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After Centuries, the Vegetarian Feast of India Finally Arrives

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SUVIR SARAN, a chef at the ambitious new Indian restaurant Amma, in Midtown, has never tasted the restaurant's tandoor-grilled lamb chops. "My family in Delhi have been vegetarians for generations," he said. "At least since the 15th century. Before that we are not so sure." Jehangir Mehta, the pastry chef at Aix on the Upper West Side, grew up in Mumbai, where about 30 percent of the 12 million residents are vegetarian. "The vegetarian cooking of India is excellent training for a pastry chef," he said. "It teaches you how much range can be achieved with spices and herbs."

India has the most varied vegetarian cooking in the world, and it has been thousands of years in the making. Now, finally, it is also widely available and authentically prepared in restaurants across New York City.

Religion, economics, demographics and geography conspired early on to make India one of the most prolifically cultivated regions on earth. Today, there are about 220 million strict vegetarians in India, according to the Anthropological Survey of India. Indian Hindus, Buddhists and Jains all aspire to an ideal of ahimsa, or nonviolence, that prohibits the killing of anything living or with the potential for life (hence, Indian vegetarians eat dairy products but not eggs).

Traditionally in India, cooking is intimately entwined with purity, spirituality and caste. "It's almost impossible to generalize about a country as diverse as India," said Rathi Raja, executive director of the Young Indian Culture Group, in Manhasset, N.Y. "But this much is true: although many of the old ways of religion and class are breaking down, eating vegetarian still has a big place in Indian culture."

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Between 1990 and 2000, New York's Indian-American population more than doubled, according to census figures. The city has also seen an explosion of Indian restaurants at every level, from ambitious, expensive spots like Tamarind on East 22nd Street and Sapphire near Lincoln Center to Midtown steam-table dhabas like Minar. More than ever, New York's Indian restaurants exist to provide desis — Hindi for countrymen — with authentic tastes of home, instead of presenting a predictable repertory of Northern-style kormas and biryanis to outsiders.

Minar Toj

As New York's South Indian population has swelled, the lighter, livelier foods of those regions are being added to the mix. Gujarat, where many of New York City's Indian high-tech workers come from, has a particularly high percentage of vegetarians. "They are bachelors, these guys," said Sridhar Rathnam, the chef and an owner of Madras Cafe in the East Village. "So they don't know how to cook. And they need restaurants."

With the arrival here of South Indian vegetarian staples like dosas and uttapams, samosa chat and idlis, Indian cooking in New York is finally reflecting how Indians eat in India. And that often means vegetarian meals at least twice a day, or an entirely vegetarian home kitchen.

Indian restaurants outside India have rarely reflected the central role of vegetarian cooking in Indian life, or its varied flavors. Where Americans see "vegetable curries," Indian cooks distinguish among dry and sauced, southern-style (flavored with mustard seeds and curry leaves) and Northern-style (cooked in tomatoes and onions), chili-hot and creamy-cool dishes. To one who eats this way from birth, Mr. Rathnam said, "a dish that is spicy and sweet tastes completely different to one that is spicy and sour."

Part of the craft of Indian vegetarian cooking is composing thalis, plates of rice, bread, dal and cooked vegetables in which the textures and flavors are full of difference and surprise. Even modest establishments like Minar and Dimple present their food with garnishes of crunchy vegetables — sliced cucumbers, whole fresh chilies, whole radishes — that are there to provide fresh contrast to the hot food. At Roomali, which just opened on East 27th Street, the vegetarian staple paneer, a fresh cheese, is rolled up in hot roti with shreds of raw red onion.

In Ayurveda, the traditional Hindu system of human biology and medicine, foods — like people — are either hot or cold, and should be combined accordingly. Additionally, food can be broken down into six flavors — salty, sweet, sour, bitter, astringent and pungent — that should be balanced at each meal. Tirlok Malik, an owner of the Ayurveda Cafe on the Upper West Side, said, "Ayurveda is all about balance." At the Ayurveda Cafe, a complete vegetarian thali is composed daily and served in its entirety to each diner (Thali in Greenwich Village and Vatan on Lexington Avenue operate on the same principle).

