

## **FOOD DIPLOMACY**

Indian cuisine reflects a 5000-year history of intermingling of various communities and cultures, leading to diverse flavours and regional cuisines. The arrival of the Mughals, the British, and Portuguese further added variety to Indian cuisine.

The consequent fusion in cuisines resulted in what is today known as '*Indian Cuisine*'. Indian cuisine also means a wide variety of cooking styles. Sometimes it seems referring to it as Indian cuisine is a misnomer, since regional dishes vary tremendously from region to region.

Indian cuisine has also shaped the history of international relations; the spice trade between India and Europe is often cited by historians as the primary catalyst for Europe's Age of Discovery. Spices were bought from India and traded around Europe and Asia. It has also influenced other cuisines across the world, especially those from Southeast Asia, the British Isles and the Caribbean.

As food influences travelled to India, so has Indian cuisine travelled abroad. Particular dishes have gained popularity or subtle influences through spices have seeped into cuisines the worldover.

### **History of Food**

There is no concrete record of the food habits of the Indus civilization. With the coming of the Aryans around 1500 BC, literary sources reveal distinct dietary behaviour. The food was simple as the early Aryans were semi-agriculturist, semi-nomadic people. As they began around 1000 BC to settle down in the fertile Gangetic plains their food became more complex and elaborate.

Barley and wheat seem to have been the chief produce of the field, and consequently the principal articles of food. Various kinds of cakes were prepared from these grains and used as food and offered to the gods. Frequent allusions to animal sacrifices and to the cooking of meat, roasted and boiled, meant that the early Aryans were non vegetarians.

As the agrarian economy grew, cattle and other domesticated animals became more useful in agrarian and related food production activities; it became increasingly expensive to slaughter animals for meat. This was the beginning of vegetarianism in India. With the rise of Buddhism and Jainism in the 6th

century BC, the doctrines of non-violence took religious connotations and meat eating became taboo in the Aryan culture.

Till early medieval times, vegetarianism was the mainstream food habit of the Aryan people; they ate grains, fruits and vegetable and milk products. A warm climate and cultivation of a large number of herbs and spices, the preparations became more complex. This remained for two thousand years as the main food habit with large sections of traditionally vegetarian Indian families – particularly in North India.

During this period, Indian cuisine gained immensely from interaction with foreigners who came to the subcontinent as migrants, traders and invaders -- making it a unique blend of various cuisines.

India's first taste of foreign flavours came with the Greek, Roman and Arab traders who used many of the important herbs and spices, and most importantly, saffron.

Another important influence from a different culinary world was from Arabs traders who introduced coffee. The Arabs also left an indelible mark on Kerala's cuisine now known as Kerala Muslim (or Moplah) cuisine. Syrian Arab Christians fleeing persecution at the hands of the Muslims took refuge under the King of Kerala and also left a heavy influence on the cuisine of Kerala.

Persian Zoroastrians arrived next and gave to India what is known as Parsi cuisine. Some believe that it was the Zoroastrians who first brought *biryani* to India, before the Mughals made it popular.

The Mughals revolutionized Indian food with their penchant for elegant dining and rich food with dry fruits and nuts, a style which eventually came to be known as Mughlai cuisine.

Tomato, chilli, and potato, which are staple components of today's Indian cuisine, were brought to India by the Portuguese. The Portuguese also introduced refined sugar, before which only fruits and honey were used as sweeteners.

Hindu refugees from Afghanistan brought with them a style of an oven, which led to an entirely new stream of dishes – *tandoori*.

The British infused in Indians their taste for tea. With an ideal tea growing

climate, India rapidly joined the ranks of tea lovers of the world. The British not only influenced what Indians ate, they also changed "how" Indians ate. For the first time Indians used knives and forks. The dining table replaced the kitchen floor.

## **Flavours of India**

Herbs and spices, or *masalas*, play a vital role in Indian food. *Masala* means a 'blend of several spices' which varies from dish to dish. *Garam masala* is the most important blend and an absolute essential for an Indian preparation. Each state in India has its own particular blend of *garam masala*.

The role of spices and herbs, in fact, goes beyond just cooking. Ancient Ayurvedic texts prescribe them for curative and therapeutic functions. Though knowledge of the medicinal properties of herbs and spices have been lost to most of today's generation, with flavor and palette becoming dominant but the fact remains that locked in traditional wisdom are age-old secrets of the benefits of herbs and spices.

The story of Indian spices is more than 7000 years old. Centuries before Greece and Rome had been discovered, sailing ships were carrying Indian spices, perfumes and textiles to Mesopotamia, Arabia and Egypt. It was the lure of these that brought many seafarers to the shores of India.

