single fried *puthi* (a local fish) on top of plain white boiled rice. Circling it are tiny portions of some of Assam's staple vegetarian dishes such as *leseramah* (black-eyed pea *sabzi*) and *titekerela* (bitter gourd *sabzi*). A blob of mint chutney makes the dish extremely Instagram-friendly.

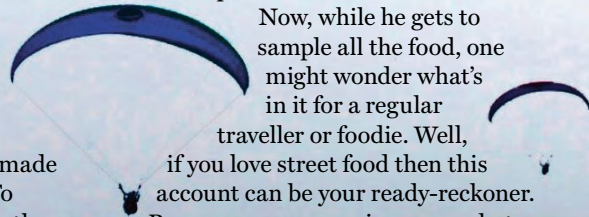
These 248 snapshots of dishes from across India all served on a yellow plate, and juxtaposed against lush green fields, snow-capped mountains, and even dingy *khaugallis*—are what have made My Yellow Plate hugely popular. To give you a sense, the barely 18-month-old account has 19,000 followers.

DISCOVERING THE LESSER-KNOWN

Since December 2016, Himanshu Sehgal, an engineer, food blogger and freelance digital marketer, has abandoned all assignments to round up Indian street food on a yellow plate. "What started as a hobby project two years ago has now become a full-time obsession. There's just no time for anything. Not even a girlfriend," says Sehgal, laughing, on a phone call from Delhi.

Now, while he gets to sample all the food, one might wonder what's in it for a regular traveller or foodie. Well, if you love street food then this account can be your ready-reckoner. Because, accompanying every photo is Sehgal's take on the dish—good or bad. There are also tidbits about people who run these joints and information like the dish's price.

Ten minutes into the conversation, few things become clear. Sehgal is self-motivated. His sense of humour eventually grows on you.



Rajma chawal served with raw onion rings, held up on a yellow plate, against Himachal's Kangra Valley.

PHOTO COURTESY: HIMANSHU SEHGAL



Himanshu Sehgal's project takes him all around the country, as he savours street foods like *bhel puri* in Delhi (left), *kachori, chole bature* and *malpua* in Pushkar (middle), and *naachos chaat*, loaded with cheese, tomato, onion and bell peppers in Rishikesh (right).

And, other than food, he's extremely passionate about documenting stories of the people behind it—simple *dhabawalas*, owners of nameless restaurants—who serve in offbeat, remote locations.

But, why a yellow plate?

"To be honest, as literal as it may sound, it all started with a random photo. I uploaded an image of *rajma-chawal* my mom happened to serve me on a yellow plate," Sehgal says of how the project took its name. "It was a poor shot. Still, it got 15 likes on Instagram. I couldn't figure out why. I guess Indians are so used to eating out of steel and aluminium *thaalis*, or white- and pastel-coloured crockery, that a yellow plate somehow clicked."

This was in August 2015. Since then, other than chargers, headphones, a torch, his laptop, and a camera, you'll always find a yellow plate in Sehgal's backpack. Wherever he goes, he requests to be served on it. Not everybody agrees. But Sehgal has learnt to persist.

Then, he clicks, eats, uploads, and repeats. The process isn't always as smooth though.

"This journey has taught me three things, to be shameless, patient and persistent," he says. For instance, a plate of *matar kulcha* bought from a stall outside Delhi's Red Fort couldn't be framed with the fort in its backdrop, because that day it was closed to

visitors. So, he kept pacing outside the entrance, *matar kulcha* in one hand, camera in another, in search of the perfect angle. An amused bystander then directed him to a broken wall through which he could jump in. But, as luck would have it, a police constable was guarding the spot. "I pleaded so

Himanshu's offbeat project is documenting so many hidden food joints across India.

That's great, isn't it?

—*Kapil Madaan* sells moong dal pizza at a small roadside stall in Delhi



Besides food, Himanshu also loves his avian friends, like this pair of rufous treepie at Ranthambore National Park.

earnestly that he eventually smiled and let me pass."

The trick therefore, says Sehgal, is to never hurry. "Because there's always an alternative, or a broken wall," he says, laughing. This sense of humour also reflects in the photo captions. Sample this: 'knock knock. *Cone hain?* is how he describes *dal makhni* inside a cone-shaped butter naan he recently tried at a Delhi restaurant.

MAPPING THE JOURNEY

Sehgal has so far covered Mumbai, Jaipur, Pushkar, Rishikesh, Agra, Tawang, Cherrapunjee and Bengaluru. Sponsors paid for some trips. Most were undertaken at his own expense. But now he wants to travel across all 29 Indian states. To fund his food and travel, he is currently raising funds through a crowdfunding campaign. So far he has only raised ₹1.68 lakh of the ₹5 lakh target. "Since I have this dream but no job, every penny counts," Sehgal says.

If all goes well, the success of this campaign will end in a short film documenting Sehgal's journey. At home, his parents have just about somewhat come to terms with their son's weird obsession. Relatives still don't get it. Who will marry a guy who roams with a yellow plate, they taunt. Sehgal, though, has a solution. "My next project could be all about finding a wife, with a yellow glass." ✂

OFF THE BEATEN TRUCK

FOOD TRUCKS ARE DUBAI'S NEW COOL, AND SEVERAL INDIANS HAVE JOINED THIS CULINARY CARAVAN. ON THE MENU ARE SHAWARMA-PARATHAS AND GOAN CHORIZO WRAPS **BY PHORUM DALAL**

Pasta, please," I say. "Penne, spaghetti, red, white?" the Asian lady at Mia Strada asks, urging me to hurry up. The queue is long, and she has no patience for my indecisiveness.

"Penne, in red sauce," I reply.

Mia Strada is one of the many food trucks parked at Dubai's Kite Beach, whose white sand and green waters attract a steady stream of surfers and water-babies. It was also amongst the multiple venues to have hosted the 17-day Dubai Food Festival between February and March this year.

Back in Mia, once my order is punched, the chef gets to work, enthralled me with his theatrics. He tosses the penne into an iron skillet and then dramatically puts it into a

parmesan wheel. Ten minutes later, I finally devour my meal settling into a white-washed wooden bench across Mia. A pungent kick from the cheese hits my palate. I love it.

As hunger subsides, my surroundings grow on me. I notice the queue outside Mia. It swells, shrinks, and swells again. Most food trucks are equally busy. Both locals and tourists keep gravitating towards them, clutching onto their minty coolers, fruit slushes and rainbow-coloured popsicles.

Food trucks do seem like Dubai's new cool. They pop up, serve, and move on. Last Exit, a first-of-its-kind food truck park came up last August, an indication of this glamorous desert city's booming food truck culture.

Interestingly, in the truck-hopping

I undertook for the three days that I was there, I discovered that several Indians, too, have hopped onto Dubai's culinary caravan. What's on their menus? Well... there's shawarma filling inside flaky parathas, fiery Asian woks, and Goan chorizo in wraps.

FROM PAV BHAJI TO HAWAIIAN BURGERS

(Food trucks: Woktruck, Tavana, Tandem) Street Nights, an indoor venue in the Business Bay area, is abuzz with B-boys dancing to hip hop beats and graffiti artists spray-painting walls. Of course, there's food, and so much of it that my senses struggle to keep pace with the conflicting aromas. I chase the smell of freshly baked *ka'ak*, a sesame-loaded Lebanese sweet dish, and it leads me to



Kevin Vaz, owner of GOBai, dreams of putting classic Goan food on the world map, but with a modern twist.



1 Shebi owner, Reshma Shetty 2 Shebi's shawarma paratha 3 Woktruck's rice noodles with veggies 4 GObai's pulled lamb vindaloo burger

a stretch dedicated to food trucks. Spoilt for choice, I pick spicy chicken noodles from Woktruck's vast menu. A fusion of Thai and Japanese, the noodles have a honey welcome, followed by a chilli-laden aftertaste. The hint of lemongrass is just perfect.

It was the *pav bhaji* he made at home five years ago that first stirred Woktruck owner Vaibhav Raisinghani's passion for cooking. "My parents gave it a thumbs-up, and ate it for dinner," says the 26-year-old.

He came to Dubai in 2014 to pursue a management degree in entrepreneurship. The next year, in 2015, he rolled out his first food truck, Woktruck. "I am a foodie, and I noticed that people in Dubai eat out a lot. Plus, the use of public spaces is incredible here. So starting a food truck seemed like a natural and logical business decision," he says.

Today, Raisinghani owns three food trucks. Besides Woktruck, there's Tavana, which serves Hawaiian street foods such as *hulihuli* chicken, and Tandem, which rustles up sandwiches and BBQ chicken fries. As business grew, Raisinghani's brother, Luvy, and Luvy's wife, Myra, joined in from London. "We used to meet once a year, but now, because of our partnership, we bond over our common passion—food."

INDIAN SPICES MEET LEBANESE FLAVOURS

(Food trucks: Shebi, Shmokins etc)

"Think shawarma in a paratha," says Reema Shetty, of the Indo-Lebanese dishes served at her food truck, Shebi. Shetty is married to Mohammed Bitar, a Lebanon national. And so, food made at home—and what's dished out in the mobile kitchens of the 12 trailers that the couple own and run

along with three friends—blends Indian spices with Lebanese flavours. The results are innovations like butter chicken shawarma served with Mangalorean *chakli* and rice, pulled beef in a potato bun, and chicken waffle.

Shebi also caters at events. At the Formula One last November, for instance, the couple worked all day long for five days at a stretch. "One day we fed almost 25,000 people," says Shetty. "But our team loves the drill, and we love the thrill of feeding fellow foodies on our wheeled beasts."

GOAN DELIGHTS, SERVED WITH A TWIST

(Food truck: GObai)

The first time Kevin Vaz tasted samboosa was on a business trip to Afghanistan. "While it had the comfort of the familiar Indian samosa, it was made out of beef, not potato, and was high on spices," says the 34-year-old co-founder of GObai.

Experiences like these, combined with his passion for food, are what inspired Vaz to launch GObai in 2015. Here, you'll find Goan delicacies, but with a modern twist. Picture pulled lamb vindaloo burgers, chicken *cafreal* tacos, *xacuti* shawarmas and chorizo wraps.

Vaz, a human resources director for a group of multinational companies, co-runs GObai with friend, Cara Davies. GObai's hottest selling dish is its pulled lamb vindaloo burger, where the lamb meat is slow-cooked in a vindaloo marinade for eight hours. "I love food. Period. Even when I travel for work, I'm always scouting for local street foods. The aromas and the innovations fascinate me," he says. "My dream is to put Goan food on the world map." ✂



THE KITCHEN IN OUR SUITCASE

ALWAYS SEARCHING FOR NEW INGREDIENTS AND NEWER TECHNIQUES, CHEFS ARE NATURAL TRAVELLERS. THEIR ITINERARIES, WE FOUND, ARE OFTEN THE START OF FRESH RECIPES **BY AATISH NATH**



ATUL KOCHHAR

Chef and Owner at Benares, London; NRI and Lima, Mumbai
MOST RECENT TRIP Our last family holiday was in **Italy**. We had seen much of Europe, but not Italy, so we decided to take a Mediterranean cruise. One of the cities that we loved was Florence. Everyone loves Rome, and it must be said that we do too, but Florence also has a charm that is all its own.

MUST EAT When it comes to the food, the simplicity of the cuisine in Italy really did surprise me. Everything from the cucumbers to the tomatoes was fresh and full of flavour. While in Italy, you must try the *ravioli nudi* (naked ravioli with a stuffing of spinach, ricotta, parmesan and nutmeg in a tomato and sage sauce) and *brodo* (meat broth). Another recommendation would be the calamari in *zimino* (stewed calamari with vegetables) while in Italy.

NEXT TRIP I plan to go to Antarctica, for a chartered cruise, with the family.

XERXES BODHANWALA

Chef and Owner at Red Fork Deli, Bengaluru

MOST RECENT TRIP Tuscany, the Amalfi Coast, Modena, Rome, Venice, and Naples. We had never been to **Italy**, and I was keen to experience the cuisine and countryside. It exceeded my expectations. It's always great to see how different regions have varied ingredients and eating habits. But regardless of where we went, from little eateries, to bars, to fine dining restaurants, it was always the same philosophy: respect for the ingredients.

MUST EAT Osteria Francescana in Modena for a memorable fine dining experience; Pizzeria da Michele in Naples for melt-in-the-mouth pizzas; and the Bar at Hotel de Russie in Rome for the Bloody Mary and the ambience.

NEXT TRIP I hope to visit Slovenia for its highly recommended food and wine.



POOJA DHINGRA

Chef and Owner at Le 15, Mumbai

MOST RECENT TRIP My last holiday was in **Peru**, and I chose it because, one, I wanted to go to Machu Picchu, and second, Lima is now *the* food destination. They have some of the best restaurants, not only in South America, but in the world. Once in Peru, my to-do-list was all about wanting to meet some chefs, trying pisco and discovering the culture.

MUST EAT There were a lot of new flavours and textures, whether at a high-end meal or something off the streets. Even in terms of the simple ceviche, or *chifa*, which is their version of Chinese food. A highlight was eating at Central in Lima. I went in kind of expecting to be let down, but surprisingly it turned out to be one of the best meals I had.

NEXT TRIP I really want to go to Bangkok, to try out Gaa by Garima Arora, and all the other new restaurants that have opened up in Thailand.



ASHFER BIJU

Executive Chef at The Pierre, New York

MOST RECENT TRIP This January I took a quick break from NYC to visit Cancun and the Yucatan Peninsula. I have always been fascinated by the flavours of Central and South America, and this was my first trip to Mexico to experience them.

MUST EAT Shrimp ceviche tostadas at the seafood stall in Mercado 24, a local market in Cancun. The marinated shrimps with lime, chili, avocado, red onion and cilantro on crisp corn tostadas are perfect for tropical weather and they are super healthy too.

NEXT TRIP I'm going on a road trip in California next month and looking forward to taking in the scenic beauty while enjoying Californian cuisine and fresh produce.



SARAH TODD

Chef and Restaurateur at Antares Restaurant and Beach Club, Goa

MOST RECENT TRIP Assam. It was a culinary sensation; the tribes I encountered were extremely warm and welcoming. People cooked for me and showed me their traditional dance and folk songs. The state has stunning scenery. It also has delicate fabrics, which inspired my new kitchenware range.

MUST EAT Dishes you must try are komal saul, a delicious boiled and sautéed pork dish; til pitha, a moorish tea time snack made from coconut, rice and jaggery; tender jackfruit curry; and sunga chicken.

NEXT TRIP I plan to travel to Kasauli, which is a two-hour drive from Chandigarh.

ALEXIS GIELBAUM, PARTNER AT SLINK AND BARDOT, MUMBAI

"Right now, to go back to France is the only kind of holiday I want. My wife lives in Japan, so I have been there to meet her a couple of times in the past two years, but that's it. In France, Paris obviously is my favourite place, because it's my city. I know all the cool things to do.

Otherwise, we have two houses. One is in Chinon, a wine production area, a little bit like Bordeaux. It is in the Vallée de la Loire. My mother lived here for more than 10 years, and vineyards surround it. Our neighbour is an amazing



wine producer. It's the kind of region where you cook a lot with the wine, where you make wine jam, and many recipes with

wine, especially red wine. There's a few cheeses also. We have another house, which is very, very south of France in a village

called Le Tignet. It's in the mountains and takes about two hours to reach from Nice. So that's the Mediterranean, and at the end of the Alps. The products you can have from here are very different from Chinon or Paris. They make their own olive pickles, and their own olive oil, which is a bit bitter—very different from what you find in Italy. Lots of lemons. There's a lot of fish, obviously. It is close to Grasse, the capital of perfumes in France, so it's full of those smells and those beautiful products."

MATYAS REHAK/SHUTTERSTOCK (FISH MARKET), BIJUTUTTA/SHUTTERSTOCK (FOOD), WJAREK/SHUTTERSTOCK (VINEYARD)



MANU CHANDRA

Chef Partner at Toast & Tonic, The Fatty Bao and Monkey Bar; Executive Chef at Olive Beach, Bengaluru

MOST RECENT TRIP Italy. I go to Italy quite often actually. This time I went to **Bologna**—that was one part of the country I hadn't been to, plus they have a great food history. It's the home of salumi and tortellinis; that's what it's famous for principally. But there was a lot more to explore. It's the kind of place where *aperativos* exist, with loads of slices of salami.

MUST EAT Bologna is one of the largest centres of processed meats in Italy, and what I discovered, of course, is that they also have fantastic seafood there. You need to be there at the right season. The winter truffle season was also kicking in. We also happened to be there during a chocolate festival, in the main square. They had 350-400 different boutique chocolate makers from across the country. So, yeah, lots of food, lots of good wine and lots of good chocolate.

NEXT TRIP I will be going to Calabria, another part of the

country that I haven't visited. It has the spiciest Italian cuisine, and one of my favourite things here is this pork sausage spread called *'nduja*. Calabrian wines are also coming to the forefront. They have very chalky soil, so there's a very distinct characteristic.



ARNALDO GONZALES RAMOS

Chef de Cuisine at The Stables and Rodeo Drive, Dubai

MOST RECENT TRIP Thailand. I love Thailand, purely because of its culinary graph. Being a tourist destination, it caters to a very dynamic set of palettes. What's unique is how they still retain the authenticity of their traditional flavours.

MUST EAT It's heaven for experimental and bizarre foodies. I tried things I never thought I would: insect and seafood, exotic vegetables, half-cooked crocodile meat, and a variety of seafood at its freshest.

NEXT TRIP Back to my home country, Philippines. I intend on starting my own food business there.

KAINAZ CONTRACTOR, CO-OWNER AT RUSTOM'S PARSİ BHONU, NEW DELHI

"I chose my destinations in **Spain** based on culinary specialties as well as the sights.

In the coastal city of Malaga, seafood and shellfish topped our list. In search of the famed Spanish cured meat *jamon iberico de bellota* we found our way to Ronda, a sleepy old town. A lovely little tapas restaurant there had perfected the art of serving paper-thin slices of cured leg of the black-footed Iberian pig.

The city that truly



embodies the culture of tapas, however, is Granada, which lies at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Granada remains one of the few cities to continue the tradition of serving tapas on the house along with your

drink. We tried mainstays like fried bacalao, patatas bravas, and *croquetas*, and local specialties like sherry soaked clams, green beans poached in olive oil with *jamon*, Sacromonte omelette with lamb brains, and my surprise favourite: *berenjenas con miel* or crisp-fried aubergine with wild honey. Moving north, I loved Barcelona for its non-conformist attitude to both food and culture (Gaudi's architectural gems included)." ✂

VIVA LA VEGAN

BITE INTO FLAKY PASTRIES, JUICY BURGERS AND VEGAN PATÉ AT THESE MEATLESS RESTAURANTS AROUND THE WORLD **BY KAREENA GIANANI**

NANUCHKA, TEL AVIV

Aromas of the kitchens of Georgia waft from the kitchen at Tel Aviv's Nanuchka. Hailed as the world's first vegan Georgian restaurant, Nanuchka serves *amruli khachapuri*, the crumbly traditional Georgian pastry, and stuffs it with soy cheese and spinach instead of meat. Patrons sip Georgian red wine Kindzmarauli and take in Nanuchka's artsy vibe and walls covered with works by famous Israeli artists. Vegans are in good company in Tel Aviv; in 2014, Israeli soldiers protested against lack of vegan food served in the armed forces, and got their way (nanuchka.co.il/en).

KOPPS, BERLIN

Kopps is sacred ground for any vegan in Berlin who swears by his or her food philosophy. The fine-dining restaurant's Turkish-German owner cooks black rice with black root, endive, apple, and walnut. He flecks sweet-potato-and-leek paté with orange, fennel, and pumpkin seeds. Whether it is their pretty-looking apple crumble vanilla or a glass of organic wine, Kopps knows how to serve vegan in style (www.kopps-berlin.de/en).

HOMEGROWN SMOKER VEGAN BBQ, PORTLAND

Ranked as the U.S.A.'s top vegan-friendly city in 2016, Portland is catnip for lovers of meatless indulgences. In addition to fine-dining spots and a vegan mini-mall with a bakery, a clothing shop, and a tattoo parlour, the city is home to Homegrown Smoker Vegan BBQ. The establishment's mobile cart and deli offer scrumptious comfort food: think burgers with a seitan (wheat gluten) patty, burritos made with tempeh (soy substitute for meat), and Mac No-Cheese (www.homegrownsmoker.com).

OOH CHA CHA, TAIPEI

No vegan food crawl in Taipei is complete without popping into Ooh Cha Cha. The plant-based café is great taste unleashed: multigrain sourdough toasts are slathered with walnuts, almond ricotta, and mushroom pate, and smoothies pack oodles of health goodness. The café's hot Vietnamese bowl meals are flavour bombs complete with lemongrass, seaweed, and pickled vegetables (www.oohchacha.com).

FLYING DUCK, GLASGOW

Raucous pub quizzes, gigs and film screenings while biting into a vegan version of the German sausage dish, *currywurst*, anyone? Head to Glasgow's much-loved underground bar, Flying Duck. Its groove metre never seems to dip, and neither does its imagination when it comes to vegan cuisine: the bar hosts monthly vegan fetes and serves "pulled pork", melt-in-the-mouth doughnuts, and shakes blended with vodka and Kahlua (www.theflyingduck.org). ✂



With its vegan ragout (in picture), plant-based ice creams and cheeseboards, Berlin-based restaurant, Kopps, serves up art on plates.

THE CONVERSATION



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**LOVE, LOSS AND
WHAT SHE ATE**

Padma Lakshmi's career has helped fuse her two biggest loves—food and travel

RENA SCHILD/SHUTTERSTOCK

THE
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ISSUE

THE CONVERSATION



PADMA LAKSHMI

LOVE, LOSS

and What She Ate

Padma Lakshmi's career has helped fuse her two biggest loves—food and travel. Eating her way through the world, she has learnt a lot about cultures, and more about herself

BY SHREEVATSA NEVATIA

Scheduled to air later this year, the new season of Top Chef will be its fifteenth. By now, the format of this reality television series is familiar. Eager to show their chops, amateur chefs sweat it out in a well-kitted kitchen.

One raw shrimp or a not-so-tender piece of pork is often ground enough for elimination. The judges are unforgiving, and at times didactic. But unlike its several emulators, this American reality cooking competition remains compelling. Padma Lakshmi, the show's presenter, does make sure of that.

