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IFEA

The rise of the Indian supper club

Preserving Cuisines from Kargil

Reimagining Regional Indian Suppers for global tables

Kashmiri cuisines at The Khyber

Indian Supper club

Special edition







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Editorial



For decades, restaurants around the world have defined Indian cuisine through a familiar repertoire of commercialised dishes like butter chicken, naan, biryani, samosa, dosa, tikka masala and the ubiquitous “thali.”

As someone who has spent three-and-a-half decades travelling through India and writing about its food, I have always found this definition far too narrow. India’s culinary richness lies in its countless regional and community traditions rooted in homes and families.

Today, Indian supper clubs are opening a window into this largely unexplored diversity.
Across India and around the world, hosts are reconstructing the flavours of home and presenting their communities’ cuisines to new audiences.

As India celebrated its 80th Independence Day on August 15, 2026, it is worth reflecting on how much of the country's culinary identity remains to be discovered—not just by the world, but by Indians themselves.

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COSMOPOLITAN KOLKATA ON THE SUPPER TABLE



Sharmishta Chatterjee-Bannerjee

My supper club began almost by accident, during the pandemic. I was working at Newcastle University at the time and ran an online cook-along for colleagues.

I expected it to be a quick lesson in a couple of Indian recipes. Instead, people were fascinated by the stories behind the food and genuinely surprised at how little "Indian food" as understood in Britain resembled what families actually cook at home. That reaction planted the idea.

Kolkata is the city I grew up in, and it felt like the natural place to start telling a fuller story, one that draws on trade history, migration, and the twenty-plus years I've spent building international partnerships in higher education. That Kolkata is home to an array of multi-cultural cuisines beyond the parameters of traditional Bengali is little known...and how each of these grew because of migration and found its home in Bengal was what I wanted to bring to the UK. SHOR.shé grew out of the same belief that shapes that work: that conversations of real significance don't need to happen in London. They can happen around one table in Newcastle.



The first challenge was building a brand and a social media presence from nothing, with no existing audience for food from Bengal to draw on. The bigger challenge underneath that was perception: undoing the assumption that "Indian food" means one flattened, curry-house version of the cuisine, when what I wanted to share was something far more specific and far less familiar to most diners. And then there's the operational reality — SHOR.shé is essentially a one-woman show, so research, menu development, sourcing, social media and running the table itself all sit with me.

Keeping the concept deliberately niche rather than scaling it to solve any of that has been a conscious choice, not an oversight — the smallness is what makes the storytelling work, so the challenge has been finding ways to grow reach and credibility without diluting that. And to keep on top of everything whilst doing my day job of Higher Education Advisory and Consulting certainly isn't easy, and had I not had passion for both, one would have probably slipped. My latest challenge however is a good one – how do I keep my table of 12 ethos intact when I have a waitlist of 120?

The menu

Every menu starts with a question, not a recipe — why Bengalis love posto, what the Mughal courts left behind in Kolkata's kitchens, how Chinese migration reshaped the city's street food. Getting to an answer means weeks spent in academic texts, archives, old cookbooks and oral histories. A lot of that work happens at our own kitchen table with my husband, Professor Anurag Banerjee, an economist by profession and a history enthusiast by inclination: debating trade, migration and politics until a menu's argument is clear. Past menus have traced Bow Barracks' Anglo-Indian heritage, the Mughal and Awadhi influences behind "The Empire's Gambit," and in "Joy Narayan Dhām", the story of our own family's salt petre business, zamindari built from





business and the link between Bengal's love of poppy seed, the opium trade, colonial economics and the Bengal famine. "Merchants & Markets" drew specifically on Sushil Chaudhury's scholarship on pre-colonial Bengali trade, right down to word origins like "bilati begun" and "malai curry." The rule across all of it: we don't serve nostalgia, we serve what history evidences.

I'm careful even with how I describe the menu itself, it isn't "Bengali food," it's food *from* Bengal. That distinction matters, because Bengal's cuisine was shaped by centuries of cosmopolitan influence: Anglo-Indian households, Armenian merchants, Chinese migrant communities, Awadhi court cooking, Jain Sheherwali traditions, Nawabi refinement. Each of those threads produced something genuinely distinct, and guests respond to that — they arrive expecting one uniform "Indian" flavour profile and instead get shown a whole region's worth of difference on a single table.

That variety does a lot of the guiding work on its own: once someone tastes how different an Armenian-influenced dish is from a Nawabi one, the flattening idea of "Indian food" falls away pretty naturally. On top of that, sequencing helps: poppadoms and chutney (when we serve Bengali cuisine) arriving as the second-to-last course, not the first as in traditional Indian restaurants in UK , is a small signal that the evening isn't running on a script anyone's seen before. Moreover, our guests



genuinely have a keen interest for exploring not just the cuisine but also the history behind each dish, and the fact that we work on a nose to tail, zero waste sustainable kitchen model.

The sourcing

Sustainability sits underneath the sourcing for the supper club: I run the kitchen around local ingredients wherever I can, rather than importing everything to chase absolute authenticity. the flavours remain authentic, even if the ingredients aren't - like for example, the mango in a tok dal replaced with British rhubarb grown in my garden which creates the same sourness but saves the food miles. Most of the spices central to Bengali cooking are now genuinely available in the UK, so that's less of an issue than it might seem. Collaborations do a lot of the remaining work — Graamiya supplies proper mustard oil, Ajji's Ghee gives me properly churned ghee rather than a supermarket substitute, and Tapari provides sustainable sal-leaf serveware, so even how the food is presented stays true to the sourcing ethos.

Fish is where the real experimentation has happened: years of living in UK have led me to trout in place of rui and katla, and salmon standing in for ilish, both close enough in texture and richness to carry the dishes they're built for, and being river fish rather than sea fish. Green mango, as explained above, becomes rhubarb, which brings a similar sharp sourness to the same role in a dish, long gourd is substituted with zucchini. The decision to substitute always comes back to function rather than appearance , what a fish or fruit is doing in a dish, texturally and in flavour, matters more than matching it on the surface. And having done that just for home and dinners we have hosted has given me an understanding of what works where and where it fails.

Theme tables

The theme for the autumn supper club was "The Zamindar's Table," built entirely around our own family's 300-year-old Durga Puja at Joy Narayan Dhar in Kolkata. The menu ran from bhog er khichuri through to niramish mangsho, the traditional vegetarian "meat" preparation served at Puja time. Woven through the food was the story of my husband's family's saltpetre trade, and the legacy of Dayamayi, our kuldevi whose worship is tied to a philanthropic tradition the family carries out every Durga Puja. It's one of the more personal menus we've done:



not a general study of a historical period, but our own household's ritual calendar, our trade and the zamindari and its history, put on twelve plates. However, as our suppers are about food from Bengal rather than Bengali food, we choose historical themes rather than festive one. Our next supper club is Before the border, which will explore cuisines from Pre-partition Bengal covering both East and West Bengal, and the December one 'The Nawab and the Banker' explores the 2 distinct cuisnes of Murshidabad: Muslim and Jain Sheherwali. Both supperclubs sold out in less than 12 hours.

