



07 MARCH 2011 | SOCIETY | STREET FOOD

We, The Food Courted

No more humble fare, the rich variety of street food is wooing ever more patrons

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One is either a street food fan, or one is not. The fan looks at piping hot batata vada that's strained out of dark-coloured oil, anticipates the pleasure of biting into its unique green masala mix, watches the happy union of spicy and sweet chutneys lathered on the pav, and hands out a tenner to the faceless boy dishing out the stuff. The non-fan looks at the oil that's been re-heated a dozen times, the grubby nails on the fingers that dunk the vada into the oil, the smudged newspaper that the pavs came wrapped in, the indeterminate source of water used for the chutneys, and wonders how the stomach can tolerate what the mind finds distasteful.

You don't need to be a number-cruncher to know that, in India, the fans vastly outnumber the non-fans. What's street food without a bit of the street in it, they ask in one voice, and don't bother waiting for an answer. Batata vada without a few micro-milligrams of Mumbai's road dust, or Calcutta's famous phuchkas minus the excitement of guessing the water source, or Delhi's mouth-watering paranthas without auto fumes, they say, is merely food; not street food. Street food fans not only eat off the streets, they unendingly pine for such food—or send drivers to cart it home like filmmaker Kiran Rao admits to doing—plan events around it, build a few minutes of street food into busy schedules, and wonder why the rest of the world is not a convert, yet.

Some enthusiasts egg on vendors to try new combinations, and enrich the street food repertoire. Like the twentysomething Sachin Saraf who chats up his favourite vada-pav stall owner in Mumbai's Dadar about turning this 45-year-old street staple into another avatar altogether. They slice the steaming vada into two halves, spread the dual chutney combo on the upturned sides, sprinkle a mix of onion-tomato-green chilli-crushed coriander leaves, and top it up with 'nylon' sev—all borrowed from the bhelpuri-wala in the next stall. For want of another name, the concoction is christened masala vada. It's anybody's guess if the experiment will become part of the staple street menu, but that's besides the point. Masala vada is fusion food, innovated on the street.



“Street food was a big part of my life when I stayed on my own. I was single, always eating out, and perpetually broke.”

Kiran Rao,

Director (with actress Kriti Malhotra, left)

Across Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai and other metros where street food is de rigueur, enthusiastic fans and enterprising stall owners are also experimenting, mixing the flavours of north and south India, marrying Chinese and Italian food with Indian fare, playing around with a variety of textures. Experimentation is, in fact, the new mantra. In Delhi’s palak patte ki chaat, the traditional puri is replaced with a spinach leaf fried in besan and served as papri chaat. A recently introduced ‘stuffed chaat’ has pieces of bhalla stuffed in golgappas, topped with chutneys and a dollop of yoghurt. In the city’s famous Paranthewali Gali, reputed for its classic ghee-laden fare, Pandit Kanhaiyalal Guruprasad is inspired to add “Chinese parantha”, stuffed with chowmein, to his menu. For an establishment set up in 1875, that spells big innovation.



“If gourmet cooking can be inspired by street food, why not? Even fashion takes inspiration from the street.”

David Abraham,
Fashion designe

In Calcutta’s busy bazaar areas of New Market and Gariahat as well as business districts such as Esplanade (Dharamtala) and Dalhousie Square, new mobile trolleys sport the city’s zesty experiments, like mushur daaler bora, finely chopped onions and vegetables mashed together, rolled into tiny balls, dipped in a lentil batter and deep-fried in mustard oil, or aaloo bora, potato slices dipped in lentil batter and deep-fried. In Tiretta Bazaar, near the Lal Bazaar police headquarters, breakfast-seekers tuck into the ultimate fusion: spicy Chinese sausage served with egg bhujjiya.



“I love going out with friends to eat street food though as a sportsperson I have to be careful about what I eat outside.”