A five-foot-niner, Lakshmi is arguably statuesque. Her gaze on television oscillates between stern and empathetic. There is warmth in her consolation, and an honesty in her accessible reviews. Surprisingly, however, this poise was once shakeable. In her recently released memoir, *Love, Loss and What We Ate*, Lakshmi has confessed to suffering an initial "touch of the imposter syndrome". Worried that star chefs would dismiss her as just another pretty face, the model found confidence in a sanguine monologue—"Sure, I hadn't broken down a side of beef or cooked on the line. But I'd eaten and learned about good food all over the world—the finest *bastillas* in Marrakesh, tons of meals in Paris bistros, fresh pasta made by expert hands in Milan, the best *biryani* in Hyderabad, and the most exhilarating chaat in Delhi."

Travel, inference then suggests, is a requisite for success in the culinary world. In an interview with *National Geographic Traveller India*, Lakshmi seemed to agree with our premise. She says, "I think that travel is the most important thing any person can do for their education. You learn so much abroad that you don't get in a classroom or textbook." The author went on to list some common benefits that travel affords cooks and chefs—"Being well-informed certainly helps on the road to greatness. Travelling also expands your palette and teaches you about ingredients and different cooking techniques from cultures other than your own." For Lakshmi, you only come to know a place when you taste your way through it.

LAKSHMI'S CULINARY career has fused the three things she admits to loving most—"food, travel and hosting on television." She first anchored a show called *Padma's Passport* in 2001, and later hosted documentaries that were given the name *Planet Food*. One of these documentaries took her back to Spain. She had spent the last months of her col-

lege life in Madrid. "Yes, I studied abroad in Spain," Lakshmi tells *NGTI*, "but filming a documentary there later allowed me not only to experience the food, but about the people who made it, and in turn, go deeper into Spanish culture than I would have otherwise." Lakshmi's memoir makes clear that places and people are both catalysts. They have a vital consequence.

Struggling to earn her living as a model, Lakshmi found herself in Paris. She didn't have much money, but to lift her spirits, she "tried to buy a small piece of Paris through its food". It didn't take long for her to fall in love with French cheese. In the Bastille street market, she discovered that cheese wasn't just white or orange, it was also "blue, beige, veiny, creamy white, yellow, deep sunset orange, or even burnt sienna". In faltering French, Lakshmi stammered her questions to a large, sweaty cheesemonger. An Alfred Hitchcock doppelgänger, the man, though gruff, had become a friend. Knowing the limits of her purse, perhaps seeing the hunger in her eyes, he'd often throw her a razor-thin slice of cheese or a crumbled edge. "The amount was always perfect," writes Lakshmi, the model who ate too much cheese.

Seeing Lakshmi sit at the high table of food, it is hard to believe she once had to rely on scraps of cheese to sample Parisian fare. She knows how to eat the hard way. If given the opportunity to spend a day roaming the streets of a city, tasting food along the way, it isn't surprising that Lakshmi would choose Paris. Though "it's gotten better over the years with its ethnic food", Lakshmi says, "You really go there for the cheese, wine, crepes, and the hole-in-the-wall shish kebab joints. I'd eat at Le Monde de Joël Robuchon for the mashed potatoes. I'd have the vegetarian tasting menu at L'Arpège, and I'd go to the food markets behind Saint Germain." Lakshmi's map, though, doesn't just outline destinations.

In many of her iterations, the TV host seemed to make a strong case for the foodie as anthropologist—"You can tell a lot about a place by where its people congregate to eat. Experiencing both high and low ends of the food spectrum is vital. It allows you to see how people really live. Most of the rituals that we practice are centred around food, so you can tell



“ YOU CAN TELL A LOT ABOUT A PLACE BY WHERE ITS PEOPLE CONGREGATE TO EAT. EXPERIENCING BOTH HIGH AND LOW ENDS OF THE FOOD SPECTRUM IS VITAL. IT ALLOWS YOU TO SEE HOW PEOPLE REALLY LIVE



Laura Cavanaugh/Contributor/FilmMagic/Getty Images (Talk Show), Bravo/Contributor/NBCUniversal/Getty Images (Kitchen)



THE BEST WAY TO FIGHT HOMESICKNESS IS TO PREPARE A BELOVED MEAL. IT HELPS GIVE YOU A LITTLE TASTE OF HOME WHEN YOU CANNOT GET THERE PHYSICALLY

a lot about a culture by the way it eats.” Cultural and culinary exploration, however, can sometimes be prone to accidents. Lakshmi, for instance, once ordered a pepperoni pizza in Milan and was given a pizza with marinated peppers instead. In Italy, she learnt, *peperoni* meant bell peppers. For those unnerved by the idea of eating abroad, Lakshmi has some pragmatic advice—“There’s always a language barrier when you go to a foreign country. So when I travel to a new place, I try to learn the words of my favourite foods so I can communicate to the waiters effectively. That’s part of the adventure of discovering food in a new land.”

LAKSHMI SPEAKS about food with a lucidity that is learnt, but with a passion that is childlike. Her love for food, she says, was born in India, where she spent the first four years of her life and then several summers growing up. In the early chapters of *Love, Loss...*, she writes, “Coming from India and spending what seemed like most of my upbringing in the kitchens of my grandmother, mother, and various aunts (that’s where all the action is, after all), I valued and took a keen interest in spices.” Her suitcases have for long been packed with “spices and sauces, seeds and twigs”, but of late, she doesn’t just bring back spices, she even has some in her bags when taking off. She tells *NGTI*, “I travel a lot for work, often to places that don’t have fresh Indian ingredients, like curry leaves or kaffir lime leaves. I have a mini spice kit I often take when I’m away filming. The best way to fight homesickness is to prepare a beloved meal. It helps give you a little taste of home when you cannot get there physically.”

Jason, *Top Chef*’s on-set assistant, makes Lakshmi chilli cheese toast when she is tired and hungry. The recipe is Lakshmi’s, and the taste is that of her Indian childhood, but not everything, she finds, is replicable. The yogurt in America, for instance, never quite tastes like the “homemade yogurt” of India. She misses her grandmother’s dosas, “which are crisp at the edges and soft at the centre,” but when asked what is the one dish she longs to eat each time she returns to the country, Lakshmi is unequivocal—“Chaat.” Even in the States, when eating a double bacon western cheeseburger at Carl’s Jr., Lakshmi felt the bacon, cheese and sweet

barbecue sauce amounted to *chaatpati*. “Given the crunchy onion ring that topped the patty, I was basically eating a chaat burger,” she writes. Nachos had an unmistakable chaat-like quality, and hot dog vendors, for her, were the *chaatwaalas* of New York. Lakshmi claims to have visited cities through her fork, but India, one thinks, she devours with her hands.

WHEN AUTHORS Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Siri Hustvedt and Susan Sontag came home for dinner, Padma Lakshmi made a creamy chicken curry, *pav bhaji*, lemon rice and *raita*. Intimidated by the collective intellectual heft of her former husband Salman Rusdhie’s friends, Lakshmi overcame her presumed feelings of inferiority by cooking, for “who doesn’t like the cook?” Her menu, though, also had another, sweeter agenda. With her cooking, she wanted to take Rusdhie back home, “to a sweet, idyllic place and time, back to those smells of childhood and India.” Food, a vehicle with wheels that takes you back, also proved to be transport that pushed Lakshmi forward. With her marriage broken, still coping with endometriosis, Lakshmi checked herself into the “Sorry Hotel”. Her melancholy only ebbed when she made a batch of chutney with kumquats that her mother had sent. Cooking, she says, has always been her salvation. “Food is one of the most basic ways we comfort ourselves and each other. Oftentimes when I have been worried about something, cooking calms me. The act of cooking is itself therapeutic.”

After the birth of her daughter Krishna in 2010, Lakshmi doesn’t quite travel and eat the way she always did. Strangely, she seems to eat more. She tells us, “Because of Krishna, when I go to Mexico now I usually have to try all the flavours of *paletas* or pop-sicles. She loves sweets, so it’s tempting to do so myself when I see her enjoying all the exotic flavours.” In *Love, Loss...*, Lakshmi writes, “Krishna was a great traveller. Over the few short years of her life, she had clocked more miles than most adults.” There is of course much that the world will teach her daughter, but if Lakshmi’s own travels were to be a manual, there is a lesson that merits memorising—when coming a long way, having a full stomach helps. ✂

If I had to spend a day alone roaming the streets of any city in the world, tasting food along the way, I'd go to Paris. You really go there for the cheese, wine, crepes, and the hole-in-the-wall shish kebab joints.



Off the Quai Voltaire, Le Voltaire in Paris is the quintessential cosy French restaurant. It's very traditional, the waiters know what they're doing, and the people-watching is fantastic.



When I return to India, the one dish I long to eat is chaat, or my grandmother's dosas, which are crisp at the edges and soft at the centre, or homemade yogurt—the yogurt in America doesn't taste the same.



I fell in love with Noma in Copenhagen because the precision and attention to detail here is staggering. The whole menu reads like a boy's childhood love letter to his forest.

NARVIK/ISTOCK (CHEESE), PAMELA JOEMCFARLANE/ISTOCK (CHAAT), MARKORD/ISTOCK (CAFE), JAVIOZ/ISTOCK (NOMA)



THE HUNDRED-FOOT JOURNEY HOME

VINEET BHATIA MOVED TO LONDON IN 1993, BUT THE CHEF STILL PLATES UP MUMBAI

BY AATISH NATH

“I would never call a *rogan josh*, ‘*rogan josh*,’” says Vineet Bhatia, “I would call it a ‘slow-cooked shank of lamb with Kashmiri spices.’” We’re at Ziya, Bhatia’s fine-dining establishment at the Oberoi, Mumbai, where a new tasting menu includes items such as an amuse bouche of prawn, apple, corn and cauliflower, garnished with sweet yogurt and tamarind sauce to bring to mind the crunchy, sweet, spicy, and sour tastes and textures of chaat. As Bhatia explains the rationale behind his very successful rebranding of traditional Indian food for an international clientele—he currently runs 10 restaurants in eight cities—something else about Bhatia clicks into place.

In a way, the chef has been running away from tradition, from home, from Mumbai, ever since he was young. “As a kid I wanted to become a pilot, and travel, and fly,” he tells me. “But you know life has its ways—I ended up being a chef purely by error, and started training at the Oberoi.”

At culinary school, Bhatia was the shortest and youngest in his class. “I used to get bullied and had to learn to stand up and fight for myself.” Looking around him, the young Bhatia “realised that everybody was doing the same damn thing. And they were all like sheep, they would follow the same path.”

European chefs, and their ingenuity in

the kitchen, opened Bhatia’s mind up to different ways of thinking. “I thought if a foreigner can do it in a foreign land, why can’t I do it in my own motherland,” he says. And I think food became a way for me to express myself, of what I wanted. It was my space, it was my freedom and I could do things the way I wanted to.”

This tension of wanting to escape, while being inextricably tied to his roots as a classically trained Indian chef, became even more pronounced for Bhatia when he moved to London in 1993 and got a job in an Indian restaurant. “I was the only Indian,” recalls Bhatia; the rest of the staff were Bangladeshis who had trained in curry houses. Bhatia was churning out, “chicken tikkas and biryanis and *mussalams* and *kormas*,” but his diners weren’t actually interested in the food he was serving up. “I realised I have to change my mindset to survive.”

So rogan josh became slow-cooked lamb shanks, and ingredients from India’s regional cuisines along with those foreign to Indian cooking came together in new and wonderful ways. A moilee, and rechado and coffee-rubbed lamb chops can be part of the same meal, as I experienced over a tasting menu at Mumbai’s Ziya, with not a single element feeling out of place.

Bhatia’s forging of a singularly Indian culinary identity, outside India, was a



“ I THOUGHT IF A FOREIGNER CAN DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS IN A FOREIGN LAND, WHY CAN'T I DO IT IN MY OWN MOTHERLAND? ”

successful formula. Besides Ziya, Bhatia has restaurants scattered all over the globe; his customers include not only Indian immigrants to cities such as Dubai and Doha but also curious eaters in places like Geneva, who have little context of Indian food. Even in London, where his flagship eatery, Vineet Bhatia London opened last year, says Bhatia, “not more than 20 per cent of customers are Indian.”

Not all Bhatia's diners are familiar with the ins and outs of Indian food, so his menus are accessible to a wide range of people. “I have always been very experimental as a kid from day one,” says Bhatia, “I used to question things.”

But today, back in Mumbai, Bhatia is also happy to talk about the childhood memories that fuelled his experiments with Indian food over all his years away from home. “What I used to love to eat was street food,” Bhatia tells me. Living on Mumbai's northern seafront, there was a bounty of such dishes available. “I grew up on Juhu Chowpatty,” he reminisces, “so you know; you had your *bhel puri* and *pani puri* and *ragda pattice* and all that stuff there. The *thelewala* or the cycle guy used to come and he used to make the *bhel puri* in the building, *neeche aake*.”

After all, Bhatia, like most Indians, loves the play of tastes and textures that a chaat entails. As he waxes lyrical about chaat—“one thing which ignites your palette”—he talks about how “it's not just one single taste coming through. It has got a lot of things that tease your palette, and that is why I think chaats are so popular.”

Bhatia applies the multifarious approach to other dishes, mixing memories with culinary discipline and a

dash of whimsy. He talks about the crab *khandvi* dish he will be introducing to the menu at Vineet Bhatia London this month (it was also on the menu at *Zaika*, which Bhatia opened in London in 1999, in a different avatar). “I love Gujarati snacks,” Bhatia says. “You get some very good Gujarati food also in Mumbai. As a kid, I remember eating *khandvi* and *dhoklas*. So again, the *khandvi* has been a big inspiration. We've taken the *khandvi*—and if I tell a Gujarati what I want to do, he'll probably turn in his grave—and we fill it with crabmeat. We did a crab *ka chaat*, and gave it coastal flavours of coconut, *kadi patta* (curry leaves) and *rai* (mustard seeds), and filled the *khandvi* with the crabmeat. When you roll it, you get a beautiful yellow spiral with the inside of white flaky crabmeat; it looks like coconut flakes!”

As typified by the *khandvi* and crab dish, Bhatia is still happy to transgress convention to create food that is both visually appealing, and that combines unexpected ingredients. But he appreciates that for many of his diners—some of whom have been away from “home” far longer than he has—“Many things boil down to what you have eaten as a kid. The flavours, the colours, the textures. You try and bring memories back. They may not think of it as a combination, but you know, when they eat, they say, *ha, yeh to maine khaya hai*”—I know this taste.”

It's a moment of recognition that makes the unfamiliar not only palatable, but delicious. ✂





Chef Alex Moser serves up farm-fresh food at AnnaMaya in Delhi.

THE ART

OF CONSTANT ARRIVAL

After drinking vodka in Vladivostok and avoiding horsemeat in Bishkek, chef Alex Moser finds himself scouring India for ingredients **By Sonal Shah**

Chef Alex Moser arrived in India on a Saturday last year, to begin cooking up a food plan for Andaz, the new hotel by Hyatt in Delhi's Aerocity. "On Sunday," Moser recalls, "my boss took me to Gurudwara Bangla Sahib's kitchen where they cook 25,000 meals daily. Wow!" The burly 34-year-old chef takes a rare pause for breath, but his ever-present grin doesn't falter. "At that time, last year, we had the refugee issue," he continues, alluding to the charged debate in his home country of Germany, "we were talking about how to help, what to do—but 25,000 meals—it was mind-blowing."

"Then my boss said, OK, next step, Old Delhi—straight into the meat market, the spice market." Moser pauses again, leaning back in his chair at our table at AnnaMaya, the restaurant and food hall at Andaz. "I was like, are you serious?"

As a widely travelled chef, Moser has had his share of eye-opening travel experiences over his 18-year career with Hyatt. He's been based out of Dubai, Russia, Switzerland and Turkey, with stops and stints everywhere from Gran Canaria island to Nice, Cannes, Yerevan and Bishkek. It was in Spain, while working briefly for a composer, that he developed a paranoia of cockroaches (after having one invade his pants in the vegetable garden); and in Kyrgyzstan that he discovered the outer limits of his gastronomic curiosity. "They do horsemeat sausages—they're really heavy, rustic, thick with fat pieces inside. Now in the south of Germany we too eat horsemeat—it's not something I would say, 'Wow, nice,' but this," he trails off. "It was summertime, there was a bit of meat hanging with this big piece of yellow fat from the horse. I couldn't stand it. The guy goes shoo"—Moser waves his hands, as if whisking away flies—"and asks, 'do you want that?' I said no."

While working in Istanbul, Moser was asked if he wanted to go to India. "It was not the first priority on my list," he smiles. He had been here before, in 2010, and he fell in love with Goa, which he calls his second home. The Delhi food scene, however, seemed to him stuffy and dominated by hotel restaurants. "But then looking at it from a life perspective, and taking into account my love of Indian food, I decided to take the plunge." The decision would end up challenging Moser in completely new ways, while also pushing the envelope for the capital's hotel food scene.

"I really like to adapt to where I am," says Moser, who speaks with a German accent, inflected with an Indian lilt. "I've learnt that wherever you go, you will always be a guest. For me, it was always interesting, to see how locals operate, how does their life come together."

Moser had also learned that what works in one place may not be appropriate for another. During his five years in Russia, he was in Ekaterinburg—"just a little city in front of Siberia" and Vladivostok, "on the far end." The focus of the local cuisine was "a lot of vodka." Moser describes the typical table: "It's very heavy food, because it's very cold; a lot of pork shashlik, sausage, smoked ham; smoky, salted pork fat from the belly; a lot of pickled vegetables in the wintertime; they make very good bread."



Chef Alex Moser loves experimenting with diverse ingredients, such as *timur* pepper (left) sourced from near the Nepal border and Himalayan rock salt infused with ingredients like garlic, hemp seed and garlic (right).

On his first visit home, he tried to recreate the same feast in Germany. “I brought the vodka, but it didn’t taste the same,” he says, “outside it was not as cold as it was in Russia, so the vodka didn’t taste nice; the pork was not as good; my mum in the kitchen didn’t fit with the vodka glasses... it’s not all about good food, it’s about the environment, the whole package.”

Moser’s chef friend in Delhi warned him that the environment—more precisely the lack of a reliable supply chain—would be his biggest challenge in India. With AnnaMaya, Moser and his colleagues decided to tackle that challenge head-on, working only with local produce (with very little exception) and set up a European-style food hall to showcase Indian ingredients. Imagine a five-star hotel restaurant that does not, on principle, serve salmon, and you’ll begin to see the novelty of the approach.

Although Moser’s grandfather was a vegetable importer, he died when the chef was very young; India provided Moser with a more intense relationship with his ingredients than he had experienced before. There’s a wall lined with living microgreens, for example, which Moser was inspired to cultivate when he came across a “futuristic” illustration of a family growing baby lettuce in their kitchen. The entire kitchen team went to Tijara in Rajasthan to visit the organic farm that supplies AnnaMaya with seasonal vegetables: such as springy, emerald kale, and carrots as bright orange as traffic cones.



If I built something in my house, it would definitely be a tandoor

“Everybody will tell you, I know my banker, I know my lawyer, my doctor,” Moser says, “we celebrate the opening of hospitals. But nobody knows the farmer, that’s the sad part.” So for the launch of the AnnaMaya in December 2016, the hotel flew in all the producers they had begun to work with, to set up stalls and talk about their work. Meera Bisht, a woman who infuses rock salt with local lemons and other ingredients in Ranikhet, made a particular impression on Moser. “She had never left her village, because of her cow. We found somebody to take care of the cow, and she brought her two kids—she was jumping on the king-size bed. It was her first time in a five-star hotel. I still get goosebumps when I think about it.”

It was because of Bisht that Moser stopped importing lemons. “She said they grow the lemons in the mountains. But no supplier was interested to go there and pick them up. Our whole mindset changed. Now the fruit you find in the hotel is only local.”

Moser is similarly excited by the *timur* pepper, a Sichuan variety from near the Nepal border; pickles and tea from the Nilgiris; and chocolate produced in Bengaluru from one of the country’s oldest cacao fields. Moser also plans to expand his knowledge of India’s edible landscape with visits to Kerala “because of the spices”, and elsewhere.

Domestic travel continues to nourish Moser’s body and brain. On a work trip to Chandigarh, Moser brought back six kilos of butter chicken: “I love good butter chicken—I’d jump in there straight away,” he says with relish. Once, when flying out of Delhi, Moser overheard a man making a big scene over being made to throw away his water bottle before security, then being charged ₹100 for a new one. “That was the moment I said, listen, we have to give complimentary water.” Plastic bottles of mineral water are available for those who want them, but AnnaMaya’s staff stresses that the water on table is double-filtered.

In terms of Indian cooking techniques, Moser is most keen on experiments with the tandoor. “We do a duck confit, for instance, in the European way of doing a confit in the oven, and then flash it up in the tandoor, which gives it a smoky taste,” he says. “If I built something in my house, it would definitely be a tandoor,” he adds, thinking back to his time in Turkey and Central Asia. “In Kyrgyzstan, they had a lot of old techniques, like doing bread in the wood-fired oven—for me as a chef, it’s always so exciting to see these places, because every cuisine has its origin, and there’s always an explanation for a dish. It’s the same in Indian cuisine.”

Moser has adapted well to his new home, even managing to dodge Delhi Belly despite his forays into local street food. Hopefully his travel bug will be content with exploring the subcontinent for a long while yet. “When I left Dubai, in 2008, the bubble exploded,” he tells me. “Dubai went down. I moved to Russia, and when I left the bubble went down. I went to Turkey... well, it was prime time there. Now I’m in India, everyone says, ‘Don’t leave!’” ✂

THE DESTINATION

88

TASTING TEL AVIV


A guide to defeating hunger in Israel's non-stop city



CHAMELONSEYE/SHUTTERSTOCK

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WINNING THE HUNGER GAMES IN JAPAN



Kyoto's Maruyama Park is a popular cherry blossom viewing (*hanami*) spot. It is particularly lively at night when revellers gather to drink sake under the hundreds of cherry trees in an event known as Gion-no-Yozakura.



Sample Tokyo, Kyoto and Fukuoka in 72 hours

BY SAYONI SINHA

DAY ONE TOKYO

10:30AM

KING OF GYUDON TIME

At our hotel in Minowa Station my husband and I enquired about a decent neighbourhood eatery for *gyudon*—a bowl of sliced beef and onions boiled in a sweet and spicy soup, laid on a bed of rice. It is one of Japan's more filling meat-and-rice combos. Following the instructions given to us we reached Matsuya, across the road from Minowa station at the corner of Showa Dori Street.