Every menu is built the way I'd approach my day job — understanding people, history and culture first — and the food follows from that research rather than from what might be easiest for a Western palate to accept. The aim isn't to soften Bengali food into something familiar; it's to let people encounter something real and find their own way into it, guided by story rather than compromise.

Each table connects food directly to trade history, migration, and the producers and collaborators



behind the ingredients. That thread is only getting more literal: 2027 will bring curated Kolkata food and history tours alongside hands-on cooking classes in the Newcastle. Ultimately the food is almost incidental, what's really happening is connecting people to history, to place, to each other, and sometimes to their own memories. And also, even if it may be uncomfortable, what they perhaps don't know about, such as the story of how 'posto' is closely linked to the Bengal famine and opium trade.

Memorable moments

Every sitting has sold out, some within hours of being announced — but what people tell me afterwards is rarely just about the food. Guests often say it feels like a dinner party, a history seminar and a cultural exchange happening at once, and that comes directly from keeping it to twelve seats around a single table, where everyone actually has a voice. Watching a format that started as a lockdown cook-along turn into a year of sold-out tables and a 120-plus person waiting list has been the most rewarding part. And people come not from my social media presence but because they have heard about us from a friend. And that is most gratifying.

Supper clubs as a platform for cultural promotion

I think the biggest shift needed is treating micro-regional cuisines as traditions in their own right, not as footnotes to a national cuisine. Bengal shouldn't have to sit under a generic "Indian food" umbrella any more than any other distinct regional tradition should. For chefs and hosts, that means resisting the pressure to smooth food into something more familiar the moment it meets a new audience, the specificity is the whole point, not an obstacle to get past. It also means documenting as you go, because so much of this knowledge lives in family memory

and disappears with a generation if nobody writes it down. Tourism organisations could do far more by investing in the actual infrastructure behind a cuisine — the producers, the supply chains, the market access — rather than just using food as pretty content for a destination campaign. And cultural institutions could take food history as seriously as any other strand of social history, partnering properly with people doing this work on the ground rather than treating it as enthusiasm running alongside "real" scholarship. Do all of that, and platforms like supper clubs stop being a novelty and start being what they actually are: a legitimate way of keeping a culinary tradition alive.

Aspirations

The confirmed next chapter, as it stands, is Kolkata — curated food and history tours in 2027, alongside hands-on cooking classes in the Newcastle itself, extending SHOR. shé from a Newcastle table into the place the whole project has been telling stories about.

But there's a second ambition I'm just as excited about, and it runs in the opposite direction. Just as "Indian food" gets homogenised in Britain, losing



all its regional specificity, British food suffers exactly the same fate in India, flattened under the label "continental," and rarely done properly even in the old colonial clubs that still claim it as their heritage. I'd like to take my own understanding of British food and run reverse-theme supper clubs there: a proper roast done right, hand-cut old-fashioned chips, a real sticky toffee pudding, scones served the correct way — jam first, then cream. It's the same argument SHOR.shé has always made, just pointed the other way: that a cuisine deserves to be understood on its own terms, not through whatever shorthand another country has settled for.

Celebrating the Food of Bengal



Roti Mami is a Berlin-based pop-up and food concept founded by Bangladeshi chef, writer and food stylist Rez Rahman. It is rooted in Bengali home cooking and shaped by Rez's East London upbringing.

AM: What inspired you to start a Bengali food pop-up enterprise?

RR: Roti Mami really came from wanting to reconnect with my own food and my own heritage.

I grew up in East London in a British-Bangladeshi family, and some of my earliest memories are of being around my grandmother cooking. She would cook huge amounts of food, and there was always this idea of feeding people beyond just your immediate household. Neighbours, relatives, whoever happened to be around.

As a child, I was given little jobs in the kitchen, and I think that instinct to cook generously and feed lots of people stayed with me.

I then spent a lot of my twenties travelling and living abroad, in Vietnam, Australia, Germany and elsewhere, and I worked professionally as a food stylist. Weirdly, after spending so much time away from home, I started feeling a really strong desire to understand Bengali food properly. For a long time, like a lot of children of immigrants, I think I saw the food I grew up with as quite ordinary because it was simply what we ate at home. There can also be a bit of embarrassment around immigrant food when you are young. The smells in your lunchbox, eating differently from everyone else, all those concerns. Then you get older and realise how incredibly rich that food culture actually is.

Roti Mami came out of that reconnection. I never really wanted to open a conventional restaurant right away. The travelling popup model gives me so much freedom. I can work with different chefs, communities, spaces, music scenes and ingredients. We have taken Roti Mami to cities including Berlin, London, Lisbon, New York, Houston, Mexico City, Melbourne, Lagos and Amsterdam, and every place teaches me something. It also means the project can keep evolving without becoming too fixed too quickly.



The name itself is quite playful. Roti essentially means bread, and it's deeply connected to so many different cultures, but especially to South Asian food and culture. Then "Mami" brings in a warmer, feminine, slightly cheeky side. I always think of that auntie figure who wants to feed you and make sure you have eaten properly. Those two things just came together, Roti Mami, and it stuck. I still think it is a great name.

AM: What challenges did you face in launching Roti Mami?

One of the biggest challenges was definitely having the confidence to showcase the food. When you are cooking food that is connected to your heritage, it is not just food. You are putting your culture, your memories, your family and something much deeper on the plate as well. Especially with Bangladeshi and Bengali food, which many people still know

very little about internationally, it can feel like you are representing something much bigger than yourself. That can be quite intimidating.

There is also the whole question of authenticity. Bengali food changes massively from household to household, region to region and generation to generation. I had to get comfortable with the fact that I am not trying to represent every Bengali person or say there is one definitive way to cook something. I am telling my own story through Bengali food, and constantly learning along the way. Then there is the practical side. Pop-ups can be chaotic. Every kitchen is different. Sometimes you arrive in a city and have two days to understand the equipment, suppliers, staff and ingredients before feeding hundreds of people. A lot of that confidence came simply through doing it again and again. Every dinner, pop-up, and residency taught me something and made the next one easier.

AM: For your supper clubs and popups rooted in Bengali home cooking, how have you researched and gathered the recipes, memories and stories behind the food?

RR: A lot of it starts with family. I



ask questions constantly. I speak to my mum, aunties, relatives and people from older generations about how they cook something, what they remember eating, or how something would have been made back home.

