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MEMOIRS OF  
FOREIGN-  
INDIAN  
CUISINE

Chicken tikka masala in the US is less spicy

Replace canned tomatoes with Romano

Indian goat curry uses lamb in the US and UK

Mackerel jhol (curry)

Salmon as a substitute fish for Amritsari Machhi

**Ugandan street food vendors offer you a Rolex—not the watch, but a distant cousin of Kolkata’s egg roll**

Atul Kochhar, Restaurateur

**The idea is to experiment and create dishes that are fair equivalents in taste, not ingredients**

Sayantani Mahapatra, Food Blogger

**Procuring ingredients isn’t a trouble in Indian-populated American cities, but pricing and sustainability get in the way of homecooking**

Nikhil Merchant, Restaurateur

With Pravasi Bharatiya Divas on January 9, Sohini Das Gupta asks gastronomes to trace the journey of Indian food that has travelled overseas

chef and restaurateur Atul Kochhar says, “In the evolution of flavours, some give in and make way for others, but the dishes carry with them their own story.” So should you eat the Johnny Roti in the Caribbean, it’s a chance to trace your way back to its original nomenclature of ‘Journey Roti’, a handy meal for migrant labourers headed for the fields. Don’t be incredulous, as Kochhar was, if a Ugandan street food vendor offers you a Rolex — not the watch, but a distant cousin of ‘rolled-egg’, the very egg-roll Kolkatans wear as their culinary badge of honour.

Kochhar also offers the example of the bunny chow – a staple at his Mumbai restaurant NRI – that travelled to Durban from India as a basic bean curry around the mid 19th century. The dish reformatted itself into a bread bowl stuffed with beans or meat, and in recent years, has returned to the country of its origin as a gourmet dish. When you bite into the protein-filled belly of the bread, you are a part of the dish’s incredible journey, which saw non-white labourers in South Africa fashioning a bowl out of bread in the discriminatory environment of apartheid.

How’s that for a taste of the foreign-Indian?

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History, however, seems to be self-referencing, especially when it comes to food travelling across oceans and continents in spontaneous migration. Britain-based the extemporisation, remember to tell your *chicken vindaalo*-eating non-Indian friend about its pork parentage — the story of its Goan coastal origin — for historicity is integral to the process. “*Chicken tikka masala* and *murgh makhani* were never meant to be the same dish. And if kale and arugula are going to be used as greens in *saag paneer*, the original should be out there as well,” reckons Merchant.

Soon, Japanese amberjack, a fish they locally call *buri*, replaced baby *kattas* in gravies, as homemade wasabi made sure she never missed the wicked bite of mustard. *Mizuna* (Japanese mustard greens) found its way into the Bengali classic of *chor-chori*, and a boiled-and-caramelised concoction of brown sugar, dates and maple syrup masked the absence of date-palm jaggery. Mahapatra even proceeded to substitute the sacred hilsa with a bigger variety of mackerel, which when cooked well with black cumin seeds “tastes a lot like the real *jhol* (curry)”. This new culinary index depended on Mahapatra’s willingness to dive under racks of an alien supermarket and create dishes “that were fair equivalents in taste, and not ingredients”. But it’s not always as simple.

Restaurateur Nikhil Merchant, whose partner venture Imli hopes to flip the “cut-copy-paste menu” in LA’s Indian eateries, reveals the struggles of foreign-Indian cuisine in a different part of the world. “While procuring ingredients isn’t a trouble in Indian-populated American cities like New York, New Jersey or Chicago, pricing and sustainability get in the way of homecooks looking to reprise dishes with elements that, due to their exotic status, cost more in the US. “When you have to spend \$4 on a carton of cream for your *murgh makhani*, which is available at a restaurant for \$12+, it’s easy to be discouraged.” Merchant blames the American wariness of stocking up on separate spices for a veritable invasion of packaged *garam masala*. It has wiped out the complexities offered by individual spices like red chilli, coriander or turmeric, he complains.