The establishment accepts orders through a vending machine, which essentially means that you punch in your order, deposit money into the slot and collect the ticket that pops out. On handing my ticket to a server, I was informed that the *gyudon*, which at Matsuya is called *gyumeshi*, came with miso soup. Apart from the *gyumeshi*, meals on offer include a variety of set menus with beef and pork belly. Perhaps everyone's first meal in Japan feels like the best ever,



but there's no denying that this meaty rice concoction warmed my soul and senses like none other.

Matsuya has outlets across the country; just look out for its characteristic logo with blue letters on yellow background (www.matsuyafoods.co.jp; *gyumeshi* from JPY240/₹136; set meals from JPY590/₹340).

12:30PM

A COMBINI LUNCH

By the time we descended from the free observation deck of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government—the best way to take in a cityscape from a vantage point—it was time for lunch. To help maximize our limited time in the Japanese capital, a takeaway lunch of tuna and egg salad sandwiches from Lawson, a popular convenient store chain, did the job.

The food here is surprisingly fresh and reasonably priced. The sandwiches have a distinct crunch (of the lettuce), and include fillings such as tuna or egg salad, *katsu* (fried pork cutlets), ham and cheese. I remembered from an episode I'd seen on television that celebrity-chef Anthony Bourdain includes the egg salad sandwich at Lawson as one of his favourite things to eat in the country. Another popular dish at Lawson's is *onigiri*, sticky rice pyramids enclosing meat or seafood and wrapped with a crisp sheet of seaweed.

The store's hot counter serves sizzling, juicy *yakitori* (deep fried meat), and I couldn't resist ordering chicken gizzards and legs, as well as steamed meat buns. Armed with these—as well as Meiji caramel pudding, Calbee potato crisps and a few cans of Santori highball, the best whiskey soda premix in the country—we headed to Yoyogi Park near Harajuku for a picnic lunch. (www.lawson.co.jp; egg salad sandwich JPY232/₹132; *onigiri* JPY129/₹74; *yakitori* from JPY100/₹57)



2PM

OF SAKES AND WINES

A few minutes' walk away from Yoyogi Park is the Meiji Shrine. The Japanese love for sake is evident in the assembly of sake-filled "decoration barrels" called *kazaridaru* (in picture) on the path to the shrine. Around the *kazaridaru* lie barrels of wine, which were gifts to the Emperor Meiji from some of the finest wineries in Bourgogne, France and around the world. The benches along the path are an ideal spot for a snack break, and washing down an egg salad sandwich with a can of highball at a quaint park is an experience that will stay with you forever. Be warned, however, that though not illegal, it is sometimes considered impolite to drink alcohol in public.



Takeshita-dori's bustling streets are lined with quirky shops, fashion boutiques, crepe stands and fast-food outlets catering to the young, trendy locals and tourists.

4PM

FEELING FRIED

Takeshita-dori, a hipster neighbourhood in Harajuku, has everything from high street to international designer brands and is a good place for window shopping. One thing Indians and Japanese have in common is their love for all things potato, and nestled in the midst of Takeshita-dori is Calbee Plus, a store that not only stocks every flavour the chips brand has to offer, but also sells freshly fried bespoke packs of chips. Choose from plain options, or add chocolate coating, salt, pepper, cheese, chicken, maple syrup, butter, shrimp, purple potato, wasabi or tofu. The salesgirl suggested a chocolate-coated potato chip parfait, but we chose to go with a pack of the wasabi and shrimp ones instead (www.calbee.co.jp; a pack of chips from JPY200/₹114)



6PM

POP-UP SHOP

During our exploration of Harajuku, a local told us about the roaring popularity of the Danish brand Flying Tiger, which stocks everything from stationery to soft toys. We decided to go looking for it but on the way came across an impossibly long queue leading to Chicago's iconic gourmet popcorn brand, Garrett. Curious about the manic popularity of a popcorn shop, we joined the line. Forty-five minutes later, we entered the store, and were enveloped by the heady aroma of caramel and butter. We'd had ample time to decide between varieties such as cheese corn, caramel crisp, mild salted, plain, almond caramel crisp, cashew caramel crisp and the popular Chicago mix (cheese and caramel), and finally settled for the cashew caramel crisp. The wait was worth it. (www.garrettpopcorn.com; small tub starts from JPY290/₹165.)

8PM ON THE SUSHI TRAIN



For dinner, we decided to explore the bustling neighbourhood of Shinjuku, a stop away. As we came out of the west exit of Shinjuku Station, a *kaitenzushi*, or conveyor belt sushi establishment caught our attention. At Ganso Zushi, plates carrying 60 types of sushi roll past diners who can pick whatever looks good. Besides the standard menu, there are special dishes such as a *magurozukushi set* (JPY600/₹345) that combines fatty underbelly, medium-fatty, and lean portions of tuna with egg.

After a few rounds, we saw a neighbouring couple placing their orders directly with the chef across a tiny window at a corner. We followed suit, and after a few hand gestures towards our neighbours' plates, we had our own plates of crimson-coloured tuna gloriously sprawled on beds of sticky rice. We soon learnt that there were more than a few off-the-menu options, such as fried octopus and scallops. After we were finished, an attendant stacked up our plates to calculate the damage. (www.gansozushi.com; JPY125-500/₹70-285.)

DAY TWO KYOTO

9:30AM EKIBEN TO GO



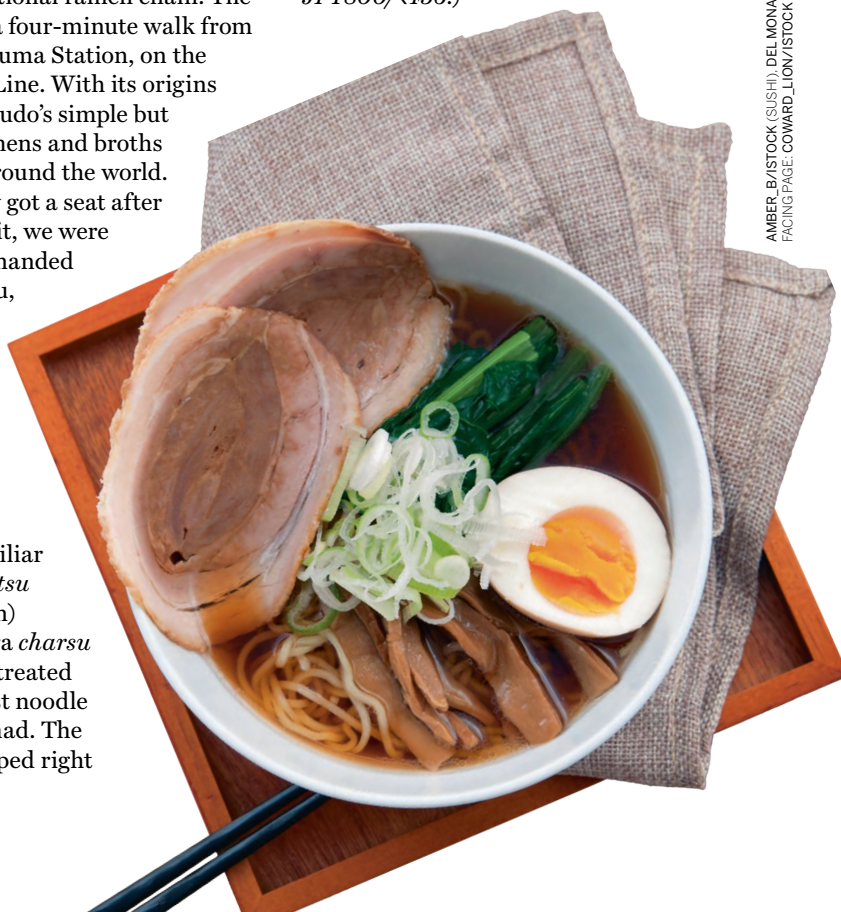
We checked out of our hotel and headed to Ueno Station for the 2hr 40min journey on the Shinkansen (bullet train) to Kyoto. Before boarding, we picked up *ekiben*, special bento boxes or combo meals sold at train stations, which are essentially combo meals. Many stations take pride in offering special *ekiben* featuring locally grown ingredients, and aesthetically pleasing packaging with designs to represent the region in question. I selected a salmon slice with an assortment of other dishes, such as *kinpira gobou* (burdock root and carrot stir fry, sprinkled with white sesame seeds), mushroom and *agedashi* tofu, an egg roll, pickled vegetables, and sausage. My husband picked one with a shrimp tempura, tender chicken, sour pickled plum, root vegetable stew, and an onigiri stuffed with mystery meat (approx. JPY700/₹400 per box).

1:30PM FIRST RAMEN

On reaching Kyoto, we left our bags in a storage locker at the train station, and went looking for the local Ippudo, a popular international ramen chain. The outlet is barely a four-minute walk from Exit 18 of Karasuma Station, on the Hankyu Kyoto Line. With its origins in Fukuoka, Ippudo's simple but high quality ramens and broths are legendary around the world. When we finally got a seat after a 45-minute wait, we were surprised to be handed an English menu, a rarity in Japan.

Ippudo has just four ramen variations to choose from, and a couple of starters. I ordered the familiar *akamaru tonkotsu* (pork bone broth) ramen with extra *chashu* (meat) and was treated to one of the best noodle bowls I've ever had. The tender pork slipped right

off the bone as I nudged and poked strategically with a chopstick. (www.ippudo.com; a bowl of ramen from JPY800/₹456.)



Toji is one of Kyoto's oldest shrines. It was founded as a guardian temple for the city in A.D. 796, just two years after Kyoto was established as the imperial capital.



4:30PM TWO TO DANGO

We worked up an appetite with a breezy walk around the Toji Temple and gardens, and decided to stop at the nearest mart to try the much hyped and ubiquitous matcha ice cream and the *dango*, sweet and chewy rice dumplings served on a stick or in a box, which originated in a Kyoto teahouse called Kamo Mitarashi. The Mitarashi dango is traditionally served in a skewer with five pieces. Some say the top represents a head; the next two, arms;

and the last two, legs. I loved the sweet chewy texture so much that I had it every day for the rest of my stay (JPY 150/₹85).



6PM TEMPURA TIME

After collecting our bags from Kyoto Station to board our train to Hakata station to reach Fukuoka, we stopped for a quick meal at a tempura speciality restaurant called Ginza Hageten. The portion sizes are so large that we were advised to order just one plate of *tendon*, which is a bed of sticky rice with tempuras of shrimp, fish, chicken, a selection of vegetables, and an egg served with a salty-sweet sauce, miso soup, pickles, and a salad (www.hageten.com; JPY1,080/₹615).



DAY THREE FUKUOKA

8:30AM
SNACK STATION

When we reached Fukuoka's Hakata station, we were surprised at its sheer size. Housing more than 200 stores, selling everything from fashion to food products, it was a mini-city. While looking for our exit, we chanced upon a brightly lit supermarket called Deitos located near the Chikushi Exit. The store offered a wide range of products, from clothing to souvenirs, and also stocked sweet bread with pastry cream from Hattendo, an iconic 80-year-old shop located in Ippin Dori Street. But I chanced upon the tastiest snack of all at a counter stocked with fried meats. Strips of karikari chicken skin which are coated with a crunchy batter and wonderfully chewy. Perfect for munchies (www.jrhakatacity.com; JPY120/₹68).

11AM

IRON PAN CHEFS

After a walk to the nearby Tochoji and Jotenji temples, we visited Tetsunabe, a home-style joint recommended to us for its delicious gyoza. Gyoza, or dumplings, originated in China, and the commercial port of Fukuoka was where the dish was first introduced to Japan. Tetsunabe (iron pan) gyoza with all kinds

of fillings are most common in Fukuoka, and are considered some of the best in Japan. Not far from

Hakata Station, Tetsunabe is also an ideal place for people-watching, as it is located at a busy junction (JPY470/₹268 for a pan of eight gyozas).



2:30PM

SUPER BOWLS AT THE RAMEN STADIUM



Hakata Canal City, Japan's largest mall, has five floors loaded with multiplex cinemas, hotels, an amusement park, and an abundance of overhanging vegetation. Our motive in visiting this commercial urban monstrosity was to experience the top-floor Ramen Stadium. Like a food court, Ramen Stadium comprises eight restaurants, each boasting a different flavour or style of ramen from Japan. Each has a machine at its entrance, where you place your order and wait for your turn (the dish names are in Japanese). We made our selections and were soon assigned a corner stool.

Fukuoka's noodles are distinguished by their thinness. A typical bowl of noodle soup is usually topped with a couple of slices of meat, mushrooms, spring onions, pickled red ginger, and seaweed. For gastronomes keen on extra seasoning, toasted sesame seeds, garlic, and a couple of sauces are an arm's length away.

The noodles were firm, the broth mild and seaweed-flavoured, and the egg when separated from its middle revealed a golden belly. And yes, the pork was tender and delicious too. (canalcity.co.jp; ramen bowls from JPY690/₹392.)

6PM MOVEABLE FEASTS

We had to try Fukuoka's famous *yatai*, small mobile restaurants complete with built-in benches, that specialise in tonkotsu ramen and sticks of yakitori which can be washed down with a beer or Japanese whiskey. My husband and I squeezed into one such makeshift stall with our back to the Naka River, separated from the rest of Fukuoka by just a plastic curtain. We shared this intimate setting with 10 other diners, mostly locals, around a U-shaped counter.

The by-now familiar aroma of tonkotsu wafted from the bare-bones kitchen behind the counter. As the



Following the ravages of the Second World War, Fukuoka's mobile *yatai*s wheeled out of the rubble and lit their red lanterns to welcome patrons.

sunlight faded, the dozen neighbouring *yatai* filled up quickly. The background score for the evening was slurping,

considered a sign of appreciation in Japanese culture (*meal for two approx. JPY1,500/₹855*).

9PM DEPARTURE



Izakayas started in the 1600s when sake shops began serving customers light bites. The word *izakaya* means "sitting in a sake shop."

We returned to Hakata Station to catch the Shinkansen back to Tokyo, but we had a few hours to kill before boarding our train. So, we walked into one of the many *izakayas*, a Japanese tavern or pub where locals go to socialise, drink copious amounts of alcohol, and eat good food. We ordered *nihonshu* (sake), salted squid guts, octopus with wasabi, and yakitori. While the yakitori was delicious as usual, the salted, pungent squid guts are an acquired taste (*meal for two with sake approx. JPY1,200/₹683*). ✂

REJUVENATE ON ARRIVAL

The best way to dive into the Japan experience, even before exiting Narita Airport, is by dipping in to 9H, a unique shower rental service and sleeping pod hotel in Terminal 2. The hour-long shower service (JPY1,000/₹570) may seem a bit excessive, but the experience will leave you altered. Futuristic and minimalist in design, this washroom is equipped with hot rain showers, towels, shampoos, and body soaps to help you wring out your flying fatigue and get you charged for the day ahead (ninehours.co.jp).

PANDECH/SHUTTERSTOCK (YATAI), LUCAS VALLECILLOS/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (WOMEN)

Who Moved

MY CHEESE

(to Kolkata)

The traditional art of making Jewish and Parsi cheeses lives on in the city's kitchens

BY **ARUNDHATI RAY**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MANJIT SINGH HOONJAN**





aturday morning, 11.30 a.m., and Nahoum and Sons, one of Kolkata's oldest bakeries, in the historic New Market is a hive of activity. It is still owned by the Jewish family that established it in 1902.

Young boys trot in and out, balancing heavy wooden trays on their heads, weaving their way through the customers thronging the place. They enter with trays laden with freshly made dinner rolls, cream horns, vegetable patties from the workshop; and leave with the empty palettes to bring in the next batch of goodies. The glass-fronted shelves need constant replenishing as people stock up for the weekend. Most can't resist the temptation of enjoying a warm snack right there in the shop while they wait for staff to pack their orders. I'm enjoying a *sambusak* which, along with plaited challah loaves, are the few traditional Jewish items still sold. The bell-shaped Jewish samosa fits warmly in my palm. The pale-gold papery pastry is plumped out by the white spongy cheese filling that's seasoned only with salt, and yet every bite is heavenly.

I notice the sambusaks are flying off the shelf. Their popularity is obvious; but I wonder how many of their fans realise that the cheese so generously stuffed in these baked samosas is not some clever combination of paneer and processed cheese. It is, in fact, a heritage product: Jewish cheese made almost exactly as it was in the homes of the first Jewish people who settled in the city over 200 years ago.

Most people are familiar with Bandel cheese—those small salty discs of cheese, smoked and unsmoked, that are one of the few enduring cultural legacies of Bengal's Portuguese past and now available only at two stalls—S. Panja and Johnson's—just a few shops down from Nahoum's. The story of how the Portuguese settled along the west bank of the Hooghly in the 16th century, named the area Bandel (from the Persian *bandar* or port), built the imposing Bandel Basilica and taught the locals how to make their cheese (hence Bandel cheese), has been well documented. But few are aware that Kolkata's artisanal cheeseboard features a couple of other excellent cheeses, each the legacy of the city's long, rich history and diverse cultures who have called it home.

Facing page:
Soft, smooth Parsi cheese is traditionally called *toplī na paneer* because of the little wicker baskets it's kept in. The community loves its cheese—the writer came across an old Parsi publication which ran a nine-page-long recipe for this delicacy.

Cheesemaking is an ancient process, my friend Jael Silliman's mother, Flower Silliman, tells me as we sit in the light-filled kitchen of their high-ceilinged apartment in one of the city's old mansion blocks located just south of busy Park Street. "It's mentioned in the Book of Genesis, the very first book of the Old Testament. Communities across the Middle East have made some form of cheese for centuries. When the Baghdadi Jews came to Calcutta in the 18th century from Iraq and Syria, their cheese travelled with them."

Those early settlers spoke with each other in their native Arabic, and Flower recalls that when she was young, Arabic words still peppered conversations in her community. "The cheese, for instance, was referred to as *jibben*."

Jael, Flower and a handful of others, are what's left of Kolkata's once thriving Jewish community that played a stellar role in the city's early development. In a timely move, Jael, author and women's study scholar, has recently created a multimedia website (www.jewishcalcutta.in) that comprehensively archives Kolkata's rich Jewish history. At 86, Flower is a repository of knowledge about Kolkata's Jewish community. A superb cook, she keeps alive the city's Jewish culinary gems both at home for friends and family;



The pale-gold papery pastry is plumped out by the white spongy cheese filling that's seasoned only with salt, and yet every bite is heavenly”

and by advising clubs and restaurants wanting to feature Calcutta Jewish cuisine. Recently, she provided recipes and training to chefs at Calcutta Stories, a new eatery whose menu showcases dishes of Kolkata's different immigrant communities, including Jews, Parsis and Anglo-Indians.

“My mother, Farah Baqal Abraham, would make the cheese right here in this kitchen using fresh rennet,” continues Flower, “but I've never tried. You see you could also buy it. There was Judah who lived in the Burra Bazaar area and made cheese and several Jewish snacks. Right up to the '40s his chap would go around from house to house with a tin box full of cheese sambusak, Turkish delights and halwa. You could also get the cheese from Nahoum's family kitchen which is just yards away from New Market. They had huge pots to boil the milk, which curdled with imported vegetarian rennet tablets. The separated solids would be drained on massive wooden-framed muslin-lined block moulds. For the plaited cheese, the solids had to be thrown into boiling water and then quickly stretched and kneaded to get the soft yet elastic texture. It was a real art, and the Nahoum's cook, Johar, who was with them for over 50 years, was an expert.”

Little has changed in Nahoum's cheesemaking today. Johar passed away in 2003 but not before teaching his son Sadim the secret of making perfect cheese. Although the plaited kind is rarely made, the block cheese is produced regularly. To obtain four or five kilos of cheese, Sadim needs 40 kilos of fresh buffalo milk. He uses vegetarian rennet imported from Denmark and works with the same pots, pans and wooden frames his father used.

Normally, all the cheese made is used up to fill the sambusaks. However, anyone wanting a block can place an order at the shop. Costing ₹600 per kilo the cheese is delicious. Moist and

crumbly, but slicing perfectly, it melts beautifully, emerging from under the grill in a satisfyingly bubbling layer over toasted bread or grilled vegetables. It's wonderful when soft-crumbled in salads, and can also be enjoyed plain.

Step out of New Market and just a short walk away is Ripon Street, a long narrow thoroughfare bracketed by the peaceful Lower Circular Road Cemetery on one end and gritty Free School Street on the other. Once a bustling residential neighbourhood, home to Anglo-Indians, Goans, Muslims and Parsis, today the pavements have been taken over by auto repair shops and sand heaps spilling out of storage sheds. Ugly half-finished buildings line a road rippled with mountainous speed breakers where pedestrians compete for passage with cycle rickshaws, two-wheelers and cars. But occasionally one glimpses an elegant residence that's a throwback to an earlier era with sunlight twinkling off beautiful stained glass skylights, wooden shuttered windows and balconies edged with wrought iron railings. Viloo Batliwala lives in one of these. A member of Kolkata's rapidly-shrinking Parsi community, this mah-jong playing grandmother is the only person in the city from whom you can buy *topli na paneer* or Parsi cheese. These semi-soft balls of cheese, made with full-cream unpasteurised buffalo milk, very similar to mozzarella in taste and texture, get their name from the little wicker baskets (*topli*) in which they are set and whose impression is lightly embossed on each snow-white rounded surface.

In a fitting testimony to Kolkata's cosmopolitan character, I was introduced to this fabulous artisanal product by a Marwari school friend, Nidhi Jalan, founder of New York based ethnic food-kit company, Masala Mama. She had discovered it at the home of a Parsi friend who gets it from Viloo. Nidhi served me the cheese in a salad, the white cushions with their pretty patina sitting in a golden bath of cold-pressed olive oil, nestled with plump red tomatoes and vibrant green basil. It was absolutely brilliant and soon I was making frequent visits to Viloo, Tupperware box in hand, to bring home the slightly-salty, delicate, panna cotta-smooth cheese, happily paying ₹250 for eight.

