


Ancient Indian food is returning to the dining table

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By Navreet Kaur Rana

Food consumed by Indians hundreds of years ago is making a comeback as some consumers switch to sustainable cuisine variants.

Two months ago, a drive in Noida's Sector 128 led a colleague to a curious signage — The Prodigal Farms. A quaint restaurant nestled amid greenery not far from Delhi, The Prodigal Farms serves five- and seven-course organic meals and beverages.

It came up in 2018 but has now shut down for repairs and will resume operations in September this year. The restaurant claims to be “an urban experiential farm project (that) caters to those who care to eat clean and live a more natural life in an urban setup”.

The desire to eat clean and live naturally has created a market for such food products. Eating organic has become fashionable, and sparked a revival of interest in vintage recipes and retro foods.

Traditional but forgotten foods are returning to the dining table, as they are considered best for our bodies, and there is a silent consideration for eating healthier by taking to a “gut makeover”.

Even Five Star hotels, including the Taj Group, have laid out menus that include a section on Lost Recipes of India.

The Indian gruel or khichdi, which is said to have its origins in 16th century Mughal India, is served across several restaurants in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata.

Across several restaurants in Delhi, most menu cards feature exotic Rajasthani, Gujarati, Bengali and other regional cuisines.

This newfound surge in harking back to India's culinary past is being attributed to "nostalgia marketing". Families across many Indian cities are taking to foods and beverages from the past.

One such 'item' is turmeric latte which appeared on the menu of a multinational coffee chain in 2017.

Turmeric latte was available across many London cafes in 2015 for an average £2.65 a cup, which is considered high by Indian standards. And when some Indian cafes began serving turmeric latte a year later, many dismissed this as a Western spin on the humble haldi wala doodh (hot milk with fresh turmeric sweetened with honey or jaggery) that some households are used to drinking. In the West, turmeric has only recently begun to be played up as a "superfood".

An after-supper beverage, milk spiced with turmeric is a staple that Indians, especially from the northern parts, have been drinking since time immemorial.

The broth has been quite popular over time, owing to the medicinal properties of turmeric which is often recommended by the ancient Ayurveda school of medicine.

In exotic Goa, turmeric latte is all the rage among foreign tourists. Just like The Prodigal Farms in Uttar Pradesh's Noida, The Coffee Concept café in Goa's Calangute has been serving turmeric lattes since 2022.

The equally humble millet is also making a comeback. In March last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Global Millets Conference which was tom-tomed as a "symbol of India's responsibilities towards the global good".

The government touted that India's millet mission "will prove to be a boon for 2.5 crore millet-producing farmers". At government programmes, guests were served millet biscuits along with tea.

Return of the native

Culinary revivalism and nostalgia are returning in India, as in the West, albeit slowly, by way of attractive, nitrogen-preserved packaging and urbane messaging.

For instance, toasted cereals have been a staple munching snack (locally referred to as bhuja and chabaina in Hindi-speaking belts) but now they are sold as a 'fat-free', 'healthy' and 'oil-free' snack.

In fact, there is a new vocabulary that describes traditional food as organic, free-range, oil-free, sugar-free, unpolished and natural. The list is seemingly inexhaustive.

Those who practice and sell clean living are now going back in time to pull out India's so-called old-world recipes that include a range of herbs and vegetable preparations cooked in minimal or no oil.

Cuisines evolve and develop as a result of a combination of whatever is grown in particular regions.

The climate also plays an important part in this culinary evolution. For instance, people in India's coastal regions consume fish and fresh coconut as opposed to those living in the Gangetic plains where vegetables and lentils are more popular.

In dry and hot regions such as Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, there is generous use of the 'flaming' red chilli in local food preparation as it is believed to reduce the difference in atmospheric and body temperatures.

One study concludes that people living in hot climatic conditions consume spicy food because spices have anti-bacterial properties that help rid foods of pathogens.

Similarly, cuisines originating in Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir use curd in most of their meals as it aids digestion.

While it is generally accepted that what grows 'organically' in certain regions of India becomes the staple food of that place, organic foods now refer to those obtained using natural fertilisers and manure.

An important element of traditional food preparation is the cooking medium or oil. Long before the bottled variants of cooking oil hit supermarket shelves and neighbourhood stores, much of India used the cold-pressing technique to extract edible oils.

Traditionally, Indians have been extracting oil from seeds and nuts, using large mortars and wooden pestles. In much of rural India, domesticated animals such as bulls and oxen are used to pull — and rotate — rope-tied pestles. The animal circles the mortar, with one end of the rope tied to its neck and the other to the pestle.

This technique is known as ghani and the product is kachchi ghani. In 1993, oil chemist and food historian Dr K T Achaya provided formal status to the ghani technique in his book titled *Ghani: The Traditional Oil Mill of India*.

Indians abandoned their traditional food-knowledge systems under the influences of Westernisation and industrialisation.

People with greater cultural capital (which includes education, intellect, speech style, dressing sense and eating habits) set the cultural norms and determine the distinct aesthetic values for a society.

The section of society with lesser cultural capital tries to match up with the norms set by the ruling faction, which provides the latter legitimacy, not in direct political and economic terms, but through cultural supremacy.

India's long history as a colonised region certainly pushed its people to adopt Western choices and lifestyles — or 'tastes' — even in matters of food.

Perhaps now we know why Achaya proudly documented the traditional methods and said in 1997 that "in a rush into modernisation, many traditional food preparations will be lost irretrievably".

This could be a reason for Indians to be motivated to switch to the old ghani method of oil extraction or take to turmeric latte instead of haldi wala doodh.

Navreet Kaur Rana is a fellow at the Jindal India Institute, O P Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana. Her area of research is ethnic foods and anthropology of food in India and cultural studies.

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