Sometimes the research starts with a flavour rather than a full recipe. I might remember the smell of mustard oil, dried fish, green chilli or something my grandmother cooked, and then I start tracing that memory backwards. Other chefs and cooks are also a big part of that learning. But travelling has probably been one of the most important parts for me. I have gone back to Bangladesh and spent time travelling around, eating, asking questions and learning from people there. I have also travelled solo through Kolkata and Bangladesh, and those trips were incredibly important for understanding



Bengali food beyond what I grew up eating at home.
Being there on my own gave me the freedom to really follow my curiosity. To go somewhere because I had heard about a particular dish, sit and speak to people, eat something I had never tried before, or understand why something is cooked differently in one place from another. The more I learn, the more I realise how huge Bengali food culture actually is.
What interests me most is often the food that historically hasn't been seen as "restaurant food". The everyday dishes, bhortas, dried fish, preserved ingredients, rice dishes and broths that people actually eat at home. Those things can tell you so much about a culture.

AM: How do you design the menus? How do you introduce unfamiliar flavours and techniques to people in Berlin, London, New York, Houston, Nashville and Melbourne when this food is very different from Indian or Bangladeshi restaurant food they may know?

RR: A menu usually starts with a feeling. I think about where we are cooking, what season it is, the kind of space we are in, how I want people to eat, and what



I personally feel excited about showcasing at that moment.
A big part of Roti Mami, for me, is taking ingredients and dishes that might seem intimidating, unfamiliar, or far from what people imagine "restaurant food" to be, and putting them into that environment. I especially love taking things that we genuinely eat at home, things you might almost never see on a restaurant menu, and giving them that space.
I think there is something amazing about saying this everyday Bengali dish that somebody's mum or grandmother has been cooking forever deserves to be on this table too. Then I think about balance. Acidity, richness, spice, texture, temperature and familiarity.
I also really enjoy putting something quite accessible next to something that might challenge people a little bit.
For example, chilli cheese roti has become one of our signature dishes. People immediately understand bread and melted cheese, but then they get green chilli, coriander, mint, lime, crispy onions and the texture of paratha. Once somebody trusts you through one dish, you can take them somewhere a little more unfamiliar.
That gives us space to introduce things like shutki, shatkora or stronger mustard flavours without feeling like we need to water them down.
For me it is never really about making Bengali food less Bengali. It is more about thinking carefully about how you introduce someone to it.

AM: Bengali cuisine is incredibly diverse. Which regions, communities and culinary traditions of East and West Bengal have you explored through your menus?

RR: My family is from Sylhet, so Sylheti flavours naturally have a big influence on how I cook. Ingredients like shatkora and shutki are really connected to that identity and come up again and again in my food.
But Roti Mami is also influenced by

all the things I have learned while travelling.
Spending time in Kolkata was really important for me, as was travelling around Bangladesh.
I have spent time learning and eating in places like Dhaka, Cox's Bazar and Chittagong, and every region gives you another perspective on what Bengali food can be.
I am also constantly learning about the Indigenous communities within Bangladesh and their food traditions, which opens up another completely different side of the country's food culture.
I'm increasingly realising that "Bengali food" is such a broad term.
Even within Bangladesh alone you have completely different landscapes, ingredients, religious communities and regional traditions shaping how people eat.
I want Roti Mami to keep exploring that rather than ever presenting Bengali food as one single thing.

AM: Has living in Europe influenced the way you cook and present Bengali food? Do you ever consciously adapt a Bengali dish to suit international diners, or do you prefer to present the food as authentically as possible and allow diners to discover it on its own terms?



RR: I worked as a food stylist for around four years before Roti Mami, so that naturally had a huge influence on how I present and style food.
I love the visual side of it. The styling can be playful, colourful, quite contemporary and really expressive of my personality.
For me, authenticity comes down much more to flavour.
If the flavours make sense, the foundation of the dish is respected, and it still tastes recognisable within the culture it comes from, that feels authentic to me.
I do not think a Bengali dish suddenly becomes less authentic because it is plated differently or presented in a more playful way.
Actually, the way I style the food is authentic in its own way too, because it is coming from me and my personality.
Sometimes I might change a dish's format. Something that would normally sit as part of a huge spread at home might become a smaller plate or be presented individually because we are serving it in a restaurant.
But I never want to make something less Bengali just because somebody might not have experienced those flavours before.

AM: How do you source Bengali ingredients in Berlin and other cities? When an ingredient is difficult to find, do you substitute it with a British or local ingredient, and have any substitutions been surprisingly close to the original?

RR: It changes so much depending on the city. I generally travel with some of my own spice mixes and particular things I know I want to use, and then I source as much as possible once I arrive.
In London it is obviously much easier because the South Asian community is so big. In Berlin you have to search a little harder, and in some cities it becomes almost like detective work.
If I cannot find exactly what I am looking for, then I think about what that ingredient is actually doing in the dish.

Is it sour? Is it bitter? Is it bringing sweetness, acidity, texture or aroma?
For example, if I am making a tenga, that sourness and acidity is fundamental to the dish. Maybe I cannot find boroi or the particular sour fruit I would traditionally want to use. In that situation, I might pickle tomatoes or use another local ingredient that gives me that same kind of acidity and brings the dish back into balance.
I think that is much more interesting than just saying you cannot cook something because one exact ingredient is unavailable. Fish is obviously another big one. You won't always find the same freshwater fish in Europe that you would in Bangladesh or West Bengal. We will always try our best to find something with a similar character, but sometimes it makes more sense to work with what is local and apply the Bengali cooking technique and flavour profile to it.
For me, the most important thing is understanding why an ingredient is there in the first place.

AM: Bengali cooking has a strong tradition of nose-to-tail fish cooking and transforming "discarded" ingredients into delicious dishes. Do you see these traditions as part of today's sustainability conversation?

RR: Absolutely.I feel like we are constantly talking about zero waste, fermentation, seasonality, preservation, and nose-to-tail cooking as if they're really modern ideas, but Bangladeshi food has always worked that way.
When you actually go to Bangladesh, it is just the normal way of living and eating.
It is not trendy. It is practical.
Fish heads, bones, vegetables that other cultures might discard, pickles, fermentation, dried fish, preserving ingredients, eating what is available at a particular moment. All of that is already built into the food culture.
I remember going to Bangladesh in December and looking for specific fruits I remembered having as a kid. I just couldn't find them anywhere.
The answer was simple: they weren't in season.
And I actually found that really beautiful.
There wasn't this expectation that absolutely everything should be available twelve months of the year or that it should be flown in from somewhere else just because somebody wants it.
You wait until it is in season, and when you finally eat it, it feels much more special. It usually tastes so much better too.
I think there is something really respectful about eating like that.
So I would never want to suddenly rebrand these things as some new modern philosophy.
Bangladeshis have been having this conversation through the way they cook for generations. It just comes very naturally.

AM: What have been the most memorable or rewarding moments in your journey so far?
There have been loads.