Jwala Gutta, Badminton player

At a sandwich stall in one of Mumbai’s myriad suburban streets, owner Krishnaji layers the top of a grilled vegetable sandwich with butter and sprinkles it with a mix of finely crushed sev and chopped coriander and mint leaves. And the sev sandwich is born, to popular acclaim. In Majithia Nagar, which turns into a veritable street gourmet’s paradise by night, Gujarati foodies ask for bits of their favourite dhokla—cubes of gramflour and spices mixed in buttermilk and steamed—to be added to the traditional bhel puri. And, voila, here’s dhokla-bhel. Dosa variations on Mumbai’s streets would make a purist shudder: palak paneer dosa, Chinese spring roll dosa, Jhini dosa (dosa layered with a mix of Indian and Chinese sauces). “Some customers suggest new combinations, we try it out,” says Mani of Sai Samarth Dosa Stall in Mumbai’s Vile Parle suburb, “and sometimes it really clicks.”



Mohsina Mukadam, academic and culinary historian. “The vada-pav itself was innovated when Shiv Sena chief Balasaheb Thackeray called upon young Maharashtrians in the late 1960s to come up with something simple to challenge Udipi restaurants.”

Of late, mutations are also being generated by the desire of health-conscious customers for less sinful fare. In Delhi’s popular Bengali Market, chefs at Bengali sweets are using-imported olive oil for deep frying, according to co-owner Girish Agarwal. In Calcutta, the trademark jhaal muri has been transformed, by some vendors, into a concoction of sprouted chickpeas with finely chopped onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, garnished with coriander leaves and a dash of lemon.



“Bengali street food is an integral part of our city’s culture and the onus is on all of us to try and preserve it.”

Roopa Ganguly,
Actress

Fusion can also mean good business as Raju Singh in Calcutta’s Dalhousie Square discovered, when he created the Amritsari Maachh Bhaat, the traditional Bengali fish curry with fish pieces roasted Punjabi tandoori style. “Maine style ko badal dala. It’s good business because people come here for the different



Street food has, in the last couple of years, found new shop windows—in the food courts of malls and more so in Delhi and Mumbai than in other urban centres. Served in sanitised surroundings, with throw-away cutlery, “mall-friendly” street food is swelling the already vast tribe of street-foodies, by drawing in those who wanted to savour it, but have never dared. At Food Chowk, a bustling food station at a Delhi mall with 36 counters, the Paranthewali Gali counter attracts the stiletto-and-leather-bag-sporting crowd. They take their pick from an array of paranthas made by cooks wearing caps, served in thermocol and plastic, minus the grime-and-chaos of the original Paranthewali Gali. Meera Malhotra, a middle-aged customer out to lunch with two friends, says approvingly: “We like the concept of street food in a sanitised environment”. At multiplexes too, kachauri, masala popcorn, bhelpuri, chana jor garam and momos have made it to the menu. In Mumbai’s Infiniti mall, two chaat counters usually have the longest queues.

The upscale restaurants in five-star hotels have also had to genuflect to the street food god. Says Paul Kinny, executive chef, The Intercontinental, Mumbai: “We have chaat fests and organise chaat counters in banquets. It gives our guests a local feel in a comfortable setting.” Putting it all into perspective, Mukadam points out that what is a necessity for the working class and commuters has become an indulgence for the well-heeled.

It’s a thought that’s also crossed Israeli documentary photographer Sephi Bergerson’s mind. Settled in India since 2002, he began photographing street food across the country, producing a handsome volume titled *Street Food of India*. “After about two years of shooting, I realised what I was seeing now, on the street, would eventually be cleaned up, and we would only reminisce about it. The stalls were going to become high-tech shops, with nice lights and napkins. Like how falafel in Israel became gourmet food.”



“I have grown up eating this food. However dirty the kitchen and sweaty the cook, if the food is good, I am all for it.” **Kunal Vijaykar, TV food show host**

Calcutta-based actress Roopa Ganguly, a diehard phuchka fan, believes passionately that not just the foods, but the cultural baggage they carry with them, must also be preserved. “Let’s not allow modern mass-



the tamarind liquid filling. In Chennai, hygiene worries explain why the city does not encourage street food as much as other metros, except in some business areas. But then, there's Kalyanasundaram, aka mama, who has had a street stall for 30 long years in West Mambalam, the preserve of Brahmins. Mama's stall offers aaloo bonda, masala vada, sundal vada, molaga bhaji (mirchi bhaji), chana. Playback singer and radio jockey Chinmayi Sripada, who discovered him recently, is an unabashed fan. "It's cheap and best, very tasty," she says.

