

Comment – Indian Food Expert



Sital Singh Maan, owner and manager of **Punjab**, in London's Covent Garden, talks to Slow Food about changing diner expectations when visiting Indian restaurants, in particular his own.

Setting up shop

In 1946, my Grandfather set up near Leaman Street in the Docklands as a coffee bar with a room which served curry. There were only a small number of Indians away from home at that time. Most of our customers were from the Docklands area; Indian seamen who would come off their ships and stay for five or six days. They wanted simple food which reminded them of home.

Purely to move the business closer to a growing pocket of the Indian community, my Grandfather relocated to the present site in 1951. This was to make the most of Indian diplomats, students and businessmen who then lived in the Covent Garden area for work at the High Commission and universities nearby.

India divided

People seem to generalise Indian food. All restaurants which serve dishes like Rogan Josh and Chicken Tikka are so called Indian restaurants. However a large number of these restaurants are traditionally run by Bangladeshis and have their own unique cuisine. There was a tradition before the partition amongst Bengali (now Bangladeshi) men to join the merchant navy. Many of the recruits would work as cooks on the ships, preparing Indian food, but to the tastes of the British officers. After partition, many came to settle in Britain and eventually opened restaurants, serving their hybrid Indian food. Therefore the food we are mostly eating in this country is not the real food of India but a form of adaption.

Chicken Tikka Masala

One well-known adaptation is the Chicken Tikka. It was without doubt invented for the people of this country. In the Punjab, we would eat Chicken Tikka with bread. This consisted of chicken pieces with spices from the oven. When it was exported to Britain, I imagine people thought it too dry, hence the now famous sauce. In Indian cuisine there is the equivalent of Butter Chicken.

Punjab's Butter Chicken

Ingredients

12 Chicken thighs
1 cup plain, whole milk yoghurt
¼ lb butter
1 large onion, finely minced
1½ tsp ground cumin seeds
1½ tsp ground coriander seeds
1½ tsp ground cayenne pepper
1 cup strained tomatoes
½ cup heavy cream
1 tsp cardamom seeds (crushed)

Method

Remove skin from chicken, Make 2 small parallel slits in each piece, Marinate overnight in yoghurt and salt. When ready to cook, heat the butter in saucepan on medium high heat

Add onion and stir fry until golden, but not brown, Add the cumin, coriander, cayenne pepper, tomatoes, stir well. Add the marinated chicken with the marinade. Reduce heat to medium. Stir. Cook covered for 15 minutes. Add the cream and cardamom. Stir well. Cover and cook for 45 minutes stirring occasionally.

Serves 6

The Punjab difference

We serve Indian food which remains faithful to Punjabi, that is north Indian, cuisine. This cookery differs from that served on most 'British Indian menus' in a number of ways. We are very true to the saying 'eat what grows around you'. Therefore our dishes rely on dairy and wheat products over coconut and rice products. In the Punjab these ingredients are simply grown far more plentifully, and therefore feature more heavily in our regional dishes. We cook with ghee (clarified butter), and wholegrain or white flour for our breads. White goes to make Naan, wholegrain for the Paratha, Roti and Chapati breads.

Our favouring of bread over rice also had pragmatic roots from in the post-war years. Rice was rationed from 1942, while bread was only restricted for a short time after the war, so it came down to a matter of supply.

House specialities range from our Butter Chicken, a real Punjabi gem, to Jalfrezi and our Acharri dishes. These again pay homage to our north Indian roots by using the pickling flavours – from traditional preserving methods – in a tangy sauce with either chicken or lamb.

Family values

My Grandfather has passed a number of his principles down the generations, principles which we keep to and cook to. He used to say, 'we are cooking for Indians away from home, so cook for them like they'd have it at home'. In keeping with this, I don't bastardise the cooking too much to suit local needs. There is very little meat in the Indian diet and therefore our menu reflects this more vegetarian style. We use lots of specialist lentils, also chickpeas, okra, pumpkin and paneer cheese.

Changing clientele

Our original business came from Indians away from home and this was a good trade for us. Back then there wasn't a large white British population living around the Covent Garden area. Furthermore, English people in the 1950s weren't as interested in our native cuisine.

This all changed in 1962 though, thanks to the power of the media. The Daily Telegraph ran a series on the new trend of Indian restaurants in the area. Punjab was featured and after that our customer base grew in diversity.

Generally speaking, non-Indian customers are now asking for more genuine cooking from their restaurants, something we've always offered. But this wasn't always the case. In the early 1970s the majority of Indian restaurants were catering for the late night trade. Their mainstay customers were the youngsters coming out of pubs having had a few drinks and wanting to show off with a hot curry. But heat is not the trademark of Indian cooking. When you eat very heated chillies you burn your palate, and then after that there's no flavour. There are some very hot curries native to south India; however flavour through spice is far more important. You have to stay true to this.

Educating the customer

I'm very proud of the unique dishes we serve here, and always want the customer to feel educated about the food. We find some diners expect the menu to feature the Indian food they're used to. It's interesting to challenge people's perceptions that they've picked up over the years. For example, Rogan Josh in Punjabi means, 'bone marrow of red meat in ghee', while Balti simply means 'bucket'. Perhaps not normally what customers are wanting put in front of them!

Another classic is lime chutney with papadums. To me this pairing is the equivalent of eating crisps with mustard. Lime chutney has a very concentrated taste while papadums have no body, so you end up spoiling your tastes buds before your main meal. I always like to give people a different perspective on Indian dining.

For more information on Punjab visit: <http://www.punjab.co.uk>