RR: Doing our residency at Carousel in London was a big moment for me because it was probably the first time I really felt the project being seen within that part of the London restaurant world.
Berlin has also been incredibly important because Roti Mami really built a community here. We have done residencies and popups with places like Gardine and Refuge Worldwide, and seeing people come back again and again is probably one of the most satisfying things.
Travelling the project internationally has also been quite surreal. Cooking Bengali food in New York, Mexico City, Melbourne, Lagos, Amsterdam and other cities makes you realise how far food can

travel while still carrying a really personal story.
Recently we also filmed a collaboration with Dishoom, which felt really special.
But honestly, some of the moments that stay with me most are much smaller.
Often, a Bengali guest comes up after dinner and says, "This reminds me of my mum," or "I haven't eaten this since I was a child."
That means a lot.

AM: What has surprised you most about introducing Bengali home cooking to diners in the Western world? Have their responses changed the way you think about your own food heritage?

RR: The biggest surprise has probably been just how curious people are, and how little convincing they actually need.
I think sometimes we assume that something needs to be familiar or somehow simplified for people to connect with it.
My experience has been almost completely the opposite.
People are really curious.
They want to know what shatkora is. They want to understand shutki.
They want to know why something tastes the way it does, where it comes from and how people would traditionally eat it.
I think that's amazing.
It has also completely changed how I look at my own food.
Things that I grew up thinking were completely ordinary suddenly become fascinating when somebody asks you to explain them.
You start looking at your own culture through fresh eyes and realise how much knowledge sits inside things you probably took for granted growing up.
It has also made me realise that Bengali food absolutely does not need to sit underneath a generic umbrella of "Indian food" for people to understand or enjoy it.
People are completely capable of learning the difference.
Bengali food deserves its own language, identity and space.

AM: What role can supper clubs play in preserving and promoting culinary heritage, especially cuisines that are under-represented in restaurants?

RR: I think supper clubs are incredibly important because they give people space to tell food stories without all the restrictions of a conventional restaurant.
A restaurant often needs recognisable dishes because customers need to walk past the menu and immediately understand what they are buying.
A supper club gives you much more freedom.
You can say, "Tonight I want to show you this particular dish, ingredient or story," and people arrive already open to that experience.
That creates space for foods that might otherwise disappear from restaurant culture.
It also allows second-generation cooks like me to actively research our own heritage.
You end up calling your mum, talking to your aunties, travelling somewhere, asking somebody how their grandmother made something.
In some ways, creating the menu becomes its own form of preservation.

AM: Can supper clubs also become platforms for promoting the culture, history, ingredients, food producers and tourism destinations associated with a particular region? If yes, how should governments support them?

RR: Definitely. Food is one of the easiest ways to make somebody curious about a place.
You eat something amazing, and suddenly you want to know where



that ingredient comes from, who grows it, where people eat it and what the landscape looks like.
Tourism boards and cultural institutions have a huge opportunity to work with independent chefs and diaspora food projects.
Rather than only promoting famous restaurants or very polished national campaigns, they could be supporting research trips, collaborations with farmers and producers, documentation of disappearing recipes, chef exchanges and international pop-up programmes.
For Bangladesh especially, I think food could be such an amazing entry point into tourism.
There is so much regional diversity that people outside the country simply do not know about.
Independent chefs and supper clubs can almost act as cultural translators.
You can introduce somebody to a flavour first, and suddenly they are curious about the place, the people and everything around it.

AM: Where do you see Roti Mami going next? What are your future aspirations?

KK: I want Roti Mami to keep travelling, but I also want to deepen what we are doing.
The first phase has been very much about movement. Taking the food into different cities, learning from different kitchens and building a community around the project.
The next phase for me is about building something more substantial from that.
I would love to do longer residencies, more collaborations with chefs and producers, and eventually create a permanent space that still has the freedom and energy Roti Mami has now.
I am also really interested in where Bengali food can sit within the wider international restaurant conversation.
I want Bengali food to be recognised with the same specificity that people now give to regional Italian, Japanese, Mexican or Chinese cuisines.



There is absolutely no reason why Bengali food should not have that level of international recognition.

AM: Are there particular regions, dishes or food stories of Bengali-speaking communities that you would still like to explore and bring to your diners?

KK: So many. I honestly feel like I have barely started.

I want to spend much more time travelling through Bangladesh and learning directly from people cooking at home.

Because I am Sylheti, I naturally want to go even deeper into Sylheti cooking, but I am also really interested in coastal food around Chittagong and Cox's Bazar, the river cultures of Bangladesh, Indigenous food traditions, and the differences between rural and urban cooking.

I would also love to spend more time exploring West Bengal and Kolkata.

And I am really interested in food connected to migration. How Bengali communities in London, New York, the Middle East and elsewhere have adapted dishes depending on what ingredients were available to them.

Diaspora food becomes its own food culture over time, and I think those stories are just as important.



There is honestly so much still to learn, and I think that is one of the most exciting things about Roti Mami.

AM: Finally, what would you most like a guest to take away from a Roti Mami dinner?

KK: First, I want them to leave really full!

Beyond that, I want them to leave curious.

Maybe they discover an ingredient they have never tasted before.

Maybe they realise Bengali food is much broader than the restaurant dishes they associate with South Asian food. Maybe they go home and research Sylhet, Bangladesh or the history of something they ate.

For Bengali guests, I hope they also feel recognition and pride.

I spent part of my childhood feeling like the food we ate at home was something slightly embarrassing or different.

Now I get to serve those same flavours in cities all over the world and watch people get excited about them.

That reversal is really powerful.

Ultimately, I want Roti Mami to feel generous. It should feel like somebody has invited you into their world, fed you properly, and sent you home knowing a little more than you did when you arrived.



A love for South Indian cooking



Named after the Deccan plateau, Deccan Canteen is a Toronto-based vegetarian supper club founded by Aalekhya Vasantavada and Pranav Iyer. Described as their “love letter to South Indian home cooking,” the project aims to to highlight the comforting, regional food of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu beyond the stereotypes about South Indian food.

Food has always been at the heart of our relationship - we're not just co-founders of Deccan Canteen, but also partners in life!

Our journey really began eight years ago back in India, bonding over a shared obsession with exploring the food scene in the cities we lived in. When we moved to Canada, that passion evolved. Cooking shifted from a necessity to something that brought us real joy, and we quickly realised how much we loved hosting and bringing people together around food. Deccan Canteen was born out of a desire to showcase the side of Indian cuisine you rarely see on standard restaurant menus, either in India or abroad. We wanted to dig into forgotten, lesser-known recipes from home kitchens that are often not documented, celebrate the rich social and cultural history behind these dishes, and put our own creative spin on the foods we grew up eating.

Beyond food, we also wanted to address something we felt was missing in today's world: true "third spaces." In a fast-paced, digitally driven world, making genuine connections and meeting like-minded people has become surprisingly difficult. Food has an incredible, universal power to break down barriers regardless of where you come from or what age you are. Food is obviously at the core of what we do, but our goal is to also build a space where people don't just come for the food, but leave truly understanding the origins of each dish and having shared a meal with strangers they meaningfully connected with!