Driven out of their native Persia, the followers of Zoroastria landed on India's west coast over 1,300 years ago. They adapted their food and customs to settle seamlessly into their new home. With a keen eye on trade and commerce, they spread to other parts of the country, arriving in Kolkata in the 18th century and contributing immensely to the city's cultural tapestry. Parsi cuisine is a unique palimpsest of the flavours of Persia (the land of origin), Maharashtra and Gujarat (where the community laid down roots) and Britain (with whom the Parsis traded). Meats combine with vegetables, dried fruit and nuts are sprinkled liberally, sweet and sour flavours predominate, cakes and flaky pastries are made exotically fragrant with rosewater and spices. Without doubt, *topli na*

Facing page:
Flower Silliman (top left) recalls her husband and other members of the Jewish community queuing up at Nahoum's on the mornings of festivals like Yom Kipper, to buy cheese samosas before they ran out. The shop continues to offer young Calcuttans (top right) a taste of the past with their delicious *sambusaks* (middle left and right) and blocks of Jewish cheese (bottom right); In addition to being a gifted cheesemaker, Viloo Batliwala (bottom left) is a former basketball player of the Calcutta Parsee Club.





paneer, with its close resemblance to mozzarella, harks back to the community's Persian heritage and the fundamentals of creating this cheese have barely altered from the way it was made by the ancestors of the Indian Parsis.

At one time produced in large quantities in Surat (hence also called Surti paneer) and supplied regularly to Mumbai, today it's a dying art, kept alive in a few Parsi kitchens, a skill passed down from mother to daughter, mother-in-law to daughter-in-law.

Viloo recalls how as a child, in the family home in central Kolkata, she would watch her grandmother prepare this delicious treat, with its intriguing elements like "the tiny pill boxes from Boots (the U.K. chemist) containing rennet tablets" and the doll-sized baskets into which the solids of the separated milk would be carefully placed to drain.

But it was her mother-in-law who actually taught her the process and from whom she learnt the critical skills that made her a successful cheesemaker: to know by dipping in a finger whether the milk is warm enough to introduce the rennet; the art of carefully moving curds to one side of the pan to be scooped into the baskets; being able to judge that the cheeses are ready to be unmoulded. Soon she was taking orders for the cheese, mostly from within her community.

Viloo may get her vegetarian rennet all the way from the U.S., but the milk comes from the neighbourhood Pure Milk Emporium, one of Kolkata's long-standing fresh milk outlets. The little handmade cane baskets are from the cane shops in nearby New Market. Over the 30-plus years that she's been making and selling cheese, Viloo has witnessed the steady decline in numbers of this once large and vibrant community. Their count is down to 500 but this close-knit, resilient group is far from moribund. Topli na paneer remains a hit at the Parsi Food Festival held in January every year and a much-looked forward to treat at traditional wedding meals.

As she packs my cheese, pouring in the whey in which they must be stored, Viloo grumbles that making this cheese is far too much trouble. I don't panic: she says this every time.

The beetroot, walnut and topli na paneer salad at Sienna café (facing page) is one of the dishes that offers patrons a taste of the mozzarella-like Parsi cheese (bottom right).

What's more, this cheese has recently got a new lease of life, scotching any retirement plans Viloomay nurture! Two entrepreneurial young women dedicated to promoting locally sourced artisanal products, are giving Calcuttans the chance to discover this heritage food. And their customers can't get enough of it.

A few miles but many worlds away from Ripon Street, Hindustan Park is in the heart of south Kolkata. Traditionally, the bastion of Bengali middle-class gentility, this quiet residential area is rapidly morphing into the city's new destination for upmarket dining and expensive lifestyle shopping. In a welcome trend, several of the old town houses lining tree-shaded streets are resisting property developers' rapacious plans and instead being converted into smart cafés, boutiques, galleries and guest houses. One of the most popular is Sienna—an edgy lifestyle store and café owned by Sulagna "Shuli" Ghosh who runs it with her friend, Diya Katyal. The café serves chic salads, excellent coffee, and innovative soups and mains. A chance recommendation connected them with Viloo when they were setting up shop in 2015. Now some of the most popular items on the menu, Shuli tells me as we sit in the café's glass-roofed outer area sipping espressos, are built around Viloo's topli na paneer.

Sienna makes delightful seasonal salads starring this cheese. They also serve a platter featuring it with cherry tomatoes, a pot of pesto and freshly-baked brown bread. Sensibly, they keep the dishes simple, allowing the delicate flavour of the cheese to emerge. They buy 40 pieces every week, "but we could easily use much more if only she could supply us," sighs Diya, who coordinates with Viloo.

Both women worry that Viloo shows scant interest in passing on her cheesemaking skills to a younger generation. In the Nahoum kitchen, however, another staffer Hafeez is trained to step in to make Jewish cheese when Sadeem is absent. Hopefully, the circle of knowledge will keep expanding to ensure continuity.

Like any art founded on received knowledge, both these heritage cheeses are in danger of being lost to posterity if the know-how is not passed on. One hopes this tragedy will be averted, and Kolkata will be able to retain these two unique handcrafted foods that are precious part of its cultural and culinary inheritance. ✂

ESSENTIALS

Jewish Cheese

Mr. J Haldar, the manager at Nahoum and Sons in New Market, takes orders (F 20 New Market; 033-22520655; ₹600 for a kg; placing the order in person is recommended).

Topli na Paneer

Mrs. Viloo Batliwala sells Parsi cheese in batches of eight against orders (033-22294808; ₹250 per batch).



Tasting Tel Aviv

A GUIDE TO DEFEATING HUNGER
IN ISRAEL'S NON-STOP CITY

By Jharna Thakkar

Eclectic Tel Aviv is best explored through its *boureka*, *falafel*, *shawarma*, *sabich*, *shakshuka*, *malabi* and buzzing coffee shops.



יודשים
למוסיקה
מקודש
0.8-4.9

Breakfast on bourekas

from Turkey, lunch on *schmaltz* (pickled) herring from Russia, snack on Iraqi-Jewish pita invention called *sabich* and sup on schnitzel from Austria. Our guide to Israel's culinary capital—a melting pot of ancient Levantine, classic Middle Eastern and modern Mediterranean cuisines—will have you “wiping” hummus, bargaining for chocolate rugelach and sipping on kosher wine like a local.

Hummus Abu Hassan



Get in early, because Abu Hassan shuts down when it runs out of hummus.

To witness the Israeli obsession that is hummus, visit Tel Aviv's (TLV) most authentic Arabic hummus house, a rare politics-free eatery. Apart from the fact that Abu Hassan—a second-generation hummus maker—first started out in 1959 as a two-pot stand near Jaffa port before moving to his current address, not much is known of its history. But you'll recognise it by the long line outside. This menu-free joint, packed with plastic chairs and veneer-top tables, serves three things: original hummus; *masabacha*, a chunkier, warm version of breakfast hummus; and *ful* (fava beans) hummus. They all come with a side of onions, a stack of warm pita and a tart, red pepper lemon sauce.

TOP PICK Try *meshuleshet* (triplet), which is equal parts hummus, *ful* and *masabacha*, or chickpeas cooked for a day and topped with tahina (14 *Shivtei Yisrael* Street, Jaffa).



Bourekas Bourekas Penso



Run by the third generation of its founding family, this 57-year-old *bourekasiya* is famous for serving the palm-sized, crescent-shaped, Ottoman-era snack. A *boureka* consists of light and flaky puff pastry, full of feta, potatoes, aubergines, mushrooms, spinach or egg. To try it the traditional way, ask the server to cut up the buttery baked phyllo treat and eat it while it's still steaming, with the customary side of pickles, hot pepper relish or a hard-boiled egg. Drown that with a salty *ayran*, the Turkish yogurt-based drink, which comes garnished with mint.

TOP PICK Ask for an unusual, yellow cheese *boureka* stuffed with *kashkaval*, an Italian sheep's milk cheese (*Levinsky 43*).

Coffee and Cakes

Café Mersand

Every city has them—timeless institutions where nothing changes. Not the menu, not the décor and certainly not the recipes. In Tel Aviv that fixture is Café Mersand. When it opened in 1955, owner Walter Mersand—a German-born Jew, or *yekke*—had his Hungarian architect recreate a European café to appeal to the area's growing immigrant population. These days, surfers, journalists, *yekkes*, hipsters and tourists can all be seen sitting on benches, sipping espressos and nibbling on raisin or brownie cheesecake.

TOP PICK Pull a local move by ordering a Hungarian cake called Gerbeaud or *zserbó*, a slightly dense sponge layered with walnut and apricot jam and drizzled in chocolate (*18 Frishman St.*).



Falafel HaKosem



For the best falafel in TLV, visit the new(ish) kid on the block: Arik Rosenthal's 2001 kosher eatery. As a matter of fact, HaKosem, Hebrew for the magician, also makes great shawarma, sabich, schnitzel and hummus. Perfect for lunch and dinner, this bright, open-kitchen café greets customers with a free falafel “chill pill” with a warning that “it's tasty.” Sit alongside locals lingering over pomegranate-lemonades and falafel in *lafa*, a Middle Eastern flatbread also known as *taboon*, meant to be shared, while you watch the city walk by.

TOP PICK These guys serve their falafel with fried eggplant slices instead of fries, so remember to say “Yes!” to the addition (*Shlomo Hamelech 1*).

Shakshuka Dr. Shakshuka



The region's most popular egg preparation, *shakshuka* or "all mixed up" as the North Africans put it, is a slow-cooked stew of tomatoes, garlic, peppers, black olive, feta, spices and poached eggs. At Dr. Shakshuka—with its communal tables, pots, pans, skillets, cauldrons and colourful Arab-tiled floors—Libyan owner Bino Gabso and his family serve up a spicy shakshuka, the traditional Tripolitan way: in the pan it's cooked with accompanying salads, pickles, potatoes and white rye bread. Other fusion versions include eggplant, mushrooms, chicken, and hummus.

TOP PICK Enjoy shakshuka with a side of authentic, Libyan-style couscous, and the signature house lemonade (*3 Beit Eshel, Jaffa*).

Malabi HaMalabiya

What started out as a small stall run by two friends, Avi Avital and Iddo Gal, turned quickly into four outlets a few years ago, each serving up the finest milk pudding in TLV. Traditionally, this creamy, custardy, rose-flavoured dessert, which can be eaten either hot or cold, came covered in peanuts and coconut. HaMalabiya's founders created a 2.0 vegan version based on both of their grannies' recipes. At their stores you can sample classic flavours like raspberry and pomegranate, as well as new-age takes like vanilla cinnamon, lemon cardamom, caramel, chai, and watermelon—all covered in cookie crumbs.

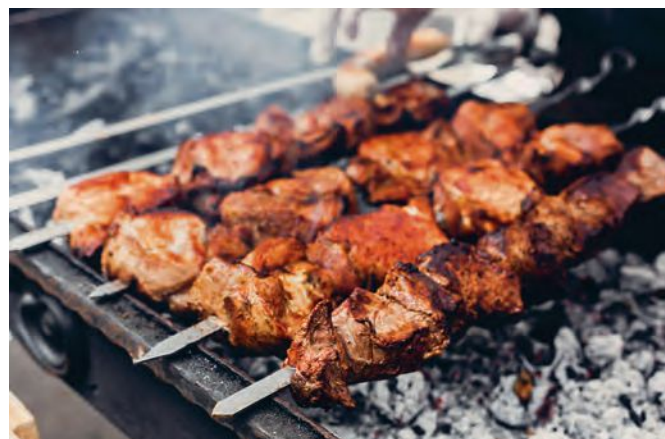
TOP PICK In winter, ask for *sachlav*, Israel's answer to hot chocolate. This ancient aphrodisiac blends orchid tubers, milk, rosewater, cinnamon, nuts and raisins (*28 Gedera*).



Gourmet Street Food Miznon

With four restaurants to his name—two in TLV, one in Paris and one in Vienna—Israeli TV chef Eyal Shani seems to be doing everything right. This mecca of modern fast food is known for two things. First, for making the cauliflower trendy; there isn't a hipster joint in TLV that hasn't tried to do its own take on Shani's whole grilled version. Second, for lifting the humble and fluffy pita to hallowed ground by packing it with every conceivable option. Minute steak? Check. Shakshuka? Check. Chicken liver, lamb kebabs, slow-cooked ratatouille and sliced potatoes? Check, check, check.

TOP PICK Try the Cauliflower King's signature dish, a smoky but still juicy full head of roasted cauliflower (*23 Ibn Gabirol and 30 King George*).



Ashkenazi Fare Keton



Until recently, the phrase “Jewish food” meant one thing only: Eastern European fare brought back to the holy “land of milk and honey” by immigrants from much colder countries. The resulting cuisine is replete with hearty preparations that satiate and warm you up. One of the oldest bistros to do justice to vintage Ashkenazi recipes is Keton's. For over seven decades, Israel's poets, writers, artists, actors, musicians and activists have lined up here for their apricot soda, kneidel (*matzah* bread ball) soup, stuffed spleen topped with fried onions and chopped beef liver, chicken schnitzel and noodle kugel, a sweet egg noodle pie with apples, raisins and cinnamon—all served with Israeli wine.

TOP PICK Go old-school with *kreplach*, fried meat dumplings in gravy; with *tzimmes*, carrots cooked with sugar and raisins; and mashed potatoes (*145 Dizengoff Street*).

Seafood HaShaked

If you love nothing more than a table groaning under the weight of numerous dishes, then this erstwhile workers' restaurant is the place for you. Since 1964, this eatery has been plating up delectable dishes with choice fish and seafood caught fresh daily. Of all the old-fashioned Jewish delicacies available, start with pickled or cured herring, followed by white mackerel carpaccio. Fresh bread comes from the bakery across the road, and 18 salads provide the frills: egg salad and chopped liver are the winners. If you have room for mains, end with either the sea bass or chef and owner Hayim Shelo's divine halva mousse.

TOP PICK Ask for the grouper schnitzel, a lightly batter-fried preparation served with a garlic sauce. If the fish isn't fresh, they won't make it (*HaHashmonaim St. 99*).



Shawarmas Shawarma Bino



The smell of spices greets you first: cumin, paprika, pepper, clove, and a secret seasoning they won't divulge. The stand packed with trimmings like *chuma* pepper; red eggplant salad; chopped onion; pickled lemons; and spicy pickled mango sauce or *amba* only came into view a few feet later. Finally, the tell-tale sizzle of fat hitting the hot plate. The city's best meat shawarma can be found at Shawarma Bino. Located in the middle of Jaffa, it's legendary for spice-infused lamb, turkey and beef shawarma rolled up in a fat pitas or a *lafa*.

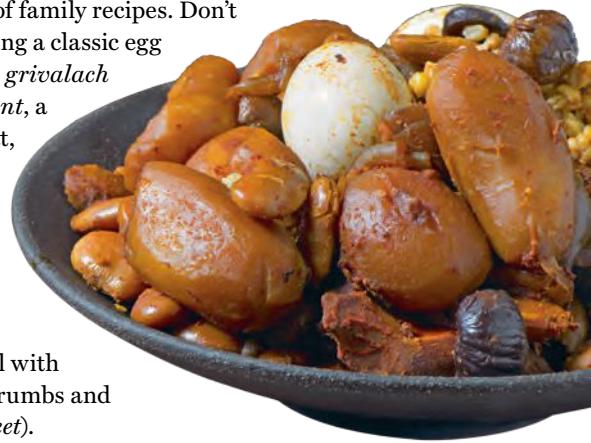
TOP PICK Ask for the veal, with touches of beef and drippings of lamb fat (29 David Raziell, Jaffa).

Kosher Comfort Food

Shmulik Cohen's Restaurant

Even before Israel was a country, there was Shmulik Cohen's. Tel Aviv's oldest Jewish kitchen began life as a food stand for labourers in 1936. Its kitchen still dishes out soul food—home-style soups and slow-cooked dishes—the kind of comfort preparations that most Israelis grew up eating. Second-generation owner Tzipi Cohen and her son Tomer ensure that the kosher food made fresh daily remains faithful to their treasure trove of family recipes. Don't leave without sampling a classic egg salad sprinkled with *grivalach* (dried fat); and *cholent*, a Sabbath stew of meat, potatoes, beans, barley and *kishke* or stuffed sausages.

TOP PICK The one thing that everyone orders here is gefilte fish, a fish ball with eggs, onions, breadcrumbs and sugar (146 Herzl Street).



Sabich Sabich Tchernichovsky

Grab a few tissues because things are about to get messy. Little known outside Israel, *sabich* is the country's "other" go-to plump pita sandwich, invented by Iraqi Jews in the 1940s as a pre-prepared dish for Sabbath. Instead of bullets of fried chickpea, it's stuffed with crispy fried eggplant, hard-boiled brown eggs, hummus, tahini, Israeli salad, onions, pickles, parsley, sunshine yellow *amba*, *skhug* (Yemeni hot sauce) and, occasionally, boiled potatoes. Of the two current contenders for top spot—Sabich Tchernichovsky and Frishman Sabich—our pick is the former, thanks to staff's diligence in ensuring each pita-wich is a perfectly curated creation.

TOP PICK Locals swear by the cheese *sabich* in which the hummus is replaced with feta. Wash that down with an old-fashioned, frizzy fruity soda called *gazoz* (Tchernichovsky 2).





CARMEL MARKET

This al fresco bazaar is the epicentre of all things fresh: produce, fruit, meat, seafood—as well as clothes, curios and Judaica. In the 1920s, HaKerem, or “the vineyard of the Yemenites” was dotted with a few Yemeni stalls, but by the 70s the neighbourhood’s marketplace had grown into what is now Shuk HaCarmel.

Before entering the maze of food stalls, juice bars, kiosk kitchens, and handicrafts stands (at Nahalat Binyamin Market on Tuesday and Friday), fortify yourself with a curative, vitamin-packed etrog juice pressed from a local yellow citron at **UziEli’s Etrog Man** shop. Walk through the vibrant Yemeni Quarter towards Tel Aviv’s favourite hummus dive, **Shlomo & Doron** for breakfast (it closes at 3.30 p.m.). Buy in bulk the country’s best marzipan at **Albert’s Confectionery**, an old-school bakery and pastry shop. Fans of artisanal beer should visit **Beer Bazaar** to sample over 100 brews from microbreweries across Israel.

Stop for lunch at an Israeli street-food kiosk, **HaShomer 1**, to sample chef Naor Cohen’s mother’s recipes. Made with market-fresh produce, these include kebabs with roasted eggplant, served in a small challah, or hummus and spinach shakshuka. Meat lovers should grab a stool at **Bar Ochel**, and try to decide between pita packed with beef kebabs, an assortment of homemade sausages or the celebrated mixed Jerusalem grill—a skillet sautéed meal of spiced lamb or chicken and offal.

For a spot of entertainment, call on Shlomo Cohen at his 70-year-old **Cafe Cohen**. Sit back and sip a custom-blended coffee while the certified cantor flexes his lungs for a Hebrew song or Frank Sinatra hit. Before leaving, take home some plain or flavoured halva, a sweetmeat made from organic, sesame seed butter at **Halva Kingdom**.

Sunday to Thursday, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Friday, 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. (closes earlier in winter).

LEVINSKY MARKET

Welcome to food forager’s paradise. Five blocks of spice stores, delicatessens, bakeries and fish shops, which opened

for business in the 1930s. Shuk Levinsky originally catered to immigrant Jews from Greece, followed by Turkey, and most recently, Iran and Iraq. Today, chefs, gourmands and natives visit weekly to buy everything from local cheese at **HaChalban** to healing herbs at **Café Atlas**. To stock up on spices and condiments including zaatar, sumac, tahini, and *medjool* dates, drop in at **Ezra Gabbay’s** family-run shop. For nuts, seeds, dried fruits, and spice mixes, visit **Nuts by Moshe and Sons** on the main shop-lined street. Try peppers stuffed with goat’s cheese at a 59-year-old Greek deli, **Chaim Raphael**. Stop in at **Pereg Spices** for a jar of *skhug*, a spicy Yemeni sauce of coriander, green chillies and garlic.

For lunch, choose between chomping on calf’s-foot jelly or a simple sausage plate at a tiny, three-table eatery called **Mati Hamekalel**. Or dine at **Sender**, a Jewish restaurant that serves rustic Polish fare like chopped liver and stuffed *miltz* (spleen).

Pick up boxes of baklava from Nazareth’s most famous sweet shop, **Mahroum**; parcel salted, smoked and pickled fish from **Victor’s**, an 85-year-old Greek fish deli; procure a jar of Zeitun Yom Tov (green olives pickled with dill, garlic and lemon) from **Yom Tov**, a Turkish delicatessen established in 1967.

Cool off with iced coffees and artisanal sodas at **Levinsky 41**, and end the day with arak cocktails and bean soup at **Caffe Kaymak**, the most beloved vegan café in Florentin neighbourhood.

Sunday to Thursday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Friday, 8 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. (closes earlier in winter). ✂



The city centre is a street *shuk* (marketplace) (top) bustling with crowds and vendors loudly hawking bargain buys; Get a glimpse of Tehran’s grand bazaar at Nuts by Moshe and Sons (bottom), the shuk’s favourite Irani dry fruits shop.



China gives the
GREEN LIGHT

A vegetarian stumbles upon a feast to remember

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY
SUCHI GOVINDARAJAN



I had been dreaming about the ancient city of Xi'an for years. I longed to cycle atop its Ming-era city walls, and walk the streets paved with the history of the Silk Road. I wanted to see the thousands of statues that make up the archaeological site, Terracotta Army.

But eagerly anticipated holidays rarely turn out to be perfect. My husband and I land in Xi'an on a drizzly grey afternoon that sets the tone for the rest of our weekend. The Terracotta Army is stunning, but by the time we finish, our clothes are damp and our spirits low. We climb up to the city walls, but the panorama is hidden behind sheets of rain, and the cycle-hire shops are closed.

On our last night in Xi'an, we head to its Muslim Quarter in soggy shoes that squelch at each step. A turn leads us into the main street, with steam rising from hundreds of woks and grills of the Bei Yuan Men Night Market. The rain seems powerless against this onslaught. We close our battered umbrellas and inspect buns stuffed with beef, chunks of mutton swimming in soups, and the kebabs on sale. There is one catch, though. My husband and I are vegetarians.

Is it hard to find vegetarian food in China? The answer is like that Facebook relationship status: "It's complicated." This is our second trip to this country, and we can eat just about anywhere when accompanied by a guide or a local. At other times, we turn to apps like Happy Cow to find Buddhist vegetarian restaurants—there are 60 such restaurants in Beijing alone, and six in Xi'an.