Hygiene worries may, in fact, be overhyped, suggests Mumbai-based Kunal Vijaykar, actor, scriptwriter and television food show host: the quick turnover of street food ensures its freshness. Advocate Sameer Dalal, who has been eating the dosas in Khau Gali for the last eight years, agrees: "I am sure of the hygiene because the cooking happens before me, the ingredients are consumed within hours." Besides, add foodies, street food was never meant for delicate stomachs and fastidious eaters. Hygiene was never meant to be its USP: it's accessibility, taste and affordability that drive its immense popularity. As Sahiblal Mishra, autorickshaw driver from Jaunpur, UP, who lived off street food for 10 years in Mumbai, points out: "If there weren't so many vada pav, chai-khari and pav bhaji stalls, I would have gone hungry."

There are other debates simmering too, in the feisty world of street food. Some diehard street foodies resist fusion. Vijaykar, for example, says we should not be experimenting with what's worked. "The other day I had Mexican Sev Puri with Taco sheets and a strange topping. It was really bad! Why meddle with a taste that's anyways so good?"

Older street food stall owners echo that sentiment. Says Sardar, the owner of the 45-year-old Sardar Pav Bhaji, a landmark in Mumbai which has catered to the likes of Amitabh Bachchan, Anupam Kher, Raj Babbar, Amol Palekar and sent pav bhaji to entire film units, "We have not changed one bit. It sells." Striking a different note from the traditionalists, fashion designer David Abraham thinks it's perfectly okay to sanitise street food and take it into malls. "I think the flavour of street food comes from the spices and the method of cooking and not the dirt. And if gourmet cooking can be inspired by street food, why not? Even fashion takes inspiration from the street."

Meanwhile, for the uninitiated, there are now street food walks. "We get many requests for customised food walks, from foreigners and young Indians. The most popular street fare on our food trail is the fruit sandwich corner at Chawri Bazaar. During Ramzan, we try to capture the mood of the festival through food," says Kanika Singh of Delhi Heritage Walks.

But the real street food fans do not need a street food walk, for sure. They know exactly where to go.

How Big Is This Small Biz

Any data on street food vendors can only be an estimate or projection. There are two reasons for this. One, the percentage of licensed vendors to the total number in a city tends to be small, from 2 to 10 per cent at best, which makes it difficult to pin down a number. And, two, comprehensive studies have not been conducted in the cities either on the number or nature of street food vendors.

However, Delhi-based ngo Manushi had conducted a limited study some years back. Figures from that study collated with data available from municipal corporations for the top four metros (Mumbai, Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai) show that the total number of people involved in the street food business, as vendors, owners and helpers, is around seven lakh and their annual turnover is approximately Rs 13,102 crore.

Here's a city-wise break-up

Delhi	2,00,000	3,650.00
Mumbai	2,50,000	4,562.50
Calcutta	1,91,000	3,485.75
Chennai	77,000	1,405.25

All figures estimated in Rs crore

Mixed-n-Unmatched

Where there's street food, there's chaos, confusion—and fusion!

Chinese bhel Mumbai mainly

- Fried noodles tossed with shredded cabbage, capsicum, carrot, spring onions and mixed with vinegar, chilli sauce and tomato ketchup instead of traditional bhel ingredients

Palak Paneer dosa Mumbai

- Punjab da palak paneer spread lavishly on traditional dosa, which is then rolled and cut into squares or triangles

Italian pav bhaji Mumbai

- Pav bhaji with a generous garnish of grated cheese, a la pizza

Paani Puri shots Mumbai, Delhi

- Traditional paani puri (golgappa, in Delhi lingo) but with the spicy water laced with vodka or rum