The challenges

Launching and growing Deccan Canteen came with a learning curve. We went from hosting casual dinner parties for eight people at home to running supper club experiences for up to 18 guests, with no prior commercial hospitality experience. For the first event, partnering with The Depanneur in Toronto was invaluable. It gave us access to a venue, staff, and operational support, while also introducing Deccan Canteen to an existing audience of food enthusiasts who regularly attended their events. After the launch, the challenge became building momentum independently. We created an Instagram page to showcase the menus, explain the theme behind every supper, and connect directly with potential guests. That channel has continued to be one of the most effective ways to generate interest and drive sign ups. Another ongoing challenge but also the most exciting part of this process has been creating a new theme and menu for

every edition. It involves a lot of research, experimentation, and recipe testing, but over time that process has become much more streamlined. One lesson that took some adjustment was moving away from the traditional Indian mindset of showing generosity through very large portions. Fine tuning portion sizes and pacing each course properly has been essential to ensuring guests can enjoy the full experience from start to finish without feeling overwhelmed too early in the meal.

South Indian food

One of the reasons we started Deccan Canteen was to challenge the idea that South Indian food begins and ends with idli, dosa, vada, and uttapam. South Indian cuisine is incredibly diverse, and we are passionate about showcasing some of its lesser known regional dishes, particularly from North Coastal Andhra, where Aalekhya's family is from. Many of the recipes we serve are dishes we grew up eating at home and in some cases they're not commonly found even in restaurants across India. What's exciting is that we're still discovering new dishes and ingredients ourselves, which makes sharing them with our guests even more meaningful.



We try to introduce diners to these ingredients before they even arrive. Through social media, we share stories about unique ingredients and dishes, like chinta chiguru (tender tamarind leaves), to give people a glimpse of what to expect. Once they're at the table, we pair authenticity with familiarity. Some dishes are presented exactly as we remember them from home, while others are inspired by traditional dishes but adapted into formats that feel approachable to a wider audience. For example, we turned atukulu pongaram (flattened rice dosa variety) into a savory waffle served with a classic peanut chutney and an idli podi whipped cream. Storytelling is a big part of the experience. We love sharing a dish's origin story, the memories behind it, and the ingredients that make it special. We hope guests leave not only having enjoyed a memorable meal, but also with a new appreciation for the incredible depth and diversity of South Indian cuisine.

Specialties

Our very first edition was centred on the traditional banana leaf meals we grew up with in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Since then, we've continued to stay rooted in authentic South Indian flavours while reimagining them in new and unexpected ways. Some of our most memorable dishes have come from that balance of authenticity and creativity. For instance, at one of our brunch clubs, we made a curry leaf podi butter as our take on the classic bun maska, and served steamed polenta with sambar in place of the traditional idli. Another

guest favourite was a dessert from our coastal summer menu: an ice apple and coconut mousse sweetened with palm jaggery (karupatti or thati bellam), which captured flavours many people had never experienced before. More recently, we served a historic Nizam-era Hyderabadi onion kheer for the dessert course. The idea of turning an ingredient most people associate with savoury cooking into a rich, velvety dessert surprised a lot of guests and sparked some great conversations around the table.

We recently had the opportunity to bring a few of our favorites to a wider audience through a month-long weekend pop-up with Kauphi, a local Toronto filter coffee brand. It was a fun experience to see some of our signature bakes in a retail setting. We featured our cardamom pistachio crumble cake, which first appeared at one of our brunch clubs and paired very well with Kauphi's rose milk. We also featured a white chocolate and curry leaf shortbread, inspired by a recipe shared by Hyderabad-based Manam Chocolate that we'd been excited to introduce to people in Toronto. The response was incredibly encouraging. Seeing both items sell out over



the weekends proved that these distinct flavour profiles resonate just as strongly on a retail pop-up counter as they do over a multi-course dinner.

We don't alter the traditional spice levels for our supper clubs because our goal is to offer a true, authentic representation of the dishes we serve. Since our guests sign up for a fixed, curated tasting menu, they know what to expect from the menu we share in advance. That said, we want everyone to feel comfortable. To accommodate different spice tolerances, we always have fresh yogurt and cooling side elements on hand to help manage the heat. Our guests come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds and palates, and most are excited to explore the flavors as they are. A big reason for this is how we structure our meals. We thoughtfully balance each course so that no single element or intense spice dominates the palate. By thoughtfully weaving together distinct flavor profiles - spicy, tangy, sweet, and cooling, the overall experience feels harmonious rather than overwhelming.

Ingredients

Toronto is a multicultural city with an established diaspora, which makes sourcing specialised South Indian ingredients surprisingly accessible. Thanks to the diverse network of local South Asian grocers and speciality markets across the Greater Toronto Area, we are able to find produce like gongura locally with relative ease. For shelf-stable or very specific ingredients like thati bellam or karupatti (palm jaggery), we bring



them back ourselves when visiting India.

Looking ahead, we are actively shifting toward integrating more locally grown, seasonal ingredients into our menus. Coming from a sustainability background, the principle of cooking with what the land naturally provides in every season deeply resonates with us. We have already been experimenting behind the scenes, and our upcoming editions will increasingly reflect this harmony between authentic South Indian flavour profiles and local Ontario produce

We have really enjoyed finding ways to incorporate local Canadian produce and seasonal ingredients into our menus. For instance, we have reimagined bisibelebath using pearl couscous instead of rice, and served polenta, made from Canadian-grown maize, alongside sambar as a substitute for idli. Our most recent summer supper club took that idea even further. We incorporated produce from our own rooftop garden, including tomatoes, basil, and jalapeños. One dish we served was a blue cheese and peach kulcha with two homemade chutneys: a sweet-and-spicy peach-jalapeño chutney inspired by traditional tamarind chutney, and a tomato-purple basil chutney inspired by South Indian tomato thokku/pachadi. During our summer editions, we even offered guests tours of our rooftop garden before the meal to showcase the produce being served.

Highlights of the journey

Reflecting on our first year, we are filled with gratitude for how much we have grown, learned, and been embraced by the community here in Toronto. Looking back, every single supper club has felt like a milestone. The overwhelmingly positive response to the food and the genuine curiosity people have shown have made this journey very rewarding. One particularly meaningful moment was at our very first supper club, where we paid tribute to our grandmothers. They are our culinary icons, the inspiration behind so much of what we do. Their love for cooking, feeding people with so much love and generosity, shaped our relationship with food. Seeing guests enjoy and connect with the home-style dishes and flavours we grew up with has been truly special.

We've also loved becoming part of Toronto's food community. Through collaborations with local businesses, conversations with fellow food enthusiasts, and opportunities like this interview, we've met so many wonderful people who share our curiosity and appreciation for food. It validates what we are building, and we couldn't be more excited for what lies ahead!