Yet a market like this—where meat abounds at every corner—is a new challenge. One guidebook goes so far as to say that vegetarians might want to avoid the 1.5-kilometre-long Bei Yuan Men market altogether. But luckily, other sources reveal that it sells two famous Shaanxi vegetarian dishes—*liang fen* (jelly noodles) and *liang pi* (cold noodles). We decide to venture in.

Amid juice, bread and sweet stalls we find one selling a hot drink of pears, goji berries and jujubes (Chinese dates) for CNY2/₹20. It's too sweet for me, but my husband likes it and finishes my glass as well. We stop at a souvenir stall to look for little replicas of the Terracotta Army when a familiar smell wafts by. A woman in a teddy-bear apron tosses fried baby potatoes with chilli, cumin powder, garlic powder, and sesame seeds in a wok. Beside her, a man works a large slab of tofu on a griddle, topping it with spring onion and cumin and chilli powder, to make *tie ban dou fu*. The potatoes are fabulous as expected, but it is the tofu we love: crisp and spicy on the outside, soft inside. Our luck is definitely on the mend. Even our shoes stop squelching.

Ahead of us, a crowd is gathering around a sweet shop. Two men with mallets work away like drummers to flatten a batch of peanut candy, the *chikki*-like *hua sheng tang*. The men wave to the crowd to come try their hand. A sturdy Chinese

Facing page: Noodles are more popular than rice in Shaanxi. *Liang pi* or cold noodles (top left and bottom middle) are served at several restaurants in Bei Yuan Men Night Market; Shaanxi cuisine is distinguished by its strong, savoury flavours and, in a nod to Silk Road influences, by the use of spices like cumin (top right); Walnuts, red-bean paste, rose essence, and jujubes are common ingredients in some of the rice cakes sold in the market (bottom left); The Muslim Quarter in home to the Hui community (bottom right), whose members are believed to be the descendants of the Han Chinese who married Arab, Persian and Central Asian travellers who came via the Silk Road.

woman volunteers and fails spectacularly—there's not even a dent in the dough. She laughs and hands the mallet back. Meanwhile, another man hand-stretches sugar dough for the candy. He hangs the ball of dough on a large hook, pulls it back like an elastic band, wraps it around the hook again and repeats the process. The dough soon transforms into a glossy, multistranded rope. We buy a box of these assorted candies for about CNY20/₹190. There are more sweets to try—flaky fruit and nut pastries stamped with Chinese characters, rice cakes coated with sesame seeds, bright orange persimmon doughnuts. We also eat *feng mi liang gao*, a yellow sticky rice cake topped with jujube jam. It tastes like a vastly improved version of semolina halwa.

We are full but I want to find the vegetarian noodle dishes I've read about. A brightly-lit shop attracts my attention, and I look closely at the Chinese characters, comparing them stroke by stroke to what I've saved on my phone. I have found the *liang pi*, the cold noodles, sold for CNY6/₹55. We peer at the bowls lined up for assembly and see vinegar, chilli oil, bean sprouts and julienned cucumbers. "What's that?" my husband asks, pointing at a black mass. "Sesame paste," I say with fake confidence. A young man inside the shop smiles at me, as if in reassurance. "What is life without some foolish bravado?" I think, and hustle my suspicious husband in. Soon, two bowls arrive at our table, and we devour the silky noodles brimming in sauce that's nutty, hot and tangy in turns. We share a second helping too, fighting over the last bits of sauced noodles. My husband has superior chopstick skills and wins easily.

It is now past 10.30 pm, and we should be heading back to our hostel. But another vendor calls out to us, and we cannot resist. His cart is stacked with ceramic jars of *suan nai*—yoghurt sweetened with honey or sugar, and mixed with ground nuts and raisins. My husband and I had it on our first trip to China in 2009, and it tastes exactly as we remember—a little sweet, a little sour; a little familiar, a little foreign.

My phone buzzes. It's my mother messaging me on WeChat, the Chinese equivalent of WhatsApp. "Are you eating well in China?" she asks. I text back, "Eating lots, Ma! Having yoghurt just like a good South Indian." 🍴

ESSENTIALS

Xi'an is the capital of Shaanxi Province in northwest China. It is well-connected to the capital Beijing (1,100 km/11.5 hr drive northeast) by high-speed trains and flights.

There are daily flights from Mumbai and Delhi to Xi'an, with at least one stopover at an Asian hub like Hong Kong or Seoul.

Stay

Han Tang Inn Hostel is a good budget option near the market with friendly, English-speaking staff (www.hantanginn.com; doubles from CNY212/₹2,000)

Getting There

The Bei Yuan Men Night Market is located in the Muslim Quarter, behind The Drum Tower (open daily, 5.30 p.m. - midnight). The nearest metro station is Zhonglou (Bell Tower) Station.

Eating *Out of your* Hands

YOU CAN'T
JUST TASTE THE
AMRITSARI KULCHA,
YOU HAVE TO HEAR IT
By Brinda Suri

In Amritsar, food is the overruling passion. It is famously said that you can never be hungry in the city, where ghee, butter and cream are the star performers, sometimes rocking a dish all together. Olive oil? What's that?

On one end of its scale is the surreal Harmandir Sahib or Golden Temple where the holy kitchen serves wholesome communal meals round-the-clock and on the other side are numerous kiosks, carts and upscale eateries whipping up an incredible assortment.

A true-blue Ambarsari, as the locals refer to themselves, had once told me, "What's cooking' is no mere phrase here. We take those two words very seriously. Our bulk hours are spent in relishing a spread and planning the next one."

One meal no one has to plan for in this city is the Amritsari kulcha. Quick to prepare and pocket-friendly, this classic street food blurs social divides and is available around every corner. It is believed that about one lakh kulchas are tossed out of city tandoors per day.

While "kulcha" in other parts of the country is prepared with fermented dough and has a bread-like texture, the city's version is similar in appearance to a stuffed tandoori roti, but very different in terms of preparation and taste.

Food is savoured through sight, smell, touch, and taste, but with the Amritsari kulcha, you'll also experience the fifth sense. You can hear it.

Once out of the scorching tandoor, it is generously glazed with a cube of butter. Then, all you need to do is give it a gentle crush. If there's a crackling sound it is baked to perfection. A silent Amritsari kulcha is just not good enough.

The crackle ensures it's got the textures: a crusty exterior followed by moist and flaky inner folds stuffed

A good kulcha must be light and flaky with the upper crust crackling as the butter oozes in.

with potato and spices. Crushing it snaps open the top layer allowing the heat to escape and letting the goodness of melted butter to trickle in, adding intensity to robust flavours.

ON THE CROSSROADS

Before setting off on the kulcha trail, I asked some Amritsari friends for their favourites. Within minutes I had a collection of names ranging from soot-stained hole-in-the-wall eateries to slightly fancy (read air-conditioned) restaurants. I should have expected that. The large-hearted and affable Ambarsari enjoys eating out and gastronomy here is reflective of the city's multi-religious and multi-lingual ethos.

I criss-crossed Amritsar in my pursuit of the perfect kulcha, walking its uninspiring contemporary areas and travelling back in time through the 500-year-old walled city or Shehr: a mosaic of bazaars, mohallas and *katras* (roadside inns), labyrinthine streets canopied with electrical wires, skies speckled with flying kites, a riot of merchandise and advertising boards, and many an "old and famous" eatery.

History is blurry on the date, but the consensus is that the region of undivided Punjab gave birth to the bharwaan (stuffed) kulcha. As invading armies from Central Asia rode in, they brought along their cooking traditions. One of these was the process of making the leavened naan, the other being the dug-in tandoor, both techniques said to have originated in Persia. Enterprising Punjabis, who traditionally devoured roti or unleavened wholegrain flatbread made on an iron griddle, started refining the flour, leavening the dough, filling it with a mixture of potatoes and baking it in the tandoor.

Later they spied on French chefs labouring in the region's royal kitchens and improvised further. They adopted





Amritsar is a street food lover's dream with stalls serving ghee-drenched sweets (top left), samosas (bottom left), lassi (top right) and the famous Amritsari *machhi* (fish) (bottom right).

a puff pastry procedure; slathering the dough with butter and folding it a few times before letting it rest. The result was a success with flaky kulchas flying off the tandoor.

THE K-FACTOR

Out of the few places I picked, most had a menu restricted to kulchas, with options of potato, paneer, cauliflower, or mixed stuffing, and a knock-out glass of lassi. Almost each of these spots downed its shutters after lunch or as soon as the dough was finished.

On a cuisine map dominated by such heavyweights as tandoor-roasted chicken, slow-cooked mutton gravy, and Amritsari *machhi* (batter-fried river fish; either sole or catfish), I found the humble stuffed-bread holding its own at eateries such as Harbans Kulcha (Green Avenue), Kulcha Land and Ashok Kulchewala (both on Ranjit Avenue). Old-timers vouched for Darshan Kulchawala and Bhai Kulwant Singh Kulchian Wale, both tucked away in Shehr—in Jamadar Ki Haveli, Guru Bazaar, and Bazaar Bikaneria, Katra Ahluwalia, respectively.

In Purani Chungi, I sat on a rickety plastic chair at the reticent Sucha Singh's much-visited All India Famous Kulcha dhaba. In these nondescript environs, I greedily demolished a couple of piping-hot kulchas with charcoal roasted edges. Though served with the accompaniments of spiced Kabuli chana

curry, a tangy tamarind chutney or the ubiquitous sliced onion-radish salad, this authentic Amritsari kulcha qualifies as a delicious meal all by itself.

Each time I probed a local baker on the secret behind crispy kulchas he would promptly attribute it to the holy water of Amritsar adding that extra punch to the all-important dough. Pawandeep Singh of Kulcha Land mentioned carting the local water when undertaking outstation catering; making it a point to state he was not the only one doing so.

BETWEEN THE LAYERS

The kulcha has had a remarkable journey. Whilst I binged on it, I recalled my grandpa's addition to a popular adage: "*Jis Lahore nahin vekhiya au jamiya nahin. Jis Amritsar aa ke kulcha nahin khada une kuj khada hi nahin...*" If you haven't seen Lahore it's as good as not being born. If you're visiting Amritsar and haven't eaten the kulcha, you've eaten nothing at all."

After I retired to the in-house restaurant of my international-chain hotel, the steward suggested I try their Amritsari kulcha. I wasn't a fan of five-star hotel experiments with street food. But no sooner had it arrived, than I had to eat my words. There was no stopping at one. Later, I complimented the F&B manager. "We have to get it spot on," he said. "In this city you're only as good as your Amritsari kulcha!" ✂

BEYOND KULCHAS

For an inviting breakfast of *peethi-puri*, Kabuli *chana* curry, tangy *aloo launji* (₹80) and *gur ka karah* (₹50) head to **Kanha Sweets** on Lawrence Road. In the evening, the outlet fries the samosa (₹50) in desi ghee. A ghee-drenched vegetarian thali awaits you at **Kesar Da Dhaba** (₹200) at Chowk Pasiyan, or **Bharawan Da Dhaba** (₹175) near Town Hall.

For tandoori chicken, head to **Beera Chicken** (₹340 for a full plate) and for batter-fried fish, to **Makhan Fish** (₹320 for 250 gm), both on Majitha Road. Should mutton be your preference, **Sunder Meat Shop** at Maqbool Road (₹200) is the place. A winter delicacy here is *kharode* or lamb trotter's clear soup (₹50 per glass) and gravy (₹250 per plate) at **Pal da Dhaba** in Hathi Gate. For a light meal of paneer *bhurji* and sliced bread (₹120), stop by at **Pyara Lal**, Katra Jaimal Singh, Hall Bazaar.

At **Giani Tea Stall**, Cooper Road, there's street-style bread wrapped in omelette, kachori, paneer samosa and masala chai (from ₹15). Under Bhandari Bridge is **Pul de Pakore** serving a variety of pakora (from ₹20) along with mint chutney and a thin bread-kulcha.

Choose between kesar lassi of **Ahuja Milk Bhandaar**, Dhab Khatikan, near Hindu College (₹55), and pede wali lassi of **Gian di Lassi**, near Regent Cinema (₹75). To satiate your sweet-tooth, head to Katra Ahluwalia for *jalebi* and *gulab jamun* at **Gurdasram Jalebiwala** (₹40 per 100 gm), or walk slightly further to **Khubi Ram Sweets & Namkeen** for *chandrakala* and *patisa* (₹360 and ₹440 per kg).

Numerous small temples and shrines dot the compound of Namdroling Monastery. They are known for their distinctive Tibetan architecture with golden spires and vibrant coloured roofs.



EAT, PRAY... AND EAT MORE

For the best eating experience in Bylakuppe, Karnataka's Tibetan settlement, go where the monks go **Text and Photographs By Zac O'Yeah**

I board a rickshaw outside the bus station in Kushalnagar, a dusty and hot town in Karnataka's Kodagu district. Around 10 minutes later it whizzes into Camp 1 and would have passed straight through in the blink of an eye if I hadn't shouted out "*illi stop maadi!*" in broken Kannada.

Suddenly I'm in an entirely different world as I step out into the tiny settlement consisting of a few blocks of shops, and try to blend in among the maroon-robed monks. Lhasa is 2,500 kilometres away and 3,500 metres higher up but on the horizon, I spy a gilded

roof with upswept eaves belonging to a majestic monastery.

Generally referred to as Bylakuppe, after the nearby South Indian village, this camp for Tibetan refugees established in 1961 is actually named Lugszungbsamgrubgling. Since few can pronounce that, it is better known as Camp 1. It lies within walking distance of four or five other camps that were established later including the more popular Camp 4 with its Namdroling Monastery, which in popular parlance is called the Golden Temple.





Sara Jey Monastery is also a monastic university and as part of their education, monks participate in debates, which brings out a jovial, witty side of the otherwise austere young men.

▼ I instantly notice that there are plenty of eateries and, thankfully, not a single one advertises tandoori. Many of the stalls specialise in momos, the classic dumplings that have become popular street food all over India. But the first place I try is the somewhat fancy Potala Kitchen. The waiter who greets me proudly states that this is the most famous eatery in town. The family-run

restaurant was founded in 2012. Unlike the older food joints it has, apart from waiting staff, a spacious dining hall, comfy sofas arranged into American diner-style booths around clothed tables, spic and span restrooms, and an unexpectedly exhaustive seven-page menu.

It is a typically meaty bill of fare (and there's one fish item on offer). Since vegetables are difficult to grow in Tibet, locals tend to eat lots of chicken, pork and beef. But as this version of Tibet lies surrounded by fertile fields, here a strict vegetarian will find about two dozen dishes to choose from. In fact, just across the road Tibetan farmers' wives sell fresh agricultural produce.

The fact that the dining hall is crowded

with Buddhist monks who talk in hushed tones as they softly slurp their soupy noodles makes me feel that I'm in the right place. After the monks leave, a group of Tibetan ladies sit down for a lunch of mixed veg soup and mixed veg noodles, so Potala Kitchen seems not to be a tourist destination as much as the local in-place. However, when I try to order a beer to beat the heat, it turns out there's no alcohol available in the refugee settlement, not even the fresh Tibetan beer, *chhang*, so I make do with a so-called fruit beer (₹30) that is non-alcoholic and contains no fruit.

Notwithstanding the lack of intoxicating beverage, the food on my table is superb Himalayan fare.



Bylakuppe's fusion breakfasts consist of Tibetan bread, sambhar and bhurji.



Photo portraits of the Dalai Lama adorn the walls of most restaurants in Bylakuppe.

Ignoring the touristy concessions of American chopsuey, *gobi manchurian* and Indianised paneer momos, I focus on food from Buddhist countries such as Thailand's green pork curry (₹160) and Bhutanese *emadatsi* (₹70), which is essentially chillies boiled with yak cheese and usually impossible to find outside Bhutan. I top it off with a delicately flavoured Tibetan spinach and meat *patsel* stir-fry with fluffy



One of the most popular dishes at the eateries in Bylakuppe is the momo, served with fiery chilli sauce.



The chief attraction at the Golden Temple is the gilded Buddha statue. Early mornings before the tourist buses arrive is the best time to spend quiet, meditative moments at the shrine.

steamed bread or *tingmo* (₹80). It is one of my best meals of this year.

Unlike in the Tibetan settlement at Dharamsala to which foreigners flock, here I'm the only tourist and there's no Pink Floyd droning on discreet surround sound systems. The walls are instead covered with uplifting slogans like "The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up" and "Live for nothing or die for something." I'm not sure if the slogans relate to the Tibetan cause or restaurant management.

After the exotic meal, I inspect the bazaar. Shopkeepers are all very cordial, but no bargaining is allowed due to a certain Tibetan code of business honesty. As a rule of thumb, everything is cheaper

here than in the shopping complex opposite the Golden Temple. Instead of wasting time on haggling, I chat with the store owners. One tells me she was born here and doesn't really think she will know any other place.

"But what about Tibet?"

She smiles without any obvious bitterness. "We are refugees."

The old lady who runs the adjoining shop, which has a large selection of handheld prayer wheels and cool T-shirts with Tibetan lettering, looks like she could be one of the original settlers. It turns out she was two years old when her parents fled Tibet. She says, "I have never seen Tibet." Hers is the oldest shop, started in 1985 at a time when there was no bazaar here.



Souvenirs at local shops range from Chinese-made statues that sell for about hundred rupees to Nepali handcrafted idols that may cost several thousand.

"Was it like a jungle with elephants?"
"No, no, there were houses. But no other shops."

In the convenience stores I buy locally made high-quality noodles, a fiery looking Kollegal meat pickle that turns out to be excellent, and an interesting cooking paste which is sold in blocks—the shopkeeper instructs me to crumble a thumbnail sized bit in the pot as a way of seasoning.

After shopping, I walk along a quiet country road through the lush landscape—between fields where Tibetan farmers grow corn, sorghum and rice—towards Namdrooling Monastery in Camp 4 and bump into an old-timer with a portable prayer wheel that he swings in his hand. He doesn't speak English, but a student comes along and translates. The old man walked all the way from Tibet to India when he was 12, together with a group of 10 refugees. Only seven made it alive through the mountains, he says and smiles as he tells me how he loves



Inaugurated last year, Bylakuppe's newest monastery, Tashi Lunpo, is a replica of the formal seat of the Panchen Lama, who is second only to the Dalai Lama.

the taste of masala dosa.

The 660 Tibetans who arrived at Camp 1 in December 1960 had to adapt to a different altitude and climate. But over the decades, adapt they did, and turned their leased land into a repository of culture. The monasteries are based on such institutions that once

existed in old Tibet and surrounded by an array of handicrafts centres and restaurants. The cluster of camps nowadays probably counts as Asia's largest Tibetan exile settlements, with many shrines and some of the world's premier institutions for studying Buddhist philosophy.

I reach Namdroling Monastery which was established by His Holiness Penor Rinpoche as a 9x9 feet bamboo structure in 1963. At that time there were only 10 monks here. Today it is home to over 8,000 monks and a gigantic gilded Buddha, which was consecrated in 1999.

Outside it, I do more souvenir shopping (a solar-powered prayer wheel and a set of prayer flags). All profit from the monastic enterprises—souvenir sales, canteens and guesthouses—goes towards welfare of the monks and also to fund medical clinics. A couple of hundred metres from the temple I find Rigo Restaurant that attracts patrons with its offers of free Wifi and “devil momo.” Their menu is even fancier than the one at Potala Kitchen—printed on thick glossy paper, with the text printed in both Tibetan script as well as in English—and apart from the many Tibetan delicacies there's a range of Bhutanese, Chinese, Singaporean and Thai, including mouth-watering items like stir-fried pork with peanuts and honey-chilli spare ribs. Upon enquiry, I learn that the devil momos are deep-fried and too spicy, so instead I go for *mokthuk* (₹100) with *konjee* (₹140). I'm not entirely sure what to expect, but in exotic restaurants I tend to optimistically order whatever is previously unknown to me. Mokthuk turns out to be a delicious momo soup with spinach and tomatoes, while konjee is a crispy fried beef dish, and I especially appreciate the fact that the food is served with chopsticks rather than knife and fork.

Again, I am the sole tourist here, the rest of the dinner guests being a merry gang of Buddhist monks. ✂

ESSENTIALS

Getting There Bylakuppe is 230 km/ 4.5 hr southwest of Bengaluru and 85 km/1.5 hr west of Mysore. The closest town is Kushalnagar (10 km/ 10 min). KSRTC and other travel companies run buses from Bengaluru to Kushalnagar. From Kushalnagar, one can take an auto to Bylakuppe.

Eat Potala Kitchen is in the market area of Camp 1 (meal for two approx ₹400, fruit beer ₹30). **Rigo Restaurant** is close to the Namdroling Monastery (meal for two approx ₹500). In Camp 1, a must try are beef momos served with hot chilli sauce and a mild broth at **Tenzing Fast Food Shop** (₹60). Between Camp 1

and Camp 2, stop at **Big Momo** for a snack. A cluster of homely canteens at Camp 3 are ideal for restaurant-hopping—try **Khangchen Restaurant** or **Kongpo Kitchen**. **Olive**, also in Camp 3, is a popular spot offering both Indian and Tibetan fare.

For breakfast, order tawa-baked Tibetan flat breads with sambar and egg *bhurji* (₹60). Don't miss the butter tea, a slightly salty drink boiled with Amul butter, served in the more nondescript eateries.

More than Meat On Wednesdays, only vegetarian food is served at Tibetan restaurants. For strict vegetarians, the pure veg monk-run **Malaya** in PDL

Guesthouse opposite the Golden Temple serves *thukpa* and momos.

Closing time Most Tibetan restaurants shut early. Don't expect to find food after 8 p.m. as dinner time here is around 6 p.m.

Stay To stay overnight anywhere in the Tibetan camps, foreigners require a PAP (Protected Area Permit), valid for 12 months. Apply 3-6 months in advance. Indians don't need permits. (PAP Enquiry: Bureau Office of His Holiness, Dalai Lama; 011-2647-4798/26218548; Settlement Office, Camp 1, Bylakuppe; 08223-253476/253633).