Long before the Christian era, Greek merchants thronged the markets of South India, buying many expensive items amongst which spices were included. It is believed that the Parthian wars were being fought by Rome largely to keep open the trade route to India. It is also said that Indian spices and her famed products were the main lure for crusades and expeditions to the East.

It was in AD1492, that Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. Five years later, under the guidance of Captain Vasco Da Gama a new route to the spice lands of Asia was being searched. While Columbus failed to achieve this goal, Da Gama succeeded. The ships brought back a cargo of spices and other products worth 60 times the cost of the said voyage. Da Gama's successful voyage intensified an international power struggle for control over the spice trade. For three centuries the nations of Western Europe -- Portugal, Spain, France, Holland, and Great Britain -- fought bloody sea-wars over the spice-producing colonies.

By the year AD1000, Arabians had conquered the Indus valley. They brought

cumin and coriander that was mixed with Indian pepper, ginger and turmeric, that centuries later British sailors spread throughout the world as curry powder. In India, Arabian traders got rare and exotic spices of the Far East from local spice merchants. India had spent the previous two millennia spreading its culture to the Spice Islands of the east.

## **Culinary styles**

Cuisine differs across India's diverse regions as a result of variations in local culture, geographical locations and economics. It also varies seasonally.

### *North India*

This cuisine is perhaps the most popular and widely served in restaurants around the world. It is broadly characterized by meats and vegetables cooked in the *tandoor* (coal fired barbecue), use of cream in *dals* and yogurt in marinades.

Wheat is produced in the north and therefore a range of breads - *naan*, *tandoori roti*, *chapatis* or *paranths* are traditionally eaten with foods of this region.

The best known North Indian food is Mughlai cuisine. **Mughlai cuisine** is a style of cooking developed by the imperial kitchens of the Mughal Empire and broadly non-vegetarian in content. This cuisine is characterized by the use of yogurt, fried onions, nuts and saffron. There are tender kebabs, creamy kormas, rich pasandas....

The most notable ingredient in Kashmiri cuisine is mutton, of which there are over 30 varieties. Traditional Kashmiri cooking is, almost like an art called Wazwan reflecting strong Central Asian influences. The Wazwan experience means primarily non vegetarian dishes, each aromatic with herbs and the fresh produce of the region. The unique feature of Kashmiri cuisine is that spices used are boiled rather than fried, which gives them a unique and distinctive flavour and aroma.

Punjabi cuisine is not different from other cuisines in the sense that most of the cuisine is inspired by the Central Asian and Mughlai cuisines since it was the entry spot for Muslim invaders. Punjab has also bequeathed the institution of *dhaba*, a wayside eating joint, especially on highways. Mah ki Dal, Sarson Da Saag and Makki Di Roti, meat curry like Roghan Josh and stuffed

paranthas are some of the popular dishes of this cuisine.

Awadhi cuisine bears similarities to those of Persia, Kashmir, Punjab and Hyderabad. The *bawarchis* and *rakabdars* of Awadh gave birth to the *dum* style of cooking. Dum, i.e., the art of sealing ingredients in a large handi and cooking over a slow fire, which relates very well with the relaxed outlook and attitude of the people of the region. The richness of Awadh cuisine lies not only in the variety of cuisine but also in the ingredients used like mutton, paneer, and rich spices including cardamom and saffron.

### *South India*

In South India, food is characterized by dishes cooked on the griddle such as dosas, thin broth like *dals* called sambar and an array of seafood. The region is also known for its heavy use of 'kari' leaves, tamarind and coconut.

Andhra Pradesh is known for its Hyderabadi cuisine which is greatly inspired by the Mughlai cuisine. The wealthy and leisured aristocracy of the erstwhile Nizam State as well as the long peaceful years of their dominance contributed largely to the development of this cuisine. Some of the most traditional Hyderabadi dishes are biryani, chicken korma and sheer khurma.

Varieties in the cuisine of Karnataka has similarities with its three neighbouring South Indian states, as well as the states of Maharashtra and Goa to its North. Karnataka has two main styles of cooking, the Brahmin cuisine that is strictly vegetarian and the cuisine of Coorg which is noted for its pork dishes.

The Chettinad cuisine of Tamil Nadu has transcended the boundaries of the state to carve a worldwide following. Generally the dishes are hot and pungent with fresh ground masalas and a typical menu resembles the aristocratic way of the Chettinad people.

The rich intermingling of cultures in Kerala has contributed to a vast melting pot of mouth-watering delicacies that are churned out. Appam and stew, ulli theeyal and of course the ubiquitous banana chips is something most are familiar with, however, in the northern region of Kerala or the Malabar coast Muslim Moplah cuisine rules the roost. Arab influence is predominant in many of its dishes like the Alisa, which is a hearty wheat and meat porridge. South of Central Kerala is where the art of Syrian Christian cooking remains the pride of many a homemaker. Their contribution to the Kerala cuisine has been

manifold and the most noted are the hoppers, duck roast, meen vevichathu (red fish curry) and the isthew (stew).