Regional food

The Indian subcontinent is home to an extraordinary, hyper-regional diversity of cuisines, many of which have been passed down through families for generations with little written record. Without deliberate efforts to document and promote these lesser-known dishes, this invaluable culinary heritage could be lost. We shouldn't shy away from serving dishes that might feel "too authentic" or unfamiliar to a global audience

At the same time, Indian cuisine as a whole is fundamentally misunderstood when reduced to standard, homogenised restaurant menus. It is a deeply complex, technique-driven culinary tradition. That's why supper clubs, independent pop-ups, and passionate home chefs play such a critical role. We give people a reason to look beyond the standardized menus, and truly value the depth of this cuisine

Aspirations

The dream has always been to open a brick-and-mortar restaurant. What it will look like is still taking shape, but the goal for now is to keep building toward that vision through more supper clubs and collaborative pop-ups. We also plan to take some dedicated time off to travel across India to get some fresh inspiration and perspective, giving us clearer direction for the next steps.



Recipe

Raw Banana Podi (Vazhakkai Podi)

Ingredients

- ½ cup toor dal
- 4–5 dried red chilies
- 1 raw banana, chopped
- Oil (for sautéing)
- Asafoetida (hing), a pinch
- Salt, to taste

Instructions:

Roast Dal & Chilies: Heat a little oil in a pan. Fry the toor dal and dried red chilies until golden and aromatic. Transfer to a plate.

Sauté Banana: In the same pan, add a bit more oil, hing, salt, and the chopped raw banana. Sauté until the banana is soft and cooked

through.

Cool Completely: Allow all fried ingredients (dal, chilies, and banana) to cool completely to room temperature before grinding.

Grind: Powder the cooled dal and chilies first. Then, add the cooked banana and pulse briefly to a coarse texture.

Vankaya Kothimeera Karam (Eggplant in Fresh Cilantro-Chili Paste)

Ingredients

8–10 small Indian baby eggplants (or substitute with any eggplant cut into bite-sized cubes)

Fresh Cilantro-Spice Paste:

- 1 cup fresh cilantro leaves and soft stems, loosely packed
- 3–4 green chilies (adjust to heat preference)
- 1-inch fresh ginger, peeled

Tadka (Tempering):

- 2 tbsp cooking oil (peanut or sesame oil works best)
- ½ tsp mustard seeds
- ½ tsp cumin seeds
- 1 tsp urad dal (split black gram)
- 1 tsp chana dal (split bengal gram)
- 2–3 dried red chilies
- 1 sprig fresh curry leaves
- Asafoetida
- Salt, to taste

Instructions

1. Prepare the Paste: Combine the cilantro, green chilies, and ginger in a small blender or food processor. Blend into a smooth paste using 1–2 tablespoons of water if needed. Set aside.
2. Prep the Eggplants: Chop the eggplants into bite-sized pieces and immediately submerge them in a bowl of salted water. This prevents oxidation and removes any bitterness.
3. Tempering: Heat oil in a medium pan over medium heat. Add the mustard seeds, cumin seeds, urad dal, chana dal, asafoetida and dried red chilies. Saute until the lentils turn golden brown and the mustard seeds begin to splutter. Toss in the curry leaves and sauté for 10 seconds.
4. Sauté the Eggplants: Drain the eggplants thoroughly and add them to the pan. Season with salt. Cover with a lid and cook on medium-low heat for 8–10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the pieces begin to soften.
5. Add the Masala: Pour in the blended cilantro-ginger-chili paste. Stir well to coat the eggplant pieces evenly.
6. Traditionally each individual eggplant is stuffed with the masala, but if small eggplants are unavailable, the above method can be followed.
7. Simmer to Finish: Cover and cook for another 5–7 minutes on low heat until the eggplants are completely tender and the raw aroma of the green masala vanishes.

Serve hot alongside steamed rice with a dollop of ghee, or pair with warm chapatis.



From the GSB kitchen to the global table

- Dr. Akshata Shenoy





The Goud Saraswat Brahmin community is lesser known and our cuisines are less explored. People generalise South Indian cuisine as one cluster without knowing the branches. GSB cuisine is sustainable, we believe in root to tip and zero waste cooking. People are now choosing veganism whereas most of our cooking follows plant-based cuisine from ages. This food is not available in any restaurants in the UK which is great because once it is commercialised, you lose the authenticity. That's when I thought of hosting super clubs which are more intimate, focusing on sharing recipes, our culture through food and introducing something new to people here.

One of the biggest challenges was procuring ingredients and second was finding a venue. I wanted to host these in my apartment but as it is too tiny, I thought it was best to hire a restaurant or community call. Convincing restaurant owners was challenging as I would need full access to their kitchen. As GSB cuisine uses a lot of local and seasonal produce, this was another challenge to procure the ingredients. But as I have worked in the hospitality industry in India for over eight years before moving to the UK, I have contacts through which this got a little easier.

Gathering recipes

I have pursued a PhD in Culinary-Hotel Management and my subject was exploratory study of Karavali cuisine, coastal karnataka culture and heritage. We have always been cooking GSB cuisine at home. My grandma used to live with us and I have inherited a lot of recipes from her. Whenever I would visit Udupi and Mangaluru for my research, I would visit multiple restaurants and have a chat with the owners. I have collected recipes from my aunts and other family members.

GSB cuisines

This is an interesting cuisine. I could probably write a book on this, hopefully one day but some of the iconic dishes are Odi Ghashi, Zalkya Randai, Chane Ghashi, Kuvaale Saasam, Ambo Avnaasa Saasam, Kulta chutney, Phagila Phodi, Karate Phodi, Jeevkadgi Phodi, Godshe, Patholi, Cheppi Kheeri, Vaali ambat, Gajbaje, Goli Bhajo, Buns, Shevai, Dalithoy, Devasthana Saaru, Tendle Bibya

Upkari, Bendi, Khotto, Goli Bhajo, Pathrado, Sannapolo, Sungta Hooman. As Goud Saraswat Brahmins are pescatarians, we eat a lot of fresh and local fish in the form of curries and fry.

Ingredients

We have a Sri Lankan and an Asian shop in the neighbouring town where I usually source the fresh vegetables from. Kokum I get it from Goa. Bimbli, fresh cashews, and Byadgi chillies are sourced from a local supplier in Mangalore who sends everything through courier.

We easily get Mackerel, kingfish, lady fish, shellfish, muscles, crabs here which are imported from India.

Introducing GSB dishes

During all our supper clubs, once the food is served, I run down the menu. I will explain the history about the GSB community and how the flavours and techniques are different to the above cuisines. While planning the menu I make sure there is no repetition of ingredients and also introduce everyone to new ingredients that they have not tried or seen before. techniques that are unfamiliar, for example using jackfruits leaves to make cups for steaming idlis etc.