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**ALL THE WORLD'S
A PLATE**

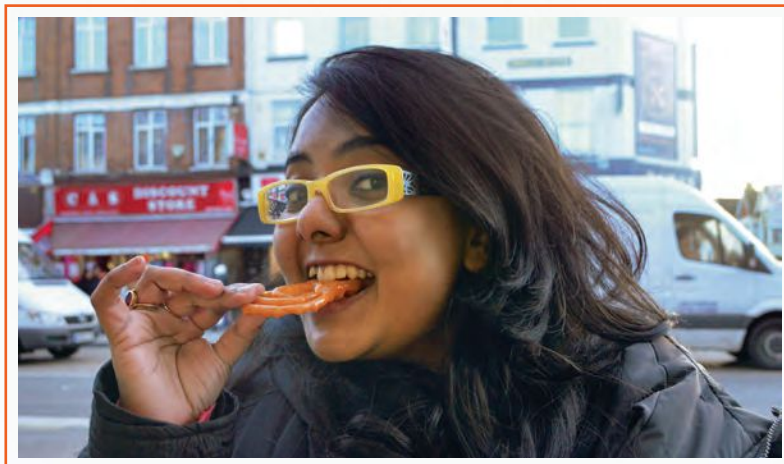
Orthodox or adventurous, travellers
bring back food stories as souvenirs

112 DELHI THREE WAYS • 116 MA'S WAY AND THE HIGHWAY • 122 IN SEARCH OF LOST BUTTER CHICKEN

ALL THE WORLD'S A PLATE



Orthodox or adventurous, travellers always bring back food stories as souvenirs **By Rumela Basu**



I've always loved food. Much like the way a child talks about her favourite toy—eyes big as coat buttons, round face stretched into a smile, animated hands—is how I talk about food. Especially the food I've eaten on my travels. Besides adding to the survival skill set, I learnt to cook because I wanted to recreate the dishes I'd tasted when travelling. After my grandfather told me that Agra's *pethas* had to be eaten, I made my father get off a train at Agra station to buy me a packet.

I was 12. Since that day, the focal points of my trips are the street stalls and local markets. Food is important to me and my idea of travel.

However, that is just me; the kind of traveller who has a passionate liaison with food at every destination. When putting together a story about travel and food, I met and spoke to more kinds—the religious meat-eaters, the adventurous vegetarians who occasionally succumb to the lure of seafood, the indifferent ones who



The narrow lanes of Haridwar are dotted with decades-old eateries that still cook traditional food. They sell everything from local favourites like hot spiced milk in a *kulhad* and aloo puri, to dishes from across the country.

couldn't care less about what was on offer as long as it appealed to their taste buds, the ones who looked for the familiar on every plate, and the ones who would go off designated routes if it meant that a plate of obscure local delicacies awaited them in the end.

From the cacophony of different travel tales told to me by family, friends and colleagues, the first one that pushes through is my conversation with my grandfather a couple of weeks ago.

“Do you remember when we found that Bengali restaurant in Haridwar? That was good. Barir khabar (a homely meal!)”

We had that dinner in a restaurant eight years ago, but scenes from it still play in my mind like a film reel. I don't remember the taste of the food but I recall the server who kept putting food on my aunt's plate whenever my mother asked for a helping. (No, they are not twins and they don't really look alike). I also remember my grandparents' excited faces at having found home-like food, and I remember their satisfied, crinkly smiles as they led me out. Predictably, I grumbled about eating home food on vacation. Just like that, this incident became one of the stories we'd recount forever. It was the time when my grandparents found the comfort of



In a Brick Lane restaurant, Ma found her grandmother's cooking and her childhood



home in a place far away from home.

Travel in the time of my grandparents wasn't so much about local food. They would often long and scour for familiar tastes, often they lived with family and friends and meals were eaten at home, and sometimes—as I remember from a story I'd heard from a colleague—a large group would even take their own cooks along. And then there were always those tiffin boxes, packed with dry snacks.

My mother remembers that food was always taken from home when travelling by train or bus. She, however, didn't do much of that herself. As a child, when travelling with my parents, I remember us packing food from our hotels, sometimes stopping at local dhabas. It was experimenting, but there was always a little taste of familiar comfort that lingered.

For many travellers, familiar food in a foreign land is like finding a piece of home. Sometimes a piece of home they miss. My mother's beaming face after a meal in London's Brick Lane is a memory I hold dear. She feasted on delicacies that her grandmother, who was originally from Bangladesh, used to cook for her. And it was across an ocean, in a different continent that Ma found her childhood again. In that moment, the long walk to find a recommended restaurant was worth it. Childhood memories and grandmothers



A meal at one of Mumbai's Irani cafés and restaurants, some of the city's oldest eateries, is like entering a delicious time warp. Food is usually accompanied by stories of "old Bombay" and family recipes.

are well-loved, yes, but I suspect nostalgia itself is sometimes enough to whet the appetite.

"They were playing the best kind of cheesy Bollywood music; the kind from the 1990s that we grew up listening to and it was some of the best Chettinad chicken I have ever tasted."

My friend Shruti was recollecting her trip to Puerto Rico. After having lived away alone in the U.S. for seven months, to find a little café in San Juan, one with "Bombay" in its name, one that played *"Tu cheez badi hai mast mast"*, was a cause of celebration. Whether the chicken was actually that good, or if her gushing was influenced by Udit Narayan's crooning, I don't know. But the bottom line is, it was one meal that was about so much more than just the food. In this case, it was about nostalgia, yes, but it was also about Puerto Rico. It told her something about this little part of San Juan—the locals loved all things Indian, specially the food).

Food can tell you novel things about a place. In Mumbai, the sighting of an Irani eatery is often a good pointer. An old Parsi colony must be nearby. Tangra in Kolkata tells you that Chinese settlers have lived in the city for years. The street stalls and market at Burma Bazar in Chennai paints a



Listening to Udit Narayan in a San Juan café, Shruti (Shenoy) discovered her Puerto Rico



picture of Indo-Burmese history. And sometimes, you could end up finding many surprises like a little Korean restaurant in Varanasi's Manikarnika Ghat, which serves, as Shruti squealed, "the most authentic Korean food ever," and is popular with both, locals and tourists.

Some surprises, though, do not need a foreign influence. Even a simple meal can at times be an adventure.

"I ain't having no hooves!"

I could almost visualise the food-loving Sampurna's incredulous expression as her fiancé suggested she try the "trotter curry" in a Nepali restaurant in Kalimpong. Because of its proximity to the mountain nation, many parts of North Bengal have little eateries serving authentic Nepali food. It was in one such place that the famished couple sat down to devour a thali. Along with rice, Nepali kali dal, two kinds of local vegetables, they were also served pigs feet curry. Courtesy his English heritage and a love for obscure food, Sampurna's fiancé was rather excited by the idea of biting into Nepali trotters, but my dear friend could only see a cloven hoof. A little bracing and some encouragement later, there were murmurs of approval. "The broth was the shizz! Well, the trotters are quite dense. You can't chew them like you would chicken or mutton

bones. But the meat on them was succulent and came right off the bone.”

During that one lunch, Sampurna learnt to love pig feet and discovered something new about Nepali cuisine. For another friend, discovery came dangling from low beams in a local hut on a snowy evening.

“Almost all the roads were closed because of the snow. The group decided to head to a local’s house for some local beer or *chhang*. The cosy hut had a fireplace, a cheerful lady huddled near it and some oddly shaped pieces of wood were hanging from the beams near the ceiling,” Malavi, my spirited classmate from school, told me her story of a trip to Pedong. The lady had then asked them if they wanted something to munch on, and *chakhna*—as many beer drinkers would say—is always welcome. The dry pieces of wood hanging from the ceiling were what the lady reached out to. She cut some up and fried it. Turned out it was cured yak meat.

Discoveries, however, are not always made on plates. I discovered I disliked the idea of familiar food on my travels while sitting in a Neelkamal chair in a Bengali restaurant in Haridwar. The



**Ishani
(Chatterji)
found that frog
legs tasted
nothing like
chicken**

thought was reinforced when in the sea-kissed Emirate of Ras Al Kahimah, I was offered butter chicken and rajma. I later compensated by taking a tour around the local market and buying dried lemon and spices (which now makes great Emirati mutton stew in my Mumbai kitchen). The food on your plate is only part of the experience, yet it becomes a medium for exploration. To taste a new thing for the first time can be exhilarating. My colleague, Kareena, a vegetarian for as long as I have known her, discovered her love for chilli crab in Singapore. She even carries around a crab claw, the souvenir from a meal at a hawker centre where for the very first time she tasted the crustacean (and loved it). She drew a line, though, at crocodile meat in Cambodia.

Some explorations, however, do not end very well. And often the first foray into a new kind of cuisine can be like jumping into a dark hole—you don’t know where you will land.

“It was not chicken. It was not chicken like. It was... well, frog.”

Ishani, one of my best friends, is an adventurous eater. I couldn’t help but guffaw when I saw her pull a face and recall an experience from four years



U.A.E’s spice markets are a treasure trove for the travelling cook. Pouches of star anise, dried lemons, and *sumak* make the best souvenirs.

ago. She had, much to my vicarious delight, tasted frog legs at an upscale restaurant in Berlin. Armed with the expert knowledge provided by her friends and by the characters of *Dexter's Laboratory* who insisted that it tastes “just like chicken,” an excited Ishani had ordered the French delicacy only to find that chicken was the last thing she could think of once she took a bite of her dinner. “I think it was partly also because I knew I was eating Mr. Frog. The thought still upsets me.” The amphibian was a rock she couldn’t jump over.

As daunting as food explorations can be, for some it is a sense of empowerment, of doing something that’s different from what you’ve known all your life. A mould that you break once you’re away from home.



he wanted to do all his life. An MBA, culinary training, and multiple travels later, he is still looking for his most adventurous plate of food. “I decided I need to travel the world in search of that one dish which will bring me to my knees. I went to almost all of Southeast Asia, to Turkey, China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, U.K., Jordan and Tokyo and tasted everything from insects to snakes, amphibians, crocodile, and simple meals, but I am yet to discover my dish. Maybe one day when I least expect it, I may find it right at home.” And maybe he will. After all, a part of travel is about coming back home. And what a story it will be if after travelling the world in search of your favourite food, your quest ends in your own backyard.

“Growing up in a South Indian Brahmin family probably cancels out 90 per cent of the food you can have.”

I could hear the laugh in his voice as I read the email that chef, biker, and a friend from university, Siddharth had sent. His exploration of different kinds of food began with shawarmas in Oman when his family moved there. Every time he travelled, he looked for something new to stomach, and soon he realised that’s what

The well-travelled Siddharth (Narayan) is still looking for his perfect plate of food

Every plate, every bowl, every little paper bag or *kulhad* of food consumed has a story of its own. Sometimes it’s in the ingredients, sometimes in your choice of food, sometimes in the place where you found it, and sometimes in the smells, sights, and sounds that accompanied the food. You can take the travel out of food, if you wish, but then it might be difficult to take the food out of travel. On your next travel, look a little more closely at that plate of food in front of you—there are many stories it has to tell. ✂



The many food courts around Singapore are ideal spots to savour both local delicacies and the city-state’s unique multicultural ethos.

DELHI THREE WAYS

A grumpy host's guide to capital eats **BY SOITY BANERJEE**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY PRIYA KURIYAN



PHAM I love my friends and relatives. And *their* friends and *their* relatives. Only, I prefer to meet them in their own habitat, not mine. For, charming as Delhi can be—particularly in summer—I fail to see its capital charms as a “getaway”.

Yet every once in a while, I must drag visitors, and the weight of their expectations, about town, ensuring they get at least one memorable case of Delhi Belly, a truly local experience. What with no one wanting to be a tourist anymore, even first-time guests would sooner believe that our neighbourhood Mother Dairy Booth No. 109 is a local institution than go to “touristy” Karim’s: “Don’t they say Al Jawahar is better? What about Pehelwan Biryani? Poltu’s Kakima Instagrammed it!”

So in the interest of reluctant hosts and misguided guests, here’s a list on dining in Delhi.

For the Been There Done Thats

Not everybody is easy to please, especially when they think they know Delhi better than you—and probably do. On flying visits for work, or weddings, visitors clock more hours in a week at the city’s hippest joints than you do in a year, or three. But since you’re never quite off the hook as a host, try lobbing these names at them. Let them know who’s the boss. This is Delhi, remember?

AMA THAKALI

Assuming your friend has butter chickened before, in the original Moti Mahal outpost in Daryaganj no less, skip all things *makhni*, and navigate north to the Tibetan settlement of Majnu ka Tila. Walking past the *tingmo* and buff *shapta* dens of Tee Dee’s and Dolma House, head to Ama Thakali. A quiet huddle of rooms with low seating, it’s a good place to acquaint yourself with Nepali food. Start with the Newari grilled chicken *tsoila* (₹160), or *joal momo*, a soup with *timur*-pepper-spiked momos (₹150). Or dive straight into a mutton curry thali, which includes dal tempered with chive-like *jimbu*, seasonal vegetable dishes, wilted greens and unusual pickles (₹280). On your way back, stop

at the stalls near the Buddhist temples to pack some Tibetan *lapping*: cold, flat noodles in a light chilli-laced sauce. Some call it greed; I call it foresight.

House no.40, first floor, above Ama Restaurant, Majnu ka Tila; www.facebook.com/amathakali; 07042983304; 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; meal for two: ₹800.

BLUE NILE, ETHIOPIAN CULTURAL CENTRE

While you may be asked to furnish or purchase a membership at the Centre, remember, sincerity of purpose can go a long way! Since it’s easier to plot Ethiopia on a map than order off a menu with more consonants than vowels (try saying “*yebgg firfir*”), heed the waiter’s advice and order a non-veg

“thali” (₹570): *injera* (flatbread) topped with *doro wat*, a braised chicken stew; *begg wat*, mutton with jammy onions; and *minchit abis alicha*, a minced meat curry, none too alien for the Indian palate. Try the coffee—they serve it with popcorn.

Niti Marg, Opposite Nehru Park, Chanakyapuri; www.ethiopianculturalcentredelhi.com, 011-24673654; 8 a.m.-6 p.m.; meal for two: ₹1,500.

THE CATEGORICAL EAT-PHAM

If I could, I’d pack off all my guests to Imphal—it ought to get more tourists than Delhi anyway. Instead, I march them to the red door of The Categorical Eat-Pham. The tiny restaurant seats 10 (they move to a larger space in July),



and serves homestyle Manipuri fare, including curried duck (₹250) and river snails tossed with smoked pork (₹300). The humble *ooti*, yellow peas cooked with soda (₹70), is lovely too. Later, take a post-dinner stroll to The Piano Man Jazz Club. A charming womb, all velvet and wood, it has some of the best bands and cocktails in town.

120-A, near Yo Tibet Restaurant, Humayunpur (near NCC Gate), www.facebook.com/categoricalcatpham, 011-41812089; noon-10 p.m.; meal for two: ₹600-700.

The Piano Man, B6-7/22 Safdarjung Enclave, www.thepianoman.in, 99581-25827; 12-3 p.m., 7 p.m.-12.30 a.m.; meal for two: ₹2,000-2,500.

LITTLE SAIGON

By the time you read this, no one in Delhi is likely to be in the mood for food. One could make an exception though—44 degrees of exception, really—for Hana Ho's cold summer rolls filled with prawn and chicken, brightened with basil, coriander and mint (₹220/170). After her former employer, Blue Ginger at the Taj Palace, downed its shutters, Ho opened her modest Vietnamese eatery last year. But don't go by its size; you'll eat well as long as you avoid the busiest hours at the two-person kitchen.

E-16, Hauz Khas Market; www.facebook.com/little.saigon.delhi; 9650260408; noon-2.30 p.m., 6.30-10 p.m.; meal for two: ₹1,000-1,500.

LAVAASH

For a fine dining experience, Chef Sabyasachi Gorai's Lavaash, which serves Armenian and Bengali dishes, is a good bet. Even if your guests, like mine, happen to be *from* Bengal, it's unlikely that they have met most things on the menu, or a bona fide Armenian (although Kolkata still has a small community, as does Asansol, the chef's hometown). Try the lavaash pizzas (₹550/650); *tolmas*, delicate grapevine leaf parcels of meat or potato (₹500/400); or *gata*, a cheese-filled pastry served with ice cream (₹450). Wash it all down with plenty of sangria (₹600/glass), that great antidote to tetchy companions.

H5/1, Ambawatta No.1, Mehrauli; www.lavaashbysaby.com; 782704-4055; 11 a.m.-midnight; meal for two: ₹2,500-3,000.

For parents, uncles and aunts

Now, Delhi is hardly an age-no-bar kind of city. I think of it more as a bar-bar-chicken-tikka-bar kind of city, where the average age of pub-crawlers is slipping steadily from the mid-20s to the unborn. A handful of clubs like the India International Centre or the Gymkhana Club push the average age of punters up to 117, or thereabouts, but if you don't move in those charmed members-only circles, head to the following.

UNITED COFFEE HOUSE (UCH)

The food can be dubious, but relatives of a certain vintage invariably coo over the powder blue and yellow walls, liveried waiters, chandeliers and Cona coffee (₹175) in chemistry lab flasks. In the old heart of Nayi Dilli, UCH has served nostalgia without apology for seven decades: think chicken à la Kiev (₹675), mushroom stroganoff (₹575), tomato fish (₹745), and cheese balls (₹245). And not a mason jar in sight.

E-15, Inner Circle, Connaught Place; www.unitedcoffeehouse.in; 9650596115; 9.30 a.m.-11.30 p.m.; meal for two: ₹2,500-3,000.

TRIVENI TERRACE CAFÉ OR CAFÉ LOTA

For those who like a spot of culture with their tea, there's Café Lota at the National Handicrafts Museum, or its sister Triveni Terrace Café at Triveni Kala Sangam in the arts hub of Mandi House. Summer evenings are not half as unbearable al fresco—not with *palak patta* chaat (₹255) and *kachcha aam* prawn curry (₹515) on the table.

Anandgram on MG Road, and the National Museum and IGNC in central Delhi are parent-friendly too, but their cafés offer little inducement to visitors. A safer option, perhaps, is Chor Bizarre, which serves decent *goshtaba* (₹695) and *haaq* (₹450), at the recently restored Bikaner House.

National Handicrafts Museum, Bhairon Marg, near Pragati Maidan,





www.facebook.com/CafeLota; 99108-07703; 8 a.m.-10 p.m.; meal for two: ₹1,500-2,000.

Triveni Kala Sangam, Tansen Marg; www.facebook.com/Triveni-TeaTerrace; 9971566904; 10 a.m.-7.30 p.m.; meal for two: ₹1,000-1,500, thalis ₹320/260.

Bikaner House, Pandara Road; www.chorbizarre.com; 9910601574/011-23071574; noon-3.30 p.m., 7-11.30 p.m.; meal for two: ₹2,000.

ELMA'S BRASSERIE

Easy to navigate and with enough apparel and home décor shops to charm the grumpiest of your guests, Meherchand Market is as easy on the eyes as it is on the knees. When the parents need a breather from shopping or from admiring the street art in Lodhi Colony, the high tea (₹699) at Elma's—sandwiches and scones, tartlets and tea—delivers each time.

73 Meherchand Market; www.elmasbakerybarkitchen.com; 97111-17516; 11 a.m.-11 p.m., 3-7 p.m. for high tea; meal for two: ₹1,500-2,000.

BAGLI'S KITCHEN

Although the dining hall at Parsi Anjuman is no longer open to visitors, you can get takeaway orders if you call a day ahead. Invite at least three others to do justice to the mountain of caramel pulao with mutton *dhansak* (₹360) and *patra-ni-machhi* (₹225 per piece).

Parsi Anjuman, Bahadur Shah Zafar

Marg; 9810788227; www.facebook.com/Baglis-Kitchen-951446014962727; starting July-August, they will also offer takeaways from Gurgaon; meal for four: ₹1,500.

For first-timers

The trouble with Delhi “virgins” is that they want to have their tandoori chicken, and eat it too. Sadly, by the time they tire of kebabs and kormas, it's too late to teach them how to eat like a local—or at least bleat like one.

KARIM'S AND KUREMAL

Get Karim's out of the way. That way, it won't come up in conversation every two hours, and you can trick your guests into believing that they want what you want: mutton *burra* (₹581) and *korma* (₹379)—not the biryani. All this, of course, before they have had the chance to resolve the nuclear standoff between Karim's and Al Jawahar. Sweeten the deal with a visit to Kuremal Mohan Lal Kulfi Wale for *falsa kulfi* (₹60) and stuffed mango kulfi (₹200).

Jama Masjid Gate no. 1, Gali Kababian; www.karimhoteldelhi.com; 8071875367; 9 a.m.-11.30 p.m.; meal for two: ₹1,500-2,000.

Chawri Bazaar Road, Kucha Pati Ram; www.kuremalkulfi.com; 9810540105; noon-10 p.m.; kulfi for two: ₹500.

ALKAUSER

If your relatives love rolls as much as mine do, reserve at least one early dinner on the boot of a car for Alkauser in Chankayapuri. Their sweetish *varki* paratha roll with mutton tikka (₹250), or delicate *kakori* in *roomali* roti (₹190), are arguably Delhi's best. Then drive down to the *paanwala* outside The Claridges hotel to learn the local art of digesting a hearty meal.

Kautilya Marg, near Assam Bhawan; 9891703786; 4.30-10.45 p.m.; meal for two: ₹1,000.

SITARAM DIWAN CHAND

Visiting Paharganj in this weather is injurious to health. But if you must, do it for Sitaram Diwan Chand's fabled *chhole bhatura* (₹60). Go early to beat the heat and the crowds.

Rajguru Marg, Chuna Mandi, Paharganj; 9999937406; 8 a.m.-6.30 p.m.; meal for two: ₹200; home delivery with an extra charge.

PRABHU CHAAT BHANDAR

I'm not quite sure if Prabhu “UPSC” *chaatwala* deserves all the love he gets. But since he's conveniently located in the India Gate tourist catchment area, it's a pit stop worth considering. This 80-year-old stall is known for its *golgappas* (₹30), *bhalla-papri chaat* (₹70), and now, *malai kulfi* (₹50) too.

Next to the UPSC Building, off Shahjahan Road; 9810314063; noon-7.30 p.m.; meal for two: ₹200. ✂





MA'S WAY AND THE HIGHWAY

A mother and daughter's shared appetite for all kinds of food has meant a lifetime of adventure

Text and Photographs
By Aysha Tanya

Roasted corn is usually a winter treat, but if you're lucky, you can spot a cart on MG Road in the evenings even during summer months.