'Healthy' paani puri Mumbai

- Deep-fried puris replaced by baked ones, potato and boondi filling substituted with sprouts and boiled vegetables, but served with typical spicy water and sweet chutney

Paalak chaat Delhi

- Paapri made of spinach rather than 'unhealthy' maida/flour and served with the usual chutneys, yoghurt, masalas



- After-dinner Indian staple filled with chocolate shavings. Also, strawberry paan, honeymoon special paan laced with silver, gold supari and tobacco

Amritsari Maachh Bhaat Calcutta

- Bengali fish curry-rice with a Punjabi twist—fish pieces roasted in tandoori style before they meet the gravy

Aloo Methi Jhol Jhol Calcutta

- North Indian dry aloo methi gets a Bengali touch with gravy

Chow Chochhori Calcutta

- Ultimate Bengalification of the Chinese dish—mixed seasonal vegetables chopped small and cooked dry with traditional Bengali spices, and noodles thrown in

Chicken 65 Hyderabad

- The typical Hyderabadi chicken dish served back-to-back with piping hot jalebis

Aloo Toast Hyderabad

- Traditional (boring) toast spiced up by filling a spicy potato-green chilli mix in between bread slices and deep-fried

Barottas Chennai

- North Indian paranthas get a southern touch with varying quantities of maida and spices instead of wheat flour and curd

Pudimass Chennai

- Omelettes and rotis/paranthas diced up into tiny pieces and tossed together with a seasoning

A To Z Of St. Food

A Aaloo tikki, aaloo ki chaat, aaloo kabuli, aam papad

B Bajji, balushahi, basket chaat, beef tikka, beguni, bhelpuri, biriyani, biskoot, bonda, bread pakoda, buddhi ke baal gola, bun-maskar, barfi, burger, burra

C Champ, chaas, chaat, chai-faen, chakkuli, chanachur, chana masala, chhole-bhature, chicken curry, chicken tikka, chitranna, chomchom, chowmein, churumuri

D Daabeli, dahi bhalla, dahi batata puri, dahi vada, dalcha, dosa, dhokla, doner kabab

E Egg bhurji

F Fritters, fruit chaat, fruit juice



H Haleem, naryan seekh, noinge, not dog

I Idli-vada, Imarti

J Jadoh, jalebi, jaljeera, Jain-bhaji, jangiri, jhal muri

K Kachori-aaloo, kadambattu, kadhi chawal, kakori kabab, karimeen fry, kathi roll, keema bun, khaaree, khajli, khaman, khandvi, kode-bale, kotambari vada, kulcha-matar, kulfi

L Langcha, lassi

M Malpua, masala dosa, masala moodi, masala poori, matar samosa, medhu vada, mirapakayi bajji, mirchi bajji, misal pav, mishtidoi, momo, moong dal halwa, moong dal pakoda, moongphali, murmura, mutton biriyani

N Neer Dosa, nihari, nimboo paani, noodles, nunchai

O Omelette

P Papri chaat, pakoda, pani puri, paneer tikka, paripuvada, parotta, pathrode, patties, pav-bhaji, peda, pesarattu, phirni, phuckha, phuluri, poha, puliyogare, puri-sabzi, puri-bhaji

Q Qorma, Quail eggs

R Rabri-faluda, ragda-pattice, raav, rajma chawal, ram laddoo, rasamalai, rasgulla, rotla

S Sabudana vada, samosa, sandwich, seekh kabab, sev puri, shawarma, sherbet

T Tadka dal, takatak, thattu dosa, thukpa, tikka wrap, tomato omelette, tubular omelette

U Usal, Utthappam

V Vada-pav, Vade, Vankai, Veg Puff, Veg Roll

W Waza Palak

X Xacuti roll

Y Yengai, yoghurt

Z Zunka-bhakar

By Smruti Koppikar with Neha Bhatt & Namrata Joshi in Delhi, Snigdha Hasan in Mumbai, Dola Mitra in Calcutta, Pushpa Iyengar in Chennai & Madhavi Tata in Hyderabad

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