I want people to experience the cuisine just the way it is and the way it is served in our homes. Most of the restaurants would alter the taste and seasonings to please the western crowd but when we go to any speciality restaurants like Italian, Japanese or Korean would they change it for us? Similarly, unless we introduce people to something, they wouldn't know the authenticity of a particular product or cuisine.

Once, a 75 yr old lady said my crab curry reminded her of her grandma who used to make it exactly like I did. An older lady called me Annapurna and said the food reminded her of her hometown and that she is proud that someone from my generation is taking forward this cuisine and the last one when i see empty plates all polished off the food. These testimonials of authenticity are the highlights of my journey.
Keep hosting more such events without focusing on monetary returns, publish more articles and create awareness, try and put up food stalls and do some sampling so people get familiar with the idea.

I would like to host more supper clubs on a regular basis at home, and introduce sub-regional cuisine to the people here.

Someday I hope to get recognition from my favourite chefs, like Chef Gordon Ramsay and Chef Vikas Khanna.



Redefining

Indian regional food in California



Delhi Darling Table is Karuna Kumar's Bay Area hospitality consultancy. Her supper club offers intimate, single-theme ticketed dinners where each multi-course sitting explores a single region of India

AM: What inspired you to start Delhi Darling?

KK: My path in hospitality stems from a deep passion for culinary narrative, menu architecture and concept design. Having previously owned and operated three successful restaurant concepts, I realized that true hospitality extends far beyond serving good food- it is about crafting an immersive experience. I founded Delhi Darling to help brands, supper clubs and hospitality concepts articulate their visual identity, preserve culinary heritage and structure menus that speak to modern, discerning diners.

AM: Did you face any challenges in launching, developing, and promoting the Indian hospitality consulting firm? If yes, how did you overcome them?

KK: The primary challenge in Indian hospitality consulting, especially in Western markets, is moving past the broad, generic generalisation of "Indian food." Positioning a firm focused on niche regional menu architecture required educating stakeholders on the vast distinctions between micro-regional traditions (such as Awadhi, Goan, Maharashtrian or Kolkata). I overcame this by anchoring our strategy in rigorous



culinary research, visual aesthetics and clear operational frameworks that proved micro-regional concepts are both culturally rich and commercially viable.

AM: What were the highlights of your professional journey?

KK: Before I launched my own restaurants, most Indian menus in the market were largely standardised, offering interchangeable dishes and multi-regional formats across most establishments. My major achievement was pioneering single-heritage, micro-regional menu architecture, proving that focused regional dining could succeed commercially and setting a new industry benchmark. Rather than focusing on corporate chains, my work centres on preserving landmark regional food traditions such as royal Awadhi, coastal Goan and Maharashtrian heritage cuisines through independent concept design, menu architecture and culinary strategy. After building three restaurant concepts, I transitioned to a direct-to-consumer model with weekly rotating regional menus, which refined our recipes and built the core community for Delhi Darling Table. Today, that same distinctiveness drives Delhi Darling Table's supper club format - one region, one story, one table at a time.

AM: Did you face any challenges in promoting different Indian flavours across US markets?

KK: Diners in markets like California are incredibly curious and discerning, yet many are initially familiar with only a narrow subset of Indian cuisine. The challenge was introducing deep, complex regional flavour profiles such as the fiery sourness of a Goan Ambotik or the delicate aromatic layers of an Awadhi Galouti without dumbing them down. Rather than altering core



spice profiles, I focused on context, curation and narrative framing. When guests understand the history, techniques, and flavour balance behind a regional dish, their appreciation shifts from intimidation to excitement.

AM: What led you to start a supper club?

KK: Delhi Darling Table was born from a desire to create a slow, intimate, and deeply narrative-driven dining experience. Standard restaurant settings can often feel transactional; a supper club allows us to transform a meal into an intentional evening. Guests gather around a single, thoughtfully styled table to connect over shared history, culture, and regional Indian heritage exploring each dish as a distinct chapter in a larger culinary story.

AM: How did you promote your intimate dinners?

KK: We built our audience organically through visual storytelling on social media, word-of-mouth recommendations and an exclusive waitlist model. By sharing moody, rustic imagery, behind-the-scenes menu architecture and the historical context of each dish, we cultivated an engaged community of food enthusiasts actively seeking intentional, experience-driven dining.

AM: Your supper clubs are described as a "table worth traveling for" where each event focuses on a single region. How do you select the region?

KK: Menu selection is guided by seasonality, culinary narrative, and flavour balance across our dining calendar. One edition might explore the complex, delicate royal heritage of Lucknow and Awadh, while another journeys to the vibrant coastal kitchens of Goa or the historic food of Old Delhi and Kolkata. Every region selected must offer a distinct cultural identity and tell a cohesive, multi-course story through its flavour progression.

AM: How do you design the menus for each region?

KK: Every menu is structured like a narrative arc. We balance rich heritage preparations with light, refreshing palate cleansers, ensuring a thoughtful distribution of clean proteins, ancient grains and plant-forward elements. I design each course to play with contrasting textures and temperatures moving from delicate aromatics to deep, slow-cooked reductions and ending with subtle, botanically infused desserts.

AM: What are your best sellers?

KK: Melt-in-your-mouth Awadhi Galouti Kebabs, Kolhapuri Tambda and Pandhra Rassa broth pairings with sukka and Jowar bhakri, vibrant Goan Prawn Ambotik, and heritage lentil preparations like charcoal-smoked Dal Makhani paired with ancient grains continuously prove to be guest favourites.

AM: Do you adapt spice levels and other elements of dishes depending on the diner demographics?

KK: I advocate for flavour integrity over sheer heat. Authentic regional Indian cooking relies on intricate spice layering—aromatics, souring agents, and roasted seed

pastes rather than overwhelming capsaicin. While I maintain original regional flavor matrices, I carefully balance pungency with cooling herbs and cultured fats so the true depth of the dish shines through for every diner demographic without burning the palate.

AM: How do you source ingredients? Have you created any dishes using local ingredients as alternatives?

KK: Sourcing is a thoughtful balance of specialised regional imports and seasonal local produce. Operating in California gives us access to world-class produce and wild seafood that complement Indian coastal and agrarian traditions. For example, using locally harvested wild-caught seafood in traditional Bengali Shorshe or Goan Ambotik reductions, or incorporating seasonal local stone fruits and greens into fresh chutney matrices, keeps the menu dynamic and fresh while strictly honouring foundational flavour principles.

AM: For your high-value corporate events, weddings, and private tables, what does the menu and decor building process look like?

KK: It is a bespoke, culinary-led design process. We begin with a deep discovery session to understand the client's vision, event tone and guest demographics, from which I build custom menu blueprints complete with dietary pairing notes. Because the table setting should seamlessly elevate the food, I set the overarching creative direction for the room guiding the mood, lighting, tableware choices and linen palettes so the entire atmosphere naturally mirrors the regional story on the plate

AM: What do you enjoy most about the food business?