My earliest memory of being on vacation with my mother is of her cooking in our tiny cottage in Coonoor, a few miles away from Ooty in the Nilgiris. The stillness in the air is punctuated with the rustling of leaves as monkeys swing about fruit trees in the backyard. The cold air makes us ravenous, and the smell of egg stew and *parottas* emanating from the little yellow kitchen is something I will always associate with the mountains.

As we head home, the familiar tropical terrain of Thalassery replaces deciduous trees and rolling hills. But the smell of Eucalyptus stays with you long after the last hairpin bend. At home, we fall back into old routines—school for me and the kitchen for mum. Thalassery, like most small towns, does not offer much in the way of entertainment, and it is the kitchen that offers respite from the monotony of the slow pace. The only trace left of the holidays are the treats that mum bakes every now and then. Strawberry marshmallow, mint-flavoured boiled candy, pizza and lasagne from scratch—when we couldn't travel to exotic places, my mother could still take us on an adventure with her dishes.

Since then, my mother and I have been travel partners in different parts of the world in search of the next memorable meal. And, the countless trips we have taken together, and the new dishes we have discovered there have informed me as a food writer as much as cooking by her side in our home kitchen has.

1995, BANGALORE

It's 9 p.m. on M.G. Road, and the sea of traffic looks like an army of ants returning to a colony after a hard day's work. We had spent the day walking around Commercial Street, enjoying the bustle of city-life, soaking in the magnificent winter weather, and stopping for a snack every now and then. The most exciting thing Bangalore (now Bengaluru) has to offer me is roasted corn on the cob. As a six-year-old, roasted corn held my imagination in the way that a PlayStation 3 probably holds the imagination of six-year-olds today. The highlight of every trip to the Big City, it was also my mother's bargaining tool—be patient while I shop, and you can have a roasted corn after. A precursor to the sanitised, pre-cooked corn cup stalls that are now ubiquitous all over the city, roasted corn could be smelt before it was seen. On blue stands dotted all over the city in the winter, the corn is husked, roasted on hot coal, and slathered with an ominous looking, but delicious tasting, chilli paste. As a final flourish, a splash of lime juice anoints the corn, completing the trifecta of flavours—spicy and sour.

As the evening progresses, and holiday cheer gradually turns to crankiness and tiredness, we cross the road to look for an autorickshaw to take us back to the hotel. The lights turn red and we form a human chain and trot across the road. Halfway to the other side, my denim skirt falls to the ground in the middle of M.G. Road. The crankiness disappears as my mother and sister burst out laughing. Roasted corn may have my imagination,

but this is the Bangalore memory that'll have my family giggling for years to come.

KANNUR TO MANGALORE, 2005

There are a few fundamental things that my mother and I don't see eye to eye on—one of those being modes of travel. I have an inexplicable loathing for trains, and my mother feels similarly about road trips. And as the adult, she usually wins out, and at least once a month, I find myself picked up from school and dropped at the railway station where mum and I catch the 5 p.m. train to Mangalore, her hometown. We've made this journey at least a hundred times together. As the golden light filters through the tinted windows, it is mandatory to spend at least a good 20 minutes admiring the lush green of north Malabar. This is usually interrupted by the first batch of food, *pazham pori* (batter fried banana fritters), that arrives soon after. We tell ourselves, no coffee-flavoured water this time, but it cannot be helped—the train journey begs for a cup of coffee, no matter how terrible it tastes. The main attraction, however, only arrives by 7 p.m. It's the biryani from Kanhangad station. We share an egg biryani between us, dividing the one precious hard-boiled egg that must be dug out of hiding from in between the layers of rice, much like an easter egg hunt. Although it's a poor rendition of the Thalassery biryani, which sets itself apart from its contenders with its small-grained *jeerakashaala* rice and has layers of ghee rice alternating with swathes of masala, this particular version is a little ungenerous with the masala. Yet, on a journey, many things are forgiven—even bland biryanis.

It comes with a sachet of spicy lime pickle and yogurt. The yogurt is tossed aside—it's the lime pickle that saves the day. Bitter, salty and sweet, it is the perfect counterpoint to the heavy biryani. If there is one thing that I have learned from these train journeys, it is that lime pickle and boiled eggs are a match made in heaven. At least during travels on the Southern Railways.

By the time the train zips past Kasaragod, the biryani has been wolfed down. The outside, now dark, offers no distraction, and the only thing that keeps us occupied in smartphone-free times is a good old-fashioned book.

NEW YORK CITY, 2011

Although I have spent four years of college in N.Y.C., when my mother finally arrives for my graduation and a 10-day vacation after, the city looks completely different with her by my side. For the first time, I see the inside of the impressive Grand Central Market, a place I had probably walked past a countless times in the past, but never thought to venture into. We walk for hours, peering into baking stores and farmers' markets.

I hadn't started thinking about food or writing from a career point of view, so instead of exploring one of the most vibrant food scenes in the world, I wanted to take her to the places that had been my frequent haunts in college. Our mornings start at 8 a.m. and pans out exactly like the day before—at the local bakery in midtown Manhattan, getting a tuna melt on a croissant. It might seem like too much of a good thing—a buttery croissant almost as delicate as a crumpled tissue, with a generous blob of tuna, a slice of American cheese, warmed till the cheese melts just so.

Years later, this is the meal my mother associates with the holiday. But right then, as we try to get the better of the messy sandwich that threatens to fall apart at first bite, we tell ourselves vacations are meant to be over the top. However, the dish I am



Buying snacks along the way (top) is almost a ritual on road trips; For my mother and I, food items like ingredients from New York's Grand Central Market (middle) make the best souvenirs; Bengaluru's Airlines Hotel (bottom), known for its breakfast, used to be a frequent stop.



most excited to introduce my mother to is the gyro, albeit an Americanised version.

Standing in the middle of Times Square, almost getting swept away by wave after wave of map-clutching herds of tourists, I watch excitedly as my mother bites into her first gyro. Sliced rotisserie lamb, nestled in a warm and fluffy flatbread with a few unremarkable vegetables, doused with hot sauce and tzatziki. When I missed home food, this is the meal I'd treat myself to. With extra hot sauce of course. Mum nods politely, and looks significantly less enthused about the whole thing than I am. But watching my mother standing in the middle of Times Square, wrestling with a gyro from a street cart is the quintessential New York moment for me.

SINGAPORE, 2015

We've finally fallen into a routine while travelling; mum wakes up at dawn to say her namaz, and makes enough noise for me to eventually crawl out of bed at 8. Our days are planned down to the second by my sister Sadia, who's hosting us in in

her apartment in Little India. I have a fair idea of what I want from a holiday by now—sleep in, laze around, and finally, step outside for a few hours with my camera and a ravenous appetite. My mother's idea of the perfect holiday, on the other hand, is to try to cram in as many activities, and places as she can before she's forced to go to bed but she's up again, early next morning, dressed before I've even cracked open an eyelid, and by sheer willpower has both her grumbling daughters out of the house by 10.

We'd make for terrible travel partners, it might seem, but our interests align when it comes to food. As anyone who has visited Singapore will tell you, the true Singaporean culinary experience is in the hawker centres best known for the Hainanese chicken rice. Although I usually tend to stay away from crowded places, I recently watched an episode of Anthony Bourdain's show that featured him exploring the hawker markets and I am ready to be adventurous.

The strong fishy smell that permeates from the stalls takes a few minutes to adjust to. There are signs announcing octopus



Cafés selling tea in Singapore often have a delectable selection of tea on display (top); Many an afternoon has been spent scouring for knick knacks at Bangalore's Commercial Street (facing page).

balls soup, turtle soup and crocodile tail soup. But the halal vendors are usually Malaysian or Indonesian and those are the stalls we end up stopping at instead. *Roti kanai* is the Malaysian version of parotta—so flaky and melt-in-the-mouth, that it feels like you're eating puff pastry. Served with a coconut chicken gravy that is so intensely flavourful, it begs to be slurped like soup—and this we do, shamelessly.

A meal at a hawker centre is not complete without *ice kacang*—the original unicorn dessert. This brightly-coloured Malaysian treat is proof of that very wise line, “never judge a dessert by its colours.” A mountain of shaved ice, topped with red beans, rose syrup, jelly, evaporated milk and palm sugar syrup quickly collapse in on itself and against the ice-cold of the dessert, the flavours meld, and turn into one singular sweetness. The real treat here, is the play of textures—the soft squishy beans, the chewy cubes of jelly between bites of ice shards. A race against the melting ice, this dessert demands to be eaten with full attention, something neither mum nor I have any trouble doing.

Once a day we visit Toast Box, a café chain that's a block away from my sister's apartment. We're here as much for the coffee as we are for watching the natives in their natural habitats. Boiled eggs, we have discovered, is perfectly acceptable café food; with a splash of soy, the soft-boiled eggs yields its runny yolk that eventually turns a muddy brown as the soy slowly makes its way into the egg. It's anytime, anywhere food. The other local custom that has us captivated is eating a big bowl of rich, fragrant chicken or seafood laksa for breakfast. Sitting by yourself in a café or even a hawker centre, with a big bowl of steaming noodles and broth in front of you, and slurping away unselfconsciously, seems to me like a celebration of life, if I ever did see one. Why save the good stuff for lunch and dinner, when you can start your day with it instead?

Our usual orders at the café are a Kopi C for me and a Teh O

for mum. “C” indicates that you'd like evaporated milk instead of the usual condensed milk, and O in Malay means, black, without milk. Made with Robusta coffee, an iced Kopi C is strong and rich, the best form of relief on a typical warm sultry Singaporean day. We also occasionally indulge in a plate of *kaya* toast, thinly sliced toast with a slab of butter and a generous slathering of kaya, a sugar, coconut milk and egg spread. It is one of those things that tastes like biting into sweet sunshine when in Singapore, but falls flat when we try to recreate it at home—something my mother always enthusiastically does as soon as we're in home turf. And that, I suppose is that inexplicable magic of a holiday. ✂

MEAL PLANNER

KASARGOD

Viceroy Restaurant on M.G. Road, Kasargod, serves some of the best biryani in town. It is open from 11 a.m.-10 p.m. A meal for two including a starter and a main course costs ₹300.

NEW YORK CITY

Zibetto Espresso Bar on 42nd street, 5th Avenue, offers excellent croissants and cappuccinos. The café is open from 7 a.m.-7 p.m. on weekdays, 9 p.m.-6 p.m. on Saturdays and 10 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Sundays. A meal for two costs approximately \$15/₹967.

The Halal Guys run the most popular street carts in NYC. The main one on W 53rd Street have lines that go around the block, so go prepared. They open at 10 a.m. until 4 a.m. A chicken gyro costs \$4.79/₹309.

SINGAPORE

Toast Box in City Square Mall on Kitchener Road is a local chain that sells tea, coffee, pastries and a few Asian favourites like nasi lemak and laksa. It is open from 8 a.m.-10 p.m. A meal for two costs SGD 22/₹1,024.

Newton Food Centre in Newton is one of the popular hawker centres in the city. Try out the **Kwee Heng stall** and fried oyster omelette at **Hup Kee**. Open from noon-2 p.m. A meal for two costs SGD 13/₹605 on an average.

For more adventurous fare, head to the **Berseh Food Centre** in Kelantan Lane, Singapore. **Very Lucky Turtle Soup Stall** sells delicacies like turtle soup and crocodile tail stew. The centre is open from 9.45 a.m.-9.45 p.m. on all days except Tuesdays. A meal for two costs SGD 12/₹558.



Butter chicken's origin story can be famously traced back to Moti Mahal in Daryaganj (right), which was once patronised by the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru and John F. Kennedy.

RAMON GROSSO DOLAREA/SHUTTERSTOCK

In search of lost BUTTER CHICKEN

A writer looks high and low across the globe for the perfect iteration of the Punjabi classic, hoping to relive memories of her beloved grandparent

By **Sukhada Tatke**



Soon after the Indo-Pak Partition, a young Punjabi Hindu man from Peshawar sought refuge on the other side of the border. In the Daryaganj locality of Delhi, Kundan Lal Gujral opened Moti Mahal, a restaurant that had been a popular eatery in his hometown. As the story goes, he conducted an experiment to save leftover pieces of dried tandoori chicken by cooking them in a creamy tomato gravy. And with this, the provenance of butter chicken or *murgh makhani* became a delicious episode in India's culinary history.

Around the same time, another young man left his home in Satara, Maharashtra, to make the journey to Bombay. For him too, it was a time of experimentation. With the freedom of travel that an engineering degree accorded him, came a delectable curiosity for food beyond the realm of the vegetarian diet on which he had been raised. The headiness of city life held sway over him as he sallied forth into a world full of crustaceans, birds and animals to be discovered. Fish and shrimps were consumed with equal fervour as were chicken and mutton.

Later this man, my grandfather, married a girl named Sindhu, the only one who would cling to her steadfast commitment to vegetarianism to the end, even as one child after another inherited her husband's carnivorous habits. It wasn't until the 1980s that my grandfather chanced upon his true gastronomic love—butter chicken—and passed it down generations.

He bore a fine personality, my grandfather: perfectly-dyed black hair, a loud voice behoving the raconteur that he was and the magician that he was. He adored his daily peg of whisky like he adored his food.

For me on the other hand, mealtime was at best a chore that needed to be done away with. I was often the one idling away at the dining table long after everyone else had lapped up the last remnants of food from their fingers and dispersed.

At its best, however, mealtime was a plate simmering with luscious pieces of grilled meat, immersed in tangy gravy slathered with a big-hearted layer of butter. Show me a person hostile to this humble dish, butter chicken—with its self-awareness of being the purveyor of delight—and I will show you a life perfunctorily lived.

It is rare for a gathering of 11 to agree upon a restaurant, leave alone the type of food. And yet, "Niagara!" is what we would all yell in unison at the mention of a family dinner outing. This restaurant right outside my colony in Khar, Bombay, had come a long way since it started in the mid-1950s as a modest Udipi joint. In its latest avatar, familiar to my generation, it was a bar-meets-south Indian-meets-north Indian-meets-Chinese cuisine.

What then was its identity, its *raison d'être*, you ask? My family had the answer. Why this little-known restaurant was named after the waterfalls along the distant border between the U.S. and Canada, nobody knew. Everyone knew, however, that Niagara was synonymous with butter chicken.

How we vowed on several occasions during our five-minute walk to the restaurant not to fall for its unbearable charm, to give other keen competitors a chance. But the menu would immediately elicit a Pavlovian response, leaving us salivating for what we knew best, our bravado fully dissipated. It was mostly around the quiet glow of this restaurant that this bright orange north Indian wonder bore silent witness to our Maharashtrian family's various milestones: birthdays, anniversaries, academic and sporting achievements; no moment was too big or too small to merit a celebration complete with butter chicken, roti and jeera rice.

At other times, we would phone in our order. So familiar was our

fierce loyalty to anyone who answered the phone, that all we had to do was give our flat number to be asked: “*Kitna* butter chicken?” The whiff of the air, a few minutes later, brought with it the eagerly awaited fragrance, preceded by the transporter of our order on his bicycle.

Our allegiance to butter chicken remained constant even as things around our axes rapidly changed: Bombay became Mumbai. International food and cafés became de rigueur. Bandra emerged as the nouveau cool. A walking stick appeared in my grandfather’s hand. And yet, the quality of our darling butter chicken weathered the seasons; a gradual increase in rates the only thing that signalled the passage in time.

When Niagara shut somewhere in the early 2000s after its five decade-long run, everyone grieved. We realised, as one does only after the death of a beloved, how widely treasured our butter chicken was outside of our family; that it had never been only ours to claim, that its life had been for collective celebration and, that its demise was for all to mourn.

If Niagara couldn’t hold its own in the new millennium, neither could its biggest patron. When my grandfather died in 2008, my butter chicken consumption took a hit. Inadvertently, I took it upon myself to reconnect with him through his favoured dish.

Much like Vikram Seth’s hero Michael in *An Equal Music* looking for the lemon perfume of the woman he loved, I too have since been casting around for the smell of my childhood everywhere my feet have travelled.

When I moved to Houston in Texas more than two years ago, I was assured that Indian food would be found in abundance. And found it was for the Texan city didn’t disappoint. I gobbled up everything my heart craved: *vada pav*, *dabeli*, even *chowpatty chaat*.

There is no end in sight for my quest to find butter chicken.

Restaurant after restaurant, I have left exasperated. “Try chicken tikka masala, no,” suggested a friend once. “Have you tried the British pub close to your place?” asked another. For any self-respecting butter chicken lover insistent on authenticity, these trivial derivatives of the original



No moment in our family was too big or small to merit a celebration with butter chicken, roti and jeera rice

version offer no comfort.

In restaurants outside of India, offenders come in different shades and shapes; the pale yellow curry with chewy pieces of chunky chicken masquerading as the real McCoy takes the offence to another level: repugnance. Familiar Bollywood music and the Indian decor in these eating spaces provide little solace.

Once I was in Germany for a month; the editor of the newspaper where I worked gave me a dream assignment. Go to five Indian restaurants, he said, order the same dish everywhere and grade the restaurants. At this point, it’s perhaps amply clear what I chose and how each adaptation of butter chicken kept falling lower on the scale of glory.

Another time during a long stay in France, when the country was transitioning from an unsympathetic winter to gorgeous spring, a brutal craving struck me and took the form of a *cri de coeur* on Facebook. My best friend’s fiancé,

a top chef in Abu Dhabi, whom I had never met until then responded from afar. “It’s easy,” he said, and kindly shared a recipe. It was anything but easy; I had neither the ingredients nor the acumen (although at a later occasion I did try, and failed miserably), but the chef scored instant brownie points in my mind.

My second best option then was to convince a French friend, who went out only on weekends, to join me on my hunt in the middle of the week. He agreed to try out his first Indian meal and we ended up at Le Maharajah. I should’ve known better than to trust a desi name prefixed by an article à la *Française*. The elusive taste continued to abscond and I left more than mildly incensed.

How to find the perfect recipe when the secret and most potent ingredients are but memories of perfection? How can something physical match the ideal when the deep orange of the butter chicken of my childhood was more than a thing to be eaten, but an image of a splendid sunset on a cloudless day?

These days, my husband is on a vitalised chase on my behalf. “We haven’t been to (insert Indian restaurant name) yet,” he says. On a recent such visit in Houston, as I sank my teeth into a succulent piece of chicken, he asked earnestly: “And?” My answer would disappoint him yet again, but the truth had to be told. “It’s butter chicken, alright, but not quite.”

Proust’s narrator in *In Search of Lost Time* feels an “all-powerful joy” when a madeleine dipped in tea touches his palate and transports him to Sundays of a bygone era spent at his aunt Léonie’s. The narrator sums up this unfathomable experience thus: “When from a long distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead...the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time.”

Whether or not I will eventually attain my madeleine moment and get propelled into a world in which lived my cherished grandfather, butter chicken with him will be at the forefront of my happiest memories.

Am I ready then to relinquish my search? Not quite.

In between these moments of yearning and probable fruition, I will draw inspiration from the young man from Satara and his eager experiments with food. ✂



The family had many a memorable meal savouring butter chicken at Niagara restaurant in Mumbai.

THE INDULGENCE



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A CHAIR AT THE ROYAL TABLE

Considering the exotic culinary legacy of India's nawabi families

PHOTO COURTESY: KARAM PURI



Karavalli at The Gateway Hotel
in Bengaluru.
Facing page: A tempered
yogurt with rice preparation at
Avartana at ITC Grand Chola.

It doesn't get
Better

From avant-garde fusion to old-school homage, these 10 hotel restaurants across the country promise a memorable meal

By Sona Babadur



AVARTANA

ITC GRAND CHOLA, CHENNAI

Chennai is a city obsessed with its own history, but in recent years, it's also been aggressively forward-thinking and cosmopolitan. ITC Grand Chola's most recent offering, Avartana, which dishes out luxe reimaged South Indian fare, is the perfect case in point. This modernist fine diner with a banana leaf design leitmotif hasn't been open for long, but already people are saying it's the most happening spot in town. If you're looking for thrills on the plate, this one gives you bang for your buck. Chef Ajit Bangera, who took two years to devise the avant-garde menu, uses ingredients and seasonal produce to fashion inventive recipes that blend tastes from across the Southern Indian Peninsula with techniques from across the globe. A flavour-packed rasam is infused in front of the guest in a French press with coriander and cherry tomatoes to soak in the freshness of the herbs. And fish fry becomes a dish of sea bass cubes marinated with ginger, garlic and Salem chilli, then encased with thin linguine of local flat bread and fried. Desserts are just as ambitious and successful. The trail of payasams is a delightful take on jasmine and fig payasam. In short, if daring and boundary-pushing food brings you pleasure, you won't be disappointed.

(Meal for two: ₹4,500 approx. excluding taxes).



Avartana's coriander shrimp dumplings.

PILLARS

UMAID BHAWAN PALACE, JODHPUR

Unapologetically old school, Pillars feels as though it's from another time and place. Launched in 1976—it started as a tearoom in Umaid Bhawan—this charming open-air restaurant offers spectacular views of Jodhpur, the Baradari lawns, and the magnificent Mehrangarh Fort. From the cane furniture to servers in white uniforms with red turbans and *kamarbandhs*, the dial here is set to familiar, colonial (and yes, expensive) luxury. Menu stalwarts include golden classics of the vintage era such as chicken a la Kiev, braised lamb ossobuco, chermoula tofu steak, and homemade tortellini with saffron beurre blanc. You can also choose from Taj signatures like cobb salad from New York's Taj Pierre Hotel and, fish and chips from Taj St. James Court, London, among others. The menu isn't radical but everything is freshly made and sourced from the best suppliers across the world. The ham is Iberico, the avocados come from Peru, and the *gulkand* is painstakingly made in-house from the best Pushkar roses. Pair the food with a selection of spirits from across the globe. Definitely try the killer Jodhpur chilli martini made with local red chillies. As you savour your tippie, know that the likes of Prince Charles, the Dalai Lama, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and Mick Jagger have all dined here.

(Meal for two: ₹12,000 approx. excluding taxes).



The fabulous view from Pillars.

The bar at Le Cirque.