Letting go of recipes in favour of improvisation, it would seem, is the key to success in the nostalgic NRI kitchen. Don’t have Kashmiri *laal mirch* at hand? Rope in the familiar smokey-sweetness of Guajillo chillies! Trade sultry-red tomatoes in cans for the fresh *umami* of the Roma variety. But for all

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KACHRI POWDER

Found largely in Rajasthan, across the Indo-Pak border from the Thar, and parts of Mewat, this wild berry is quite a fascinating souring agent. Dried and powdered, *kachri* is used in signature Kayasth dishes like *badam pasande*. It tenderises and marinades meat and was a favourite of the desert state’s royals, who often used it to bring out the best gamey flavour of venison.

ANARDANA

Ever wonder why despite the best ingredients and following the recipe to a T your chole never turns out like in rural Punjab? Their secret is pomegranate seeds. *Anardaana*’s tangy bite and distinct taste can’t be matched. This natural aphrodisiac is also good for your heart, improves memory, relieves joint pain, normalises blood pressure, and helps combat cancer.

HOG PLUMS

*Ambade* to Maharashtra and *amtekaai* to Karnataka, this native of Asia’s tropical rainforests is a great souring agent for vegetables, dal, fish and pork preparations. It makes for some of the yummiest pickle by itself in brine or with fiery byadgi chilli powder. Yet another souring agent that has gone from India across the length and breadth of South East Asia and Far East Asia.

KUCH KHATTA HO JAAYE...

Leave your cough syrup and suck on something sour this winter. Yogesh Pawar gives you several traditional options

While high energy and protein foods are needed to combat the winter cold, souring agents too have health benefits such as boosting digestion, absorption and immunity, as well as keeping the nasty cold and cough away. Given our diverse traditions and cuisines, no one souring agent seems to work for all of India. Every region has its own favourites. Here are some:

TAMARIND

The fruit of this African native deciduous tree, introduced to India thousands of years ago, has made itself completely at home even travelling to South East Asia and Far East Asia from this subcontinent. Though Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are the among the top tamarind producers, connoisseurs swear by the fruit from Bastar in Chhatisgarh. Much of the tang in chutneys, sambars and the *kulambus* (a type of broth) and even fish curries (Mangalore) from down South can be credited to tamarind that’s the soul of our *khatta-meetha* chutney and tangy *pani-puri* water. It aids in weight loss, cancer prevention and improved digestion. Packed with Vitamin C, minerals like magnesium and potassium, and antioxidants, tamarind is a storehouse of nutrients.

KOKUM

A popular mainstay of cooking in Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Assam, this souring agent belongs to the mangosteen family. Its violet-red fruits are dried and preserved to add when cooking, and its extract is added to fresh coconut milk to prepare the all-time favourite coastal Maharastrian aperitif *sol kadhi*.

GONGURA

Cooked with green chillies, garlic and vegetables into a nutritious leafy vegetable, gongura leaves are also great for preparing pickles and chutneys made with green/red chillies. A hot favourite of Telangana, Andhra and Tamil Nadu, it is consumed with relish along the Maharashtra-Karnataka border. Odisha, Jharkhand, in the Santhal tribal pockets of Bengal and North Eastern states of Mizoram and Manipur.

KUDAM PULI

Though the world is just waking up to its magical weight-loss properties, this delicious sour fruit of the Garcinia Cambogia has helped enliven fish curries for thousands of years in Kerala and southern parts of coastal Karnataka. The tiny pumpkin-like yellowish-green fruit is dried out till it turns pitch black and is stored to be added as a foil to fiery, red-hot curries in this belt and in some parts of Assam.

RAW MANGO

A versatile ingredient, it is used in its raw form to make chutneys/pickles and added to dals, vegetables, chaat, meat and fish preparations from across the Indo-Gangetic plains to the Cauvery delta. The dried, powdered raw mango flesh, popularly called *aamchur*, is a much-liked souring agent for many parts of North, East and North West India.

AMLA

Just like raw mango, gooseberries can be used raw when fresh, or dried, powdered and stored for adding to dal or vegetables. This practice is more prevalent in Central India and tribal belts of the Gujarat-Maharashtra border where amla grows in abundance. One of the richest sources of Vitamin C, it helps in repair of all body tissue, formation of collagen, absorption of iron, boosting immunity, healing wounds and maintaining cartilage, bones, and teeth.

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