

What's cooking in the Parsi kitchen

The main ingredient of Parsi cuisine is love. On the eve of Parsi New Year, Phorum Dalal scours family recipes, masala dabbas and rich culinary history that give the food a perfect balance of sweet and sour

THE aroma of curry powder, spices and marinated gosht (meat) welcomes you, along with the melodious and nonchalant banter of happy people, as you enter a Parsi home.

The magic of their cuisine lies in the 'masala dabba', a box that contains ground spices such as red chilli, turmeric, coriander, cumin and Parsi-style garam masala neatly filled in small containers.

Peep into the refrigerator and you'll inevitably spot ginger-garlic paste, a bottle of red-coloured chilli-garlic paste (marchu-lasan), cider or red vinegar and vanilla essence.

"All these are non-negotiable in a Parsi kitchen," explains Perinaz Avari, who writes on food and travel on her website Peri's Spice Ladle. She adds that spices such as cardamom, nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves, in their whole and grounded form, are used liberally in savoury and sweet dishes.

"Dig a little deeper and you'll find unique Parsi ingredients such as dried apricot (Jardaloo) and Charoli seeds as well as almond, cashew and golden raisins," says the San Francisco-based food writer.

Parsis, who settled on the West coast of India in Gujarat when they came to India from Persia, picked along the way the tradition of stews, gosht (meat) and dry fruits from Iran. They devoured the fish available on the coast and upped the sour content in their food with red vine-

gar to balance the sweetness of Gujarati cuisine. That is how the Parsis, influenced by their history, founded their own distinct cuisine.

The spice route

Every Parsi family has its own recipe to make traditional dishes, which is why the taste may differ. M Motilal Masalawala is the go-to place for all Parsi masalas. When we meet Ketan Patel, the third generation co-owner at the Grant Road East store, he narrates the story of how his grandfather used to sell salt in Bhuleshwar, and opened a shop that sold ghee in 1912. He went on to sell barely two or three masalas out of his home. With time, they owned six shops in Mumbai under the name of Tiger.

Today with a factory in Mazgaon, his brand of masalas are found in every Parsi household, while his standalone store sells all Indian masalas. One can log on to his website, Mangalmasala.com and order, too. "Star anise, cloves, cinnamon, pepper, methi (fenugreek), rai (mustard seeds) are the main ingredients of dhansak masala, while curry powder has fennel seeds, dried ginger, curry leaves and sesame seeds," he says.

Curry twist

Parsi food, which is mildly spiced, strikes the perfect balance of sweet and sour. "Not many know this, but Parsis are famous for their curries,"



Perzen Patel poses with a Parsi spread at her Dadar residence.

PIC/EMMANUAL KARBHARI

says Perzen Patel, caterer and author of the blog, Bawi Bride. There is the green coconut curry, which is made using coriander, chillies and jeera, and the red curry made of raw peanuts, Kashmiri chillies and cashew nuts. "We also make a white sauce which contains vinegar and sugar and goes very well with fish or khichdi," she adds.

The egg or 'edu' has a great role to play in Parsi cuisine, too. "We can eat egg with anything. Parsis strongly believe, 'When in doubt, break an egg on it'. We have dishes such as bhinda (ladyfinger) par edu, tamato (tomato) par edu and salli (potato

Parsi celebratory dish, Sev Dahi. PHOTO CREDIT PERI'S SPICE LADLE



chips) edu," says Patel.

Legendary sweet tooth

Ravo, a semolina pudding or Sev-Dahi is a sweet roasted vermicelli preparation, served with a dollop of cardamom vanilla-flavoured yogurt are staple breakfast items for Parsis. Apart from this, classic Parsi sweets include Lavras (like barfi), Bhakras, which are fried donuts, the famous Lagan nu Custard, a rich creamy wedding custard and Caramel pudding. "Some dishes, which Parsis don't make at home often but are easily available in some stores, include Chapat, a cardamom and vanilla-flavoured pancake with Charoli seeds and Kumas, a fermented cake.

The cuisine today

Over the years, Parsi cuisine has become more Indianised in its cooking techniques and use of ingredients. While masalas are bought ready made, dishes are cooked in the oven to

speed up the process. "In addition one can see the influence of Iranian cafes in our Parsi egg cutlets, chick puffs and Khari biscuits, which is not part of Parsi cuisine. The British influence is evident in our love for pudding jellies and the one-of-a-kind savory Parsi Saas ni Macchi — fish sauce preparation," says Avari. "Food and cooking, in general, has changed to accommodate our fast-paced modern lives, and Parsi cuisine is no exception to that rule," she adds.

But what makes Parsi dishes stand out so distinctly, compared to other Indian foods, we wonder. "I often complain to my mom that my food never tastes exactly like hers, and her kind response is my greatest lesson on food: 'It doesn't have to taste like mine, it needs to taste like your food. Just remember to add patience and love to your dish,'" concludes Avari. phorum.dalal@mid-day.com

Store full of Parsi delicacies



Belgaum Ghee Depot opened in 1912 as a shop that sold ghee from Porbandar. Today, it sells Parsi delicacies including sweet and savoury snack items, full meals and even pickles. PICS/PHORUM DALAL

WHAT started in 1943 as a shop that sold ghee from Porbandar, Belgaum Ghee Depot, run by third generation owner Farrokh Workingboxwala, now sells Parsi food since 27 years. Head here for their famous gosht — mutton, chicken and fish — kebabs, patties and cutlets. Among the traditional fare, try Dal Poli, Mava Poli, egg on Tomato, Dhansak (on Tuesday and Fridays), and even pickles and vinegars from Navsari.

Workingboxwala also sells sweets such as Darni-Pori, puff pastry pie

with a sweet lentil filling, Vasanu, a thick, sweet and spicy winter fudge and Popatji, a pastry fermented in toddy.

On the savoury side, delights such Parsi Kharia (trotters), Gharab nu Achar (fish roe pickle), Titori, fresh sprouted lentils and Fried Bheja, which are not often made at home, are available here.

AT: 104 Naushir Bharucha Marg, Belgaum Ghee Depot, Nana Chowk, Grant Road (West)
CALL: 23887746



Mutton Pattice ₹25