

Food for Thought: Delhi's Restaurant Paradox

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

As you head home you get tantalizing wafts of the food that everyone else is eating. All around you, people are tucking into dishes from a cuisine of extraordinary variety and refinement, but these are being cooked and eaten at home, not in restaurants. India may now have an economically buoyant middle class and tandoori chicken may have spread around the globe, but a culture of good restaurant food has never taken root at home. Most capital cities, bringing in people from around the country, are filled with a wide range of restaurants. But not Delhi. All across the city are those ominous establishments that offer. "Continental-Chinese-Mughlai Cuisine." This is not some new fusion, but generally three types of food done badly.

Madhur Jaffrey, the Indian food writer and actress, attributes this to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, which led to major displacements of the population across the Punjab. Punjabis were less constrained by religious inhibitions against becoming cooks and were eager for work. They started the first restaurants -- indeed Punjabis still dominate the Indian restaurant business in most countries, although in some places like Britain, Bangladeshis also play an important role -- and then went on to run the training schools and catering colleges. It is Punjabis who spread tandoori foods, India's foremost contribution to the global menu. In villages across the Punjab, communal tandoor ovens were used to cook breads and the technique has now been taken around the world. Much of the food in restaurants run by Punjabis is a mix of their own food and Mughlai food -- dishes such as soft kakori kebabs and butter chicken.

FULL TEXT

Somewhere outside Delhi is an enormous kitchen where thousands of people labor around the clock making a thick brown curry gravy. Piped into tankers, it is trucked into the city to be distributed to restaurants where this now tepid sludge is poured over anything served to tourists. Be it chicken, lamb, eggplant or any other overcooked vegetable, they are all covered with the same sauce with the same taste of dusty spices long past their expiration date. To accompany these dishes comes cold, gritty rice and naan bread with all the sodden appeal of a much-used washcloth. The meal is normally served in a room with all the cheer and ambiance of a perfumed morgue.

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Many Indian food writers have pinned this lack of a restaurant culture on the religious restrictions on food that are so important to all the country's major religions. Muslims don't eat pork, the strictly vegetarian Jains are not allowed onions, garlic or anything else that grows beneath the ground, and many orthodox Hindus would not eat food prepared by a stranger for fear of ritual pollution. In "Good Food From India," Shanti Rangarao writes that at her

college, the student hostels had 10 separate kitchens and dining rooms for different groups, ranging from those who ate a European diet to vegetarian Brahmins. And this, she notes, reflected the diversity of just a small area of the country.

But that hasn't translated into a similarly diverse restaurant culture. Nor has the interplay between those religious rules and the country's enormous geographical and climatic variations yielded a vivid spectrum of tastes for those who dine out in Delhi. The constrained restaurant culture can be explained rather simply: Many of the establishments are run by a single group of Indians -- Punjabis.

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In "The Penguin Food Lovers' Guide to India and Nepal," Karen and Gul Anand list just a few of the Indian cuisines that most visitors don't know about: Malvani, Goan Christian and Goan Hindu, Mangalorean, Bengali, Rajasthani, Tibetan, Andhra, Hyderabad, Southern Indian (from Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala) and Maharashtrian. They also admit that most of these are unavailable in Delhi. Few restaurants are allowed to serve alcohol in Delhi, which makes it hard for a restaurateur to make money and further dampens the variety available to consumers. Even the relentlessly perky Anands have a hard time eating well in the city, concluding their section on it by saying "this is not a place to have a culinary adventure."

The picture is not entirely gloomy. There are places that have an atmosphere or food that mark them out. Ask Delhi residents where to go and they'll often mention the restaurant Karim's for its kebabs and tandoori dishes. Founded in 1913 just outside the walls of the Red Fort, the restaurant is one of the oldest in Delhi, although there is now a second branch in a more convenient and comfortable location, where maroon-clad doormen lead you through a cacophonous alley to the restaurant, which is still run by the great grandsons of the founder. The family comes from a line of cooks employed in royal kitchens.

The kebabs are indeed excellent at Karim's, as are most of the other dishes, which range from the perennial favorites like chicken tikka to feast dishes like tandoori bakra, a lamb stuffed with chicken, rice, eggs and dried fruits (you have to order this 24 hours in advance and pay half of the \$60 cost up front). Karim's has excellent rotis and naans, so hot they burn your fingertips if you are too eager to get at them. The dishes have a variety of flavor and spicing that suggest the gravy tanker doesn't stop here.

At the higher end of the price range is Dum Pukht, the top-end restaurant in the Maurya Sheraton Hotel. The restaurant comes complete with its own legend: In the 18th century, the Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah of Avadh tried to end a famine afflicting his people by carrying out a never-ending series of public works. To feed the vast numbers of people engaged in this Keynesian pump-priming, the Nawab had his cooks seal food in huge pots and cook them surrounded by fire. When the seals were broken, enchanting aromas were said to waft out.

Dum Pukht has kept up this traditional method of cooking that uses dough to seal dishes before they are put in the

oven. Some of these as known as "purdah" dishes for their contents are hidden away until the pastry seal is cracked open and the fragrant steam bursts out. The restaurant also has kebabs from a recipe the Nawab's cooks used when he had become old and toothless; the meat is pounded to such softness it resembles a highly spiced fine pate and is served with a heavy saffron bread. Dum Pukht's vegetable dishes have a crunch and freshness to them which is unusual in Delhi. Service is attentive and the atmosphere is plush, the lunchtime crowd consisting of expensively besuited and turbaned Sikh businessmen celebrating deals. The restaurant, which has been cloned in Sheraton Hotels in Bombay and Bangalore, is astoundingly expensive for India - lunch without alcohol was \$40 a head, enough for about five meals at Karim's.

Send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

Exceptions to the Rule
Karim's (more formally known as Dastar Khwan-e-Karim) is at 168/2
Hzt. Nizamuddin West, New Delhi. Tel: (91-11) 469-8300 or 463-5458.
Opening hours 12:30-3:30 p.m. and 6:30-11:30 p.m. Closed Mondays and
at lunch time during Ramadan. The original branch is in Old Delhi, off
Matya Mahal close to the Jama Masjid. Tel. 326-9880. There are rooms
reserved for women and families and no alcohol is served.
Dum Pukht is at the Maurya Sheraton Hotel, Diplomatic Enclave, New
Delhi. Tel: 301-0101. Open 12:30-3 p.m. and 7:30-11:30 p.m. Bar
license.

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