

Renaissance of flavours

Given its rustic yet nourishing qualities, Punjabi cuisine has been the genesis of many culinary wonders and is often called the cuisine of the 'bravehearts'

by madhulika dash

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Sasron ka saag with makki roti topped with olives

Think Punjabi cuisine and the first thing that comes to mind is butter chicken, dal makhani and of course, the all-popular tikka. In fact, for many years, while for the international audience, Indian cuisine was nothing but Punjabi food – and that too the one from East Punjab, which is predominantly meat-based and has a high use of ghee and butter and the tandoor – for Indians elsewhere, it is the ‘North Indian cuisine’.

Though this has made Punjabi cuisine rather well-known internationally, with the streets of London and New York mushrooming with Punjab cuisine-inspired restaurants and food trucks, it has also limited Punjabi cuisine. And has led to a few misconceptions like Punjabi cuisine is high on non-vegetarian delicacies, is fattening and spicier. "The real Punjabi cuisine has been just the opposite of all these assumptions. It is milder than Mughlai food and uses amchoor powder, dried plums and imli powder that created a burst of flavours in the gravies and a distinct taste in the mouth. Also, the cooking technique used is either tandoor (East Punjab) and anarkali (West Punjab) that uses the fat from ghee and onions to get the taste. The use of khada masala, tomatoes and garlic came rather later to Punjab, by way of traders and invaders," says culinary expert Jiggs Kalra.



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An excellent example of traditional Punjabi cuisine is the warrhi (dry lentil cakes) or the 'phulkari palao' which is a pilaf made with a variety of rice. A reason for this could also be that Punjab, contrary to generic belief, was also a centre point of the Spice Route. Punjab back then was situated at the crossroads of the Spice Route. This allowed the Punjabis to imbibe diverse culinary influences. The proximity with Persia, Afghanistan and Central Asia gave them a taste for fresh and dried fruits and exotic nuts.

Yet the cuisine has been the simplest in making, says Chef Vikas Seth, who has been archiving old dishes that lay the foundation of the cuisine and says that food in Punjab always depended on the freshness of food to impart flavour. Like the 'choori', comprising of paranthas, broken up and mixed with shakkar and ghee, and 'shahi khajoor', a sweetmeat made using dates.

The inclusion of gravies in Punjabi cuisine happened because of invasions when the Peshawars and Mughal influence them with their own food style while adopting the rustic flavours. The most popular example of this is murg makhani. It served the state well to combine this influence in its cooking since it had a lot of pure ghee and butter and perfectly complemented all flat breads made in a tandoor. It is said to be the earlier version of butter chicken which became more famous because of its sweet, buttery smooth gravy that appealed to all palates.

But tandoor cooking wasn't the only contribution of this cuisine which was among the first to introduce community cooking and eating because of the common tandoor used by a village. In fact, food historians often contribute the generous portion and the hospitality style to such community cooking that gave birth to beverages like buttermilk and lassi to keep the men and women remain satiated as the former rested and the latter cooked. It also led to the emergence of a variety of seasonal specialties like kadi and rajma and the



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mixed vegetable which was the basis of vegetable jalfrezi.

The tandoor, says Chef Seth, 'was also the chef's table where new combination was tried, tested and popularised. Like Rao Ki Kheer which is rice cooked on very slow fire for hours together with sugarcane juice. Like stuffed parathas and tikkis."

Such was the influence of communal cooking that often communities were known and identified by their style of presenting food. East Punjab was known for its use of meat, tandoor and paste of cashew, and West Punjab was seen as a gravy bowl with lot of vegetarian dishes and the use of Anarkali style of cooking, which eventually inspired the

'dum' style of making biryani in the house of Nizams. Thicker gravies have always been the culinary signature of people of Punjab that became the first state to serve rogan josh with stuffed parathas. A cuisine developed by farmers, Punjabi cuisine is season based. While the summer menu is high on wheat, lentils and curd, winter brings a huge array of vegetarian food to the fore such as the famous beetroot tikki pakode and chaats.

In fact, Punjabi cuisine is the oldest recorded cuisine that practiced the Ayurvedic principles of preserving food through spices. Vatika or vadi, a dumpling of sundried, spice specked delicacy made with lentil paste, is one such example while papad is another. The art of making vadi reached its

acme in Amritsar with the arrival of the merchants of Marwar who were invited by Ram Das, the fourth Guru of the Sikhs, to streamline the trade in the sacred city. It is said that Das was so impressed by Marwar's style of making these dried dumpling with chilli that he too decided to incorporate it into the cuisine and that's how chillies, red chillies and powder, came to be used in creating these delicacies.

It is perhaps this form of thoughtful evolution that gives Punjabi cuisines its all-palate pleasing texture and taste and has led to its popularity. ■

Feedback

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