

Oosh and aash on the menu

Irani food is berry good, and Mumbai is finally waking up to it

Pronoti Datta | TNN

Mumbai: It's funny that the only Irani features in an Irani cafe are black tea and its owner. The menu usually has Parsi food, which has more in common with Lucknow than Tehran. It's ironic that the city's fair-sized population of Iranis—both Muslims and Zoroastrians who migrated to India from Iran several centuries after their Parsi brethren—have very little culinary representation.

Some restaurants, like Britannia, offer berry pulao and a tasty yet inauthentic version of the chellow kabab that has no hint of key ingredients saffron and egg. Colaba's Picadilly, which is infamous for greasy shawarmas, has a few Iranian dishes on its menu. The only other restaurant that we've come across that serves Irani food is Cafe Universal at Fort, which should by the time you read this story, have introduced two Persian dishes.

SOUP KITCHEN

Unlike its spicy descendants from the north-west frontier province, Persian foods are rather bland. Herbs rather than spices are used to flavour the food. As a teaser to Iranian cuisine, the Dehmiris, who own Cafe Universal, will begin serving gormeh sabzi and gheme badenjan. The former is a dish of sauteed vegetables, kidney beans and dried Iranian limes known as limoo omani. At the cafe, the dish will be available with and without meat. The key ingredient is the herb ja'fari (parsley), said Thrity Dehmiri. Gheme badenjan consists of brinjal and minced chicken in a tomato sauce. "We have Parsi dishes like dhansak," said Thrity's 27-year-old Rustom Dehmiri, who runs the eatery near the GPO with his



LIGHTS OF PERSIA Cafe Universal serves Irani staples gheme badenjan (brinjal and minced chicken in a tomato sauce) and gormeh sabzi (a stew of vegetables, kidney beans and dried lime)

parents. "Now we want to bring the Irani side out."

The Dehmiris, who are Zoroastrian, moved to Mumbai from Iran in the late 1980s. Since they are recent immigrants, they still have strong cultural and familial ties with Iran. As a result, acquiring ingredients is never a problem—relatives and friends constantly travel to and fro ferrying various Persian foods.

Most Iranis in Mumbai stock up on native foods during trips to Iran or depend on visitors for supplies. There are few stores that sell Persian food. One of them is Iranian Sweets Palace in Dongri. It's run by Hasan Hajati, who opens his shutters once a year during Jamshedi Navroze in March to sell Persian sweets like baklava. Making sweets is an ancestral business, but one that Hajati pursues only annually as it's not lucrative. He also sells small quantities of major Iranian ingredients such as kashk, sour and salty balls of dried camel's milk that Hajati said look like naphthalene balls, limoo omani, zareshk, the sour berries of berry pulao and robb-e-anar, a pomegranate puree.

As the ingredients suggest,

Persian cuisine has a tart flavour. In her book *The Legendary Cuisine of Persia*, Margaret Shaïda writes that wine was commonly used in cooking before Arabs invaded the region and forbade alcohol. Vinegar was later used to give food a pleasing sourness. One of the few Persian qualities

Baklava maker Hajati said that the difference between almonds and walnuts of Iran and India is like the difference between desi and broiler chicken

that Parsi food, which is thoroughly influenced by Indian cuisines, retains is a mild piquancy.

Some of the most common dishes cooked by Iranis are various kinds of oosh or ash. This is a potage made with various pulses, vegetables and often meat. Hajati explained that there's ash-berenj, which has rice, ash-nakhod, which is made with chickpeas and ash-gandum, which has wheat and is Iranian version of khichda, to name a few. An-

other commonly made item abgoosht, a soup with mutton, chickpeas, and boiled potatoes. After finishing the soup, Rustom Dehmiri said, the meat and vegetables are mashed into a euphonically named pulp called gushte kushte, which is then eaten with bread. His favourite food is fesenjan, which Shaïda describes as "that most aristocratic of all Persia's stews". It's made of ground walnuts and robb-e-anar and can be cooked with duck, chicken meatballs, fish and brinjal.

In fact, dried fruits are integral to Persian cuisine. But local varieties won't do. Hajati said that the difference between almonds and walnuts of Iran and India is like the difference between desi and broiler chicken. Persian dried fruits are also sold in Crawford Market and Monish Dry Fruits in Colaba market. The latter even keeps gaz, a slightly chewy sweet made of camel milk and baklava that are brought by travellers from Iran.

So far sweets such as these are all Mumbaikars know of Persian cuisine. That could change if the Dehmiris' experiment succeeds in winning patrons. Onward ho to Cafe Universal!