LE CIRQUE

THE LEELA PALACE, NEW DELHI

Like its famed crème brûlée (the recipe shows up as you scrape the bottom of the bowl in which it's served), Le Cirque is a favourite of the capital for a good reason: its staff is friendly, the candle-lit ambience chic, and the food innovatively upper crust. The restaurant, housed on the 10th floor of the beautiful Leela Palace, offers a breathtaking view of the majestic diplomatic enclave. The menu has a strong European bent with an honest yet unpredictable approach. Snack on a decadent plate of truffle fries, or a silky smoked potato mousse with slow-cooked free-range egg. For the antipasti, try owner Sirio Maccioni's signature spaghetti primavera, its light cream garlic sauce humming with flavour. The grilled NZ lamb chops, encrusted with black pepper and pecorino cheese, and grilled over charcoal, are a comforting treat. Chef Adrian Mellor's reverence for his ingredients and their provenance, coupled with his playfulness and skill, makes every mouthful a rare treat. Take for example, his preference for secondary cuts of meat like the belly, cheek and shoulder. Treated with slow-cooking techniques, they yield layers of flavour not usual of filleted cuts that are used for these dishes. The outstanding wine list is a draw in itself.

(Meal for two: ₹7,000 approx. excluding taxes).

The artisanal cheese platter at Vetro.

VETRO

THE OBEROI, MUMBAI

The tide may have turned in favour of more casual fine dining, but visit Vetro and you wonder why. Extensive use of sunlight-reflecting glass (Vetro means light in Italian), crema marfil marble flooring, and lacquered panels create a fitting backdrop for contemporary Italian dishes displaying oodles of technique and flair. With its sumptuous wine bar Enoteca stocking what is probably Mumbai's largest selection of wines, a visit here is as much about the drink as the food. Every dish rewards curiosity with quiet surprises. To open, try antipasti like fresh buratta with asparagus textures, grilled lamb loin with rucola, mustard vinaigrette, apple compote or salt baked onion with asparagus puree and parmesan. Pasta lovers can try the spaghetti n'duja, featuring spicy calabrian sausage and finished with pecorino romano, the saltiness of the hard sheep's cheese balancing the fieriness of the n'duja. A glass of Ribolla Gialla brings out the best in the main course of baked Chilean sea bass served with porcini mash and black truffle (vegetarians can try a roulade of aubergine, spinach and ricotta). Desserts are equally impressive. Soft and giving under the spoon, the ethereal white chocolate and sambuca foam with watermelon granita and fresh mint is a treat you should order and most definitely not share.

(Meal for two: ₹4,500 approx. excluding taxes).



Spice Studio's setting is as inviting as its food.

SPICE STUDIO

ALILA DIWA, GOA

There are few of life's mishaps that a good bowl of curry cannot mend. And in case of Spice Studio's Goan fish curry, a rich yet simple classic with a tangy twang, any low spirits will be instantly lifted. As the name suggests, the heart of the restaurant is home-style traditional cooking showing off India's glorious bounty of spices. The open-air diner features winners from across the country, but when it comes to Goan dishes, it punches way above its weight. Kokam-spiked dishes from the Susegad state get their due in the form of fresh prawns *kismur*, prawns tossed in coconut and onions, *aamsol* curry, button mushrooms cooked with onions and tomatoes, and *alsande*, a thick, orange-coloured coconut gravy. Among the North Indian stars, the *martaban* gosht is the thing to order: boneless lamb cubes slow-cooked with pickled spices and red chilli pickle are cooked again in a *martaban* to heighten flavour and colour. Finish simply with ginger and chai spiced crème brûlée with *bolinhas* or traditional Goan cookies. There's plenty to like in the setting—such as the backdrop of a banyan tree lit up by candlelight, breezy surroundings and lamps hung from the ceiling, trees and walls. Pair the food with a selection from the well-conceived wine list. The restaurant has also introduced a unique “Dine in the Dark” evening, where the master chefs ensure that you soak in the delicate flavours of your food without any visual distractions. (Meal for two: ₹2,000 approx. excluding taxes).

KARAVALLI

THE GATEWAY, BANGALORE

At Karavalli, you're snagging a taste of the south west coast of India in heaping portions. The beautifully landscaped restaurant with a mix of al fresco and indoor seating is reminiscent of a traditional tiled Mangalorean house. Chef Naren Thimmaiah's belief that, “like museums, regional restaurants also preserve traditions,” is reflected in everything from the use of home-style kitchen equipment—stone grinders, mortar and pestle *andurlis*—to the brass and copper serving ware. The cuisine is grounded in the regional cuisines of the south—Moplahs of Malabar, Konkani Brahmins of Mangalore, Syrian Christians of Travancore and Havyaka Brahmins of Vitla among others—but the newly-revamped menu also features grills and seasonal stars. The line-up has a stable core of dishes including a stunningly tender curry of *koli-barthad*, pieces of chicken pan-fried in a blend of roasted spices and tart Coorg vinegar, Alleppey fish curry simmered in a moderately spiced gravy of freshly ground coconut, ginger and raw mangoes, and the *piece de resistance*, tiger prawn roast tossed in Kerala spices, coconut slivers and lemon juice. A recent addition of tiffin meals keeps things interesting for return customers too. The wine list ticks all the boxes, and service is warm. A happily messy tamarind ice cream (or the delicious vermicelli payasam) rounds off an evening of class and comfort. Unquestionably, a Bangalore keeper. (Meal for two: ₹4,000 approx. excluding taxes).



Vazhapoo thoran, a highlight on Karavalli's menu.

WASABI BY MORIMOTO

TAJ MAHAL PALACE, MUMBAI

The only Indian restaurant to be featured on San Pellegrino's prestigious Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list for 2016, it flies down authentic ingredients and seafood fresh from Japan every five days. Little wonder that the red-themed luxe diner has that special power over its patrons. Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto's modern menu deconstructs and reconstructs ingredients and plays with flavours like a painter mixing colours on a palette and layering them on a canvas. Secure a spot by the window to get a spectacular view of the Gateway of India and take the time to survey a sake-dominated wine list. Then leave yourself in the hands of cool, calm chefs to deliver hit after hit. The fuusen tofu (decorated with a sprig of sakura flowers) and sashimi uni make for a delectable start. Among the sushi offerings, negitoro-maki, sushi hamachi, and sushi chutoro are equally good and come with freshly grated wasabi. The main course of black cod in miso hits all the right notes, the sake-miso sauce delivering pungency, kuromame black beans giving smokiness and pickled peppers adding crunch. Don't forget dessert. Kurogoma millefeuille made with fresh caramel, Tochigi strawberries and hokkaido chocolate ice cream isn't death by chocolate but gets awfully close.

(Meal for two: ₹13,000 approx. excluding taxes).



Avocado tartare on Wasabi's menu.

THE SPICE ROUTE

THE IMPERIAL, NEW DELHI

There is nothing subtle about the design of The Spice Route. The OTT décor with its theatrical murals and antiques delivers a sense of fantasy verging on Indiana Jones. But the overwhelming visual depiction does succeed in bringing alive the fantasy of the Orient. The 20-year-old restaurant traces the journey of spices from the Malabar Coast through Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia to Thailand and Vietnam, and offers six South East Asian cuisines on its menu. Chef Veena Arora cherry-picks flavours to give you a striking blend. Some cracking dishes are on offer. What you come for are winners like stir-fried lobster with ginger and Thai black mushrooms, served in a shell, chicken in Thai green curry with pea and cherry tomatoes and, *chemeen thoren* (Kerala style prawns stir-fried with coconut, curry leaves, black tamarind and mustard seeds). And let's not forget that *phad phak* (chef's special stir-fried baby spinach with black mushrooms, flavoured with soya bean paste). Dishes are also customised and crafted as per the preferences of patrons. For instance, the Summer Collection, which features unique creations using raw and ripe mangoes, and the Winter Collection starring seafood. At any time, consistently good food in striking surrounds is assured.

(Meal for two: ₹6,000 approx. excluding taxes).



Spice Route has a temple-inspired architecture.

SOUTHERN SPICE

TAJ COROMANDEL, CHENNAI

This Chennai icon's ornate design, inspired by the temple architecture of the Chola, the Pallava and the Pandya dynasties, guarantees a special night out. Every detail in Southern Spice, from where you sit (tufted chairs with bronze-capped feet) to the service ware (customised silver and gold-plated dinner ware), coalesces into a seamless experience. The menu charts a wide range of southern flavours, the dishes running the gamut from *vazhapoo kara podimas* (banana blossoms with ginger and ground spice powders) from Kerala and the scrumptious *Thanjavur kozhi varutha kozhambu* (country chicken cooked in rustic ground spices) to asparagus *paruppu usili* (asparagus and steamed lentils tempered with Madras chillies) and *munakaya mamsam kura* (drumstick-infused tender lamb shoulder meat curry from Andhra Pradesh). Dessert is just a little wicked; coconut obsessives will be in seventh heaven digging into the exquisite *elaneer payasam*, the slivers of coconut shavings adding contrasting textures. Attentive service ensures a smooth flow on the floor. Also, there is a premium on procuring ingredients from their region of origin, like coconuts from Pollachi, cinnamon from Kerala and Byadgi chillies from Mangalore. (Meal for two: ₹4,000 approx. excluding taxes).



Southern Spice's new dish—cauliflower kodamilagai urulai therattal.

SONARGAON

TAJ BENGAL, KOLKATA

Sonargaon means golden village in Bengali, and the ethnic setting here is definitely one reason for its longevity. Featuring mouthwatering fare from Bengal and the North West Frontier, the dishes are backed by a commitment to authenticity and flavour. The kakori kebabs are as God intended them, a fine mixture of tender lamb mince and lamb fat, enhanced with a mixture of hand-picked roasted spices and seasonings, skewered and slow-cooked in a lava stone fired open oven. The velvety *dal makhani* (known as *dal sonargaon*) is just as good, simmered overnight, smothered with butter and sharpened with tomato paste, red chillies and *kasoori methi*. Both pair divinely with the *gilafi kulcha*, a blend of two doughs, flattened and baked in a slow-flame tandoor. The highlight of the Bengali line-up is the *jamindari thali*, a classic traditional combination of a complete meal experience selected from the Bengali zamindar gharanas in and around Kolkata. Available in vegetarian and non-vegetarian versions, a mouthwatering array of homestyle dishes from *mochar* (banana blossom) chop to *kosha mangsho* are on offer. For dessert, classics like *mishti doi*, *gobindo chaler payesh* are well executed. It's worth visiting during the monsoon to relish their Hilsa special.

(Meal for two: ₹5,000 approx. excluding taxes). ✂

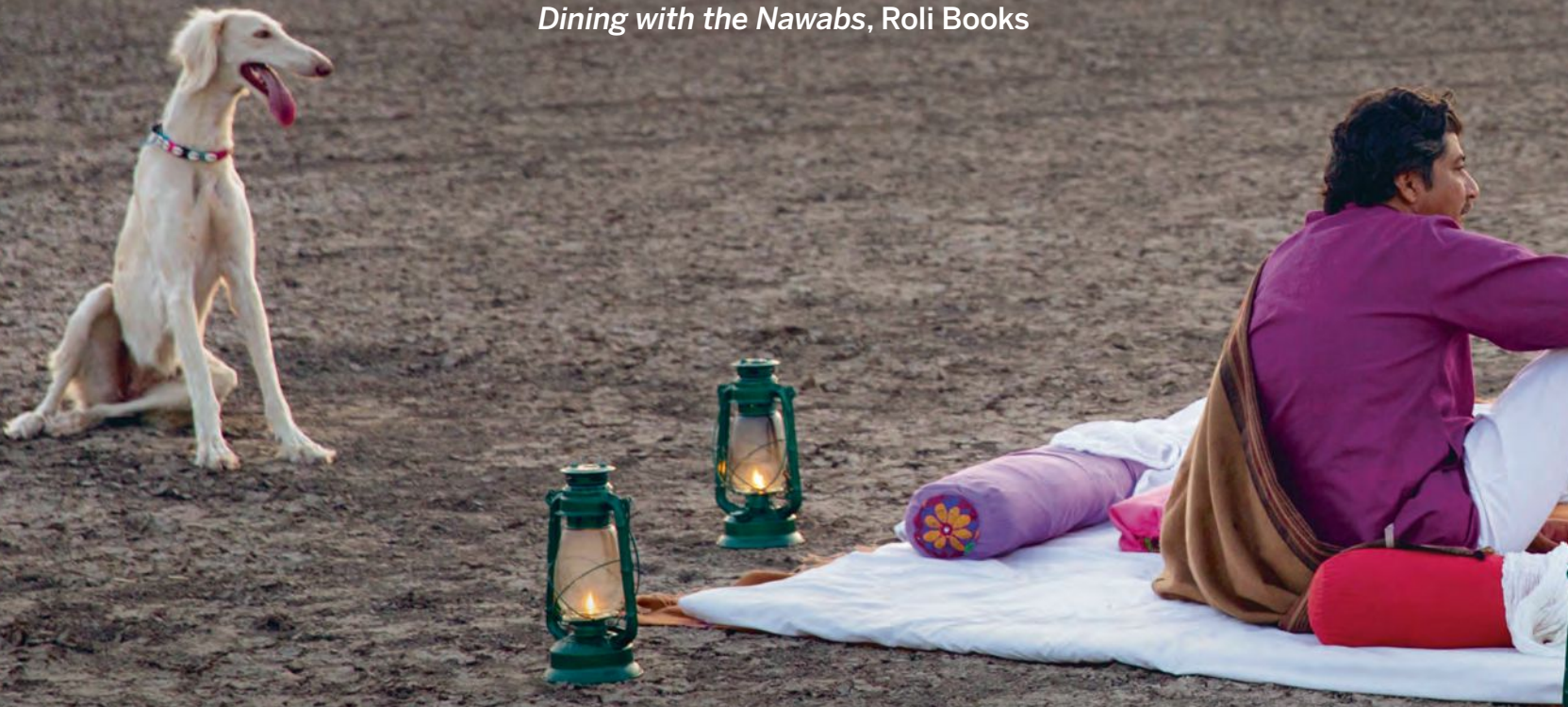
The kakori kebab at Taj Sonargaon.



A CHAIR AT THE ROYAL TABLE

Considering the exotic culinary
legacy of India's nawabi families

Text and Photographs Courtesy:
Dining with the Nawabs, Roli Books



One of the most distinguishing facets of any nobility is perhaps its food and wine. Picture, if you will, kitchens as big as mansions, stocked with the finest fruit and meat, moustachioed *khansamas* or *bawarchis* fussing over every detail and a liveried staff wheeling out the final spread to elegantly attired diners. It's like that famous Ralph Waldo Emerson quote come to life: "Let the stoics say what they please, we do not eat for the good of living but because the meat is savoury and the appetite is keen."

India has had its fair share of princes and maharajas, who were renowned pleasure-seekers and aesthetes. Their kingdoms are no more but, in many cases, vestiges of their culinary customs have been respectfully preserved by their descendants. In their coffee table book, *Dining with the Nawabs*, author Meera Ali and photographer Karam Puri transport readers into this charmed world of storied recipes and epicurean traditions.

For the nawabs, dining was an exercise in high artistry. Early in the book, Ali discusses the nawabs of Avadh, whose cooks were no less than mad scientists inventing ingenious confections for their masters. "Cooks took

pride in creating dishes never seen before. *Pulao anardana* was a dish created in Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's time where half the rice in the dish was made to look like shining white pearls while the other half looked like tiny rubies," they write.

Showmanship in the kitchen was encouraged. Another Avadhi ruler, Nawab Nasir ud din Haider, had a chef named Pir Ali who once presented his master with a samosa and a pomegranate while he was entertaining the Nizam of Hyderabad. When the nawab broke open the samosa, a tiny bird flew out of it. According to the author, "The pomegranate too was piece of art with each grain, the seeds inside the grains, the paper-like web of walls within which nestled the grains, and its thick outer skin, all made of flavoured milk and sugar."

Modern life may require that today's nawabi families eschew outlandish spectacle, for the most part at least. Their food though is rich with a capital R. Some of these nawab households featured in the following photo essay often open their doors to travellers, who can then experience up close what it is to live like kings even if it be for a fleeting few hours.





A Zainabadi thali—*jild gosht*, masala prawns, dal, biryani, *bajre ka rotla* and meethi roti.
Previous page: Dhanraj Malik and his father Shabbir Malik, the present nawab of Zainabad, like to watch the sunset during their dinner picnics.



THE MALIKS OF ZAINABAD

Shabbir Malik, the current nawab of this region bordering the Little Rann of Kutch in Gujarat, was the grandson of Malik Shri Zain Khan of Dasada, a district nearby. The latter established Zainabad in 1919. Nowadays Shabbir Malik and his son Dhanraj Malik run Desert Coursers, a camp for visitors interested in their hometown's culture and heritage.

Guests to the camp can catch a glimpse of Gujarat's rare nomadic tribes and enjoy the unique local cuisine, which includes a delicacy called *khad gosht*, mutton cooked in sheep skin under the ground.

On special occasions, father and son, accompanied by Dhanraj's favourite canine companion, ride out to a remote corner of the Rann for a dinner picnic. Chefs are sent to the location in advance to prepare a meal. The spread incorporates all preparations typical to Zainabad: *bajre ka rotla*, a lentil, a biryani and *jild gosht*, which like *khad gosht* is spiced meat wrapped in goat's skin, buried six-eight inches under the ground and cooked on a fire above ground.





Guests at Kotwara, hosted by Muzaffar Ali and wife Meera, can also catch a screening of Ali's films besides enjoying a meal.



THE RAJAS OF KOTWARA

Kotwara House and Anhalwara Palace in Uttar Pradesh's Lakhimpur district is home to filmmaker Muzaffar Ali and his family. Ali's father Raja Sajid Husain was an MLA from this constituency. He possessed an eclectic taste for food. Kotwara and Lucknawi cuisine were obviously his favourites but Sajid was also enchanted with the English way of life, having been raised in England and later Scotland. In his meals, he would attempt to infuse the best of both worlds.

As the author writes, "Food was always served in courses starting with his favourite almond soup followed by *galavat ke kebab*, served with paper thin *rumali roti* or *murgh mussalam* or *pasanda*. Grilled fish topped with large amounts of melted butter or a Chicken a la Kiev and lamb ribs were served next." Amongst desserts, he preferred *shahi tukda* and *rasaval*, a sugarcane juice and rice-based treat.

Ali and his relatives are now enthusiastic ambassadors of the family's past. They offer a taste of their royal dining experience to visitors at Kotwara House on appointment. Guests can also check into Anhalwara Palace, which functions as a heritage hotel.



A Kotwara speciality,
Kebab Husn Ara.





THE PAIGAHS OF HYDERABAD

Some of the city's breathtaking monuments, including the famous Falaknuma Palace and Paigah tombs, are the creation of the Paigah nobles, a family whose members often married into the Nizam of Hyderabad's dynasty. Head of the Paigahs, Asman Jah, served as the prime minister to the Nizam from 1887-1893. He was known for his grand soirées and banquets, during which every course was resplendent.

A usual menu had *dum ka murgh* (chicken cooked in the dum style), *kuchhe gosht ke kofte*, kormas and, various biryanis and pulaos. There were all manner of kebabs including the *shikampur shaami* (a stuffed *shaami* kebab) and *malai seekh*. Other specialties like *tootak*, an oval biscuit stuffed with fresh mince and cooked with lemon, and *luqmi*, a pastry stuffed with fried kheema, were also served.

Subsequent rulers kept expanding the Paigah cooking repertoire with the *yakhni* pulao, *mirch ka salan*, *haleem* (an introduction from the Arab world) and *bharwan dolma baingan* (brinjal stuffed with spiced bone marrow), among other dishes.

Nawab Ghouseuddin Khan, the current head of the family, is fond of cooking and is known to entertain guests at Basheerbagh Palace with help from his wife Moin un Nisa Begum. The women of the family have recorded all the old recipes and now take turns in preparing them.



The Asman Jahi Paigah family are close-knit and meet often to enjoy a traditional feast; The Paigah cuisine is famous for many delicacies like the *safed biryani* (top right).



THE BEGUMS OF BHOPAL

Madhya Pradesh's capital has witnessed the rule of several female nawabs, also called begums. The first begum of Bhopal was Qudsia Begum, who took charge of the princely state after her husband Nawab Nazar Muhammad Khan was assassinated in 1819. Taj ul Masajid, one of the city's prominent landmarks, was built by another female nawab, Sultan Shah Jahan Begum.

The family's present matriarch is Begum Suraiya Rashid, who is 90-years-old and lives in Shamla Kothi. In the heydays of nawabi rule, this house was the epicentre of courtliness with a kitchen out front that had five chefs and 15 su-chefs cooking for 100 or so family members.

Many of the delicacies evolved around shikaar, which was a favourite pastime of Rashid-uz-Zafar, Suraiya Rashid's husband. After a hunt the game was often cooked on the spot and then used to make *kaleji* (liver) or *filfora* (coarse kheema using only whole spices). Meat from hunts was typically dried after it was boiled with salt and garlic, minced and stored.

Mutton was a favourite and was commonly prepared with different ingredients: *aalu gosht*, *palak gosht*, *gobhi gosht*, *turai ghost* and even *dal gosht*. Spreads for special occasions included *murgh mussalam*, *safed korma*, *dar behisht* (a dessert made with almonds and pistachio) and other sumptuous fare.

Suraiya Rashid's extended clan are involved in carrying forward these eating traditions through the hospitality business, running properties like the Jehan Numa Palace Hotel in Shamla Hills and the Jehan Numa Retreat in the city's outskirts. ✂





Begum Suraiya Rashid's three sons, including Omar Ali (in picture), have returned to Shamla Kothi to keep family traditions alive.

TRAVEL QUIZ

TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ



IN WHICH CITY IS THE CAFÉ DELIRIUM, WHICH SERVES OVER 3,000 KINDS OF BEER?



WHICH COUNTRIES DOES JULIA ROBERTS VISIT IN THE FILM *EAT, PRAY, LOVE*?



THIS FRUIT IS CALLED ONE OF THE SEVEN WONDERS OF BARBADOS.



WHICH PEAK DOES THE TOBLERONE CHOCOLATE'S SIGNATURE TRIANGULAR SHAPE PAY HOMAGE TO?



AIRAG, MONGOLIA'S POTENT NATIONAL DRINK, IS MADE FROM THE MILK OF WHICH ANIMAL?



THIS PLACE HOSTS AN ANNUAL FESTIVAL FOR ICE WINE, BELIEVED TO BE A CURE FOR FROSTBITE.

ANSWERS 1. BRUSSELS, BELGIUM 2. ITALY, INDIA AND INDONESIA 3. GRAPEFRUIT 4. MATTERHORN IN SWITZERLAND 5. HORSE 6. ONTARIO, CANADA

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