



Punjabi Tadka for America

By Jagdish Batra

Food has been my Achilles heel that has revealed itself everywhere – whether it's India or America. So, you can well understand my predicament when during my first visit to America at the time when life was full of “romance and poetry”, I encountered the American food – pepper-less, curry-less and ghee-less and to top it all – boiled, in most cases. I missed my dear Punjabi food and under the circumstances took it upon myself as a mission to give the Americans a taste of the authentic Punjabi food.

I was a member of Rotary Group Study Exchange program to the US. Under the program, we stayed in American homes and savoured their hospitality – not the dishes, of course. So, I took one day my host Mr. Jim to the New York Madras Woodland Hotel. I can recall vividly poor Jim cutting the paratha with fork and knife, dipping it in hot mutton-curry and gulping it down with a draught of cold water and tears rolling down his cheeks! “Very tasty,” he mumbled out of the American habit of appreciating things of necessity. “OK. Let you have one more onion paratha,” I suggested. “Oh, no, no, no...,” his throat choked as he shook his head vehemently, “this is enough. You see, one should not take too much foreign food in first instance.”

“Foreign,” I butted in naughtily, “It's prepared in New York, my dear, your Big Apple.”

My group mate nudged me to be quiet and let the fellow wipe his tears instead.

Encouraged (!) by this incident, I thought it proper to prepare some Indian dish at my host Mr. Doisroth's house. To start with, just a plain omelette, should be enough, I thought, partly because I had never prepared food at home but having been thrown into such a situation, I couldn't have backed out. So, one fine morning, I called for eggs, margarine, salt and onion and was duly provided these things. “Red hot chilli,” I hollered after a while from the kitchen. Mrs. Doisroth stared alarmingly through her specs. With great difficulty, she located chilli powder. It was her eldest daughter, now married and settled elsewhere, who had once needed it for some Italian dish. Two of her younger daughters were in the kitchen being immersed in “Experience India” project!

I proceeded to prepare the delicacy. After the onions had turned brown in the frying pan, I filled a rather small spoon that was provided to me with red chilli. Mrs. D burst into instant warning: “This is very hot, my dear.” I grinned. Another spoon and she was gasping feverishly. As I proceeded to put in the third spoon, she protested: “Look, do you

know what you are doing?” “Yes,” I said, “just three spoons for three egg-omelette,” I explained my Punjabi cuisine formula. “Oh no, no...Just wait. My God! I can’t stand it. Do it after I am out of the room.” So saying, she ran away dragging her two daughters along. It was futile to expect them to share the omelette with me on the breakfast table.

But some people can really cross limits and shatter your ideas. Such was Mr. Austin Wallace, another host of mine. They had invited a French lady to dinner that night. And I was asked to go ahead with my chicken curry. I made it the usual way. Just to give it a good red colour, I put in a little more chilli than was needed. This time I also felt my palate burning. On their side, Mr. Wallace took quite an unexpected quantity while the two ladies excused themselves with just a spoonful of the stuff. The next morning, I complained of an upset stomach and had to cancel scheduled outings while Mr. Wallace was his usual jolly self, singing la-la-la and mouthing a volley of compliments about last night dinner!