Many Ayurveda practitioners, Jains, Buddhist monks and Krishna worshipers do not eat any onion or garlic — these pungent foods are considered too "hot" and stimulating. It is hard to imagine a vegetarian cook functioning without onions, garlic, scallions, or shallots, but Mr. Rathnam said that vegetarian cooks in India have a much wider range of vegetables to choose from. "Americans are accustomed to thinking of India as a poor country," he said. "But in Madras you can buy three different kinds of radishes, carrots that are red and yellow as well as orange, all kinds of leafy greens, fresh spices, baby eggplants, shoestring beans, jackfruit and all different kinds of mangoes."

Nitu Singh, an owner of Minar in Midtown, says that more and more Indian vegetables are available here, and that more customers order them. "Ten years ago, only Indians ordered okra," he said. At Chinese Mirch, a new Indian-Chinese restaurant on Lexington Avenue (Chinese is a popular cuisine in many parts of India), nearly every table holds a mountain of crisp-fried whole okra pods, sprinkled with smoky chili powder.

Beyond vegetables themselves, rice and bread are integral to vegetarian eating. Especially in South India, the word "bread" does not really begin to describe the range of savory pancakes, crepes, doughnuts, and plain and stuffed flatbreads that make quick, filling, savory meals for millions every day.

Dosas are lacy, chewy flatbreads, very thin and crisp, with a pleasant sourness that comes from fermenting the rice-and-lentil batter overnight. The dosa can be eaten plain or folded around a filling to make a speedy breakfast that's as integral to Madras as egg and cheese on a roll is to New York. The fundamental filling is the spiced potato mixture known as masala, but there are many variations: mysore (with chili powder sprinkled between the bread layers), butter (extra-thin and buttery), rava (made from wheat instead of rice); and others with onion or cheese sprinkled inside. Listening to Indians order dosas is like listening to Seattle residents order coffee.

You can best do this in New York City in Queens, at the Dosa Hutt, the canteen attached to the Ganesha temple in Flushing, where the dosas are smoky from the griddle and brushed with lashings of ghee, or

clarified butter. The unrelated Dosa Hut on Lexington Avenue is closed for renovations, but its signature dish, when it returns, should still be the tenderest in Manhattan. Once folded, a normal dosa is about two feet long (a new vegetarian restaurant coming to Manhattan, Saravanas, promises six-foot dosas).

Many New Yorkers who have adopted dosas are moving on to idlis, also crafted from rice and lentils but much thicker and fluffier than dosas. When well-made, idlis have the pillowy texture and light tang of the perfect buttermilk pancake. Uttapams are also something like pancakes, but the batter is poured around tomatoes, mushrooms, onions or mushrooms, to make tender, vegetable-studded rounds.

Idlis and uttapams are always served with a bowl of sambar, a soupy, tangy tamarind-spiked stew of lentils and vegetables that is synonymous with South Indian cooking. Mr. Rathnam says that in South India, "we judge a cook by her sambar." A cup of creamy-sweet coconut chutney is invariably presented too, to round out the flavors, making this a highly satisfying simple meal. Some of the best idlis in New York are served at Madras Cafe and at Chennai Garden, both vegetarian and kosher-certified restaurants that opened in 1999. Chennai Garden, along with Curry Leaf, has some of the best food in the neighborhood known as Curry Hill, which radiates out from Lexington Avenue and 28th Street.

At Chennai Garden's lunch buffet last week, visiting engineering students from Hyderabad lined up alongside American Muslim women and kosher-observant New Yorkers like Leah Kahalani. Ms. Kahalani, whose father was a Jewish Indian raised in Mumbai, said the new Indian vegetarian food is the best in the city. "We used to make samosas for Shabbat dinner when I was growing up," she said. "This cooking is so much more interesting than most vegetarian and kosher food."

Lavina Melwani, a writer in New York who grew up in Delhi, has been a vegetarian for 15 years and considers the changes in New York's Indian restaurants to be remarkable. "Now in Midtown you can get a totally traditional chole batura for breakfast," she said, referring to a spicy chickpea stew served with crisp, puffy bread, "and then have a dosa for lunch. When I moved here, there was nothing Indian vegetarians could eat, except for pizza."

Pizza is still a staple for New York's Indian-Americans, especially young ones. Singas Famous Pizza, originally a Greek-owned family storefront in Elmhurst, Queens, has become a six-store franchise with a cult following. The distinctive Singas tomato sauce is heavily dosed with fresh jalapeños. The owner of the Hicksville franchise, Jai Jeyasri, said that about 40 percent of his customers are Indian. "Singas pizza is even too spicy for me," he said. "But I like a mysore dosa."