

A Royal Repast

To keep the tourist dollars rolling in, former royals and owners of heritage properties in Rajasthan are reviving ancestral recipes created by master chefs

By Rohit Parihar

It's food for thought-and profit. Tourists have been flocking to Rajasthan to get a taste of the fabled lifestyle of India's erstwhile maharajas. Of late, they have been literally getting just that. Former nobility and those in high positions in the pre-privy purse era are digging up ancient royal recipes to serve their foreign guests. After heritage properties, heritage food is now the latest hook to keep the tourists coming to Rajasthan.

At his ancestral castle in Mandawa in Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu district, Randhir Singh Mandawa is hosting a gala evening for his European guests. The traditional touristy elements are all there: the camels, colourfully dressed drummers, the campfire and antique canons. What's different is the chef-Mandawa himself-and the food. He rotates a goat on a barbecue, roasting it till it is tender and then serves it to his guests. They cut into it and fragrant rice spills out. It's a family recipe that has been around for generations, now given a modern revival. "For me it is a reminder of my father's jungle trips," says Mandawa, "and also the return of heritage food."

It is not just around desert campfires. In Jaipur, Dharmendra Kanwar, well-known for her books on royalty, is busy compiling Royal Jaipur Cuisine, a collection of recipes handwritten by Jaswant Singh, the former head cook at the City Palace. There are about 3,000 recipes, including more than 300 varieties of chapatis. Digvijay Singh, the erstwhile maharaja of Sailana, Madhya Pradesh, also penned down recipes that his father Dilip Singh had preserved. These recipes have been brought out in a book titled The Cooking Delights of Maharajas.

Elsewhere, the recipe revival is cooking up a tourist storm. Rawat Narendra Singh holds cooking classes at his castle in Bijapur in Chittorgarh, along with elder son Rishi and daughter-in-law Yukti, as a special attraction for foreign tourists. One group from Australia was taught how to cook chicken using nutmeg flowers, also pania rotis baked by sealing the dough between two leaves of flame of the forest. "This is an innovative experience," says Diana Bianciardi of Melbourne.

PICTURE SPEAK



CHEF'S DELIGHT: Randhir Singh barbecues a rice-filled goat at Castle Mandawa; Man Singh

PICTURE SPEAK



CHEF'S DELIGHT: Uses his father's recipes at Kanota

More than anything else, it marks a revival of ancient royal cuisine, or "thikana" recipes, which till recently risked being lost to history and circumstances. The abolition of jagirs and privy purses meant that erstwhile royals and jagirdars found it impossible to maintain the team of specialised chefs they had employed earlier. Thus, the next generation of chefs who inherited the skills and recipes did not find employment as most heritage hotels that had come up offered continental food to satisfy their largely foreign clientele. Rawat Prabhu Pratap Singh of Amet near Udaipur gives another reason, "Since thikana recipes take a long time to cook, the younger generations within royal families were reluctant to spend the time required to master these." Only a handful of families living in places with rich traditions of food, like Jodhpur, maintained the culinary heritage with dishes such as gulab jamun curry (fried khoya balls without sugar syrup soaked in traditional gravy) or kabuli, which beats biryani in taste. A few local restaurants commercialised these dishes but it is the Thakur families and owners of heritage hotels who now plan to make these an integral part of heritage experience.

PICTURE SPEAK



PRINCELY PRIVILEGE: Guests at Narain Niwas enjoy royal thalis

The commercial success of heritage hotels has given their Thakur owners greater financial security, offering them a chance to explore royal food as an added attraction. Amar Singh of Jaipur's Kanota thikana, famous for writing the world's longest continuous diaries, brought out a series of notes on recipes. His heir Mohan Singh and his sons Man Singh and Prithvi Singh now use them to sell special royal thalis for Rs 1,500 at their Jaipur hotels Narain Niwas and Royal Castle Kanota. An added attraction soon will be Chandrahass-a heritage liquor-to be served along with these thalis. Other recipes being revived include ones where even the type of metal in utensils for cooking particular dishes are specified.

PICTURE SPEAK



DISHING UP DELICACIES: Rawat Narender Singh (centre) and family holding a cooking class at Bijapur castle

Along with the royalty, the Thakurs had also taken a lot of interest in cooking. Since they frequently went hunting, their cooks, who travelled with the hunting party, showed great innovation in preparing meals for the pot. These were then modified and refined for use in homes. Rajput royalty, generals and landlords generally had Muslim cooks, so a majority of the recipes being revived have a distinct flavour. It can be sampled in the dishes prepared by Mehrunissa, daughter of Ahmed Ali, a chef employed by Jaipur's royalty, who provides meals on order.

The present scions of Thakurs are now reviving their ancestral identity of being great cooks. Apart from Man Singh and his wife Sandhya who prepare royal thalis for their customers, the Sailana family holds food festivals as does Vijay Singh Bedla of Udaipur, who is known for special sauces and recipes that he uses in popularising Mewar food through his food festivals at hotels in India and abroad. Vikramaditya Singh of the Sodawas thikana is an accomplished cook and holds food festivals where buffets made out of 60 Sodawas delicacies are served at his Karni group of hotels. Prabhu Pratap Singh offers dishes such as smoked Govind Gatta ki Khichadi, Dahi-Samosa ka Maas and arabi cooked in tomato gravy to his foreign clientele at Amet haveli, the garden restaurant on Pichola Lake in Udaipur. The search for ancestral recipes has become so hot that families have fallen out over their ownership.

PICTURE SPEAK



CUISINE KING: Pratap Singh serves ancestral dishes at Amet in Udaipur

Meanwhile, the foreigners are lapping it up. As **Lloyd Rudolph**, emeritus professor of political science, University of Chicago, who visits India every year, says, people abroad, particularly those who have been to India, are interested in Indian cooking and Indian food. Original recipes from royal families are even more interesting. "The authenticity of these recipes can be verified from original documentation," he says, "to prove that these are not something created for tourists but have been cooked the same way as in 1905." That, for tourists and locals alike, is a mouth-watering prospect.