### *East India*

Bengali cuisine is the only traditionally developed multi-course tradition from the Indian subcontinent that is analogous in structure to the modern service *à la russe* style of French cuisine, with food served course-wise rather than all at once. Bengali cuisine has a high emphasis on chilli pepper along with mustard oil and tends to use high amounts of spices. The cuisine is known for subtle flavours with emphasis on fish, vegetables, lentils, and rice. Fresh sweet water fish is one of its most distinctive features; Bengalis prepare fish in many ways, such as steaming, braising, or stewing vegetables and sauces based on coconut milk or mustard.

The flavours of Oriya cuisine are usually subtle and delicately spiced and fish and other seafood such as crab and shrimp are very popular.

The food of India's eastern states such as Sikkim, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur varies quite dramatically due to their geographical location. These areas are heavily influenced by Tibetan, Chinese, and even Western Cuisine.

### *West India*

Rajasthani cuisine is quite diverse. On one side of the spectrum, the love for shikaar (a good hunt) among the erstwhile royalty creates a culinary art form that is unimaginable. And on the other side of the spectrum, is the equally grand all vegetarian food of Marwar or Jodhpur with popular dishes such as choorma laddoo and daal baati.

Gujarat has a large populace that has been mainly vegetarian for religious reasons and therefore Gujarati cuisine is strictly vegetarian. The popular dishes in this cuisine are oondhia, patra, khaandavi and thhepla. Gujarati food tends to be sweet.

Parsi food is the hallmark of India's Zoroastrian community - ancient Persians. The Parsis' main dish is Dhansakh (caramelized onions and brown rice served with a mix of dals, vegetables and meat) which is eaten on Sundays and at all weddings and functions. Goan cuisine has a strong Portuguese influence since it was previously a Portuguese colony. The gravys are chilly-hot, spices are

ground with vinegar and coconut. Some examples of this cuisine are Balcao, Xacuti, Vindaloos, Sorpotel and Moehlos.

Malvani/Konkani cuisine is the standard cuisine of the Hindus in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, Goa and northern parts of West Karnataka. Although Malvani cuisine is predominantly non-vegetarian, there are many vegetarian delicacies. Malvani cuisine uses coconut liberally and is usually very spicy; however, the 'Konkanastha Brahmin' style of food of the region is quite bland and also vegetarian.

### **Celebrating with Food**

Due to the diversity of geographical features and religions, festivals, small or big, are celebrated all year long in India. These festivals offer a great opportunity for people to enjoy traditional delicacies that are associated with each festival. Special dishes are prepared and offered to the respective deities. For example, milk pudding, butter, and curd preparations signify cowherd Krishna's birthday, *Janmashtami*, while Modakas of fresh coconut, regional varieties of murukku, laddu and kajjaya are thought to be favourites of Ganesh and are offered on Ganesh Chaturthi.

There are so many varieties of *mithais* as one moves from North to South or East to West and within different ethnic groups that one gets overwhelmed. While rasgulla, cham cham, sandesh and laddoo, gulab jamun, kaju katli are popular in West Bengal and North India respectively, messu, monthar and ghevar are the order of the day in Gujarat and Rajasthan.

### **Indian Food the Worldover**

Indian migration has spread the culinary traditions of the subcontinent throughout the world. These cuisines have been adapted to local tastes, and have also affected local cuisines. For example, curry's international appeal. Indian tandoor dishes such as *chicken tikka* enjoy widespread popularity.

Indian cuisine in the Middle East has been influenced greatly by the large Indian diaspora. Centuries of trade relations and cultural exchanges have resulted in significant influence on each region's cuisines, the most notable being the *Biryani*. It was introduced by Persian invaders into Northern India and has since become an integral part of the Mughlai cuisine.

Indian cuisine is very popular in Southeast Asia, due to the strong Hindu and Buddhist cultural influence in the region. Indian cuisine has also had considerable influence on Malaysian cooking styles and also enjoys popularity in Singapore. Singapore is also known for fusion cuisine combining traditional Singaporean cuisine with Indian cuisines. The spread of vegetarianism in other parts of Asia is often credited to Hindu and Buddhist practices that originated in India.

Chicken tikka masala has been called "a true British national dish." In 2003, there were as many as 10,000 restaurants serving Indian cuisine in England and Wales alone. According to Britain's Food Standards Agency, the Indian food industry in the United Kingdom is worth 3.2 billion pounds.