KK: The ultimate reward is watching guests experience a distinct regional Indian flavoUr profile for the first time and connecting deeply with its heritage. Navigating the continuum between high-level menu consulting, large-scale event production and intimate supper club hosting has allowed me to engage with every dimension of hospitality from grand brand strategy down to the nuanced human energy across a single dining table.

AM: What kind of food trends do you see in the global market? What opportunities should aspiring food entrepreneurs build on?

KK: The global market is moving decisively away from generic, pan-regional dining toward hyper-regional authenticity, narrative-led dining formats, and functional whole-food menus centered on ancient grains and clean proteins. Consumers now seek depth over breadth. Aspiring entrepreneurs should embrace hyper-specialization rather than trying to satisfy everyone. Owning a focused, distinct niche—whether that is a micro-regional coastal cuisine, single-origin heritage framing, or an intimate supper club concept—builds far stronger brand equity and guest devotion today.

AM: How do you think the Indian diaspora should promote their cuisines?

KK: The diaspora must lead with pride in culinary specificity and elevate the presentation, technique, and heritage framing around our food. We need to move beyond standardized buffet curries and showcase the vast, vibrant diversity of our regional foodways focusing on seasonal local produce, ancient cooking techniques, elevated visual aesthetics and the rich historical roots behind every dish.

AM: What are your future aspirations?

KK: My goal is to grow Delhi Darling Table into a defining name in heritage dining—scaling our supper club series, debuting an artisanal spice collection, publishing my book on what two decades of devotion taught me about life and love, and consulting for brands elevating regional Indian cuisine worldwide.

Recipe

Goan Fish Ambotik

Ingredients:

- 500 gms fish (Pomfret, Mackerel or any firm fosh) cleaned and cut into pieces
- Tamarind pulp - 2 tablespoons
- Onion - 1 medium finely chopped
- Tomato - 1 large chopped
- Coconut oil - 2 tablespoons
- Salt - To taste

Spice Paste -

- Dry red chilies: 6-8 (adjust to taste)
- Coriander seeds: 1 tablespoon
- Cumin seeds: 1 teaspoon
- Fenugreek seeds: ¼ teaspoon
- Garlic: 4-5 cloves
- Turmeric powder: ½ teaspoon
- Peppercorns: 6-8

Method -

1. Prepare the Spice Paste -
Dry roast the red chilies, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, and fenugreek seeds.
Grind them into a fine paste along with garlic, turmeric, and peppercorns using some water. Set the spice paste aside.
2. Cook the Base -
Heat coconut oil in a deep pan. Add the chopped onions and sauté until they turn golden brown.
Add the chopped tomato and cook until it becomes soft and the oil begins to separate from the mixture.
3. Add Spice Paste:
Add the prepared spice paste to the pan and cook for 5-6 minutes until the raw aroma of the spices fades, stirring occasionally.
4. Prepare the Curry -
Add tamarind pulp and salt mixing everything well. Add enough water to adjust the curry's consistency to your liking.
Bring the mixture to a boil, then reduce the heat and let it simmer for 10-12 minutes.
5. Cook the Fish -
Gently add the fish pieces to the curry. Cover and let it simmer for 6 - 7 minutes, or until the fish is cooked through and tender. Be careful not to overcook the fish.
6. Serve -
Serve Ambotik hot with steamed rice



A Gujarati Supper Club In London

- Punam Vaja



khao

Khao Suppers was born from the idea of sharing the dishes I have enjoyed since childhood but rarely found at an eatery in London. As a born-and-bred East Londoner, I grew up with strong Gujarati influences, which drives the core of the dishes we serve. Beyond the food, what left a lasting impression was the hospitality shown to every guest who visited the Vaja home. Each visitor is spoilt with cups of chai, sweetmeats or savoury snacks. My Grandma was particularly skilled at hosting and always made sure no one left without a full belly and a hearty smile!



The biggest challenge was making sure I did justice to the authentic dishes and their names. It was about being genuine while also making the dishes appealing to people who may have never seen food like this. I wanted them to not only enjoy the food but also to understand the stories and history behind the dishes. Why do we use the word shaak and not curry? Why is garam masala not used in all our cooking? In a city where "Indian" food was specifically seen as 'korma' and 'balti', it became almost challenging to bring a fresh and new perspective to people about different regional cuisines. This complex challenge still continues on today, but I feel with so many supper clubs popping up, Gujarati food and other regional Indian cuisines are really getting a place at the table.

The cooking style at each Khao supper club is a combination of recipes and dishes passed on from Punam's mum and dad, from my Baa (Grandma) and the women in my family. They're recipes and cooking techniques that have been passed down verbally for generations. As a Gujarati born here in London, my view of Gujarat and its culture comes entirely from my family and their perspective. From the music and songs I heard and learnt to sing, to the celebrations and festivities, to the language and dialect we speak in. My heritage is from the Saurashtra region and so my food represents the dishes of the Kathiawad peninsula.. Mum was born in Mumbai, and so there is a little influence from the food available in that city. Dad was born in East Africa, so there is also an influence on the Gujarati cuisine that existed in Uganda and Kenya from the 60's and 70's, that migrated here to Britain with him. I have also spent some time researching Parsi food, a Gujarati-speaking community largely based in Mumbai and South Gujarat.

The menu for each of our events varies based on a few factors: is it dinner or lunch/brunch? What season are we in, and also what country. As Khao travels to different cities and countries, we consider local produce. When planning a menu, we love to present a mix of classic and traditional Gujarati flavours

and dishes, along with my own personal take on them. Usually, the starters and appetisers are a modern take on something like chaat, bhajiya, some kind of nashta dish or something very tasty and playful. The main course tends to be more traditional, using seasonal ingredients from organic, local farmers here in the Southern UK region. Dessert is where I tend to go beyond the box, looking at traditional flavours and textures like shrikhand, gulab jamun, and falooda, and presenting them in a more modern, fusion way. I will bring in my love for baking, creating British twists with Gujarati flair on a posset, trifle or cheesecake.

There is such a vast variety and range of Gujarati cuisines, not just hailing from Gujarat directly, but from Gujarati households in other parts of the world. I feel that, in order to share the dishes where my confidence lies, it is important that I can be as authentic in doing so, and so my events focus on only a smaller portion of this region, but I do hope someday I can explore Gujarati cuisines on a wider spectrum/

Whilst I use local produce/ ingredients, I do not believe in altering any traditional family recipes to suit a more "British" palate. People come for an authentic experience and mostly all my guests over these eight years want to experience the food in the most original form. The only difference is how I present my dishes over several courses, so guests can really taste and understand the varying levels of flavours and spices used.

I love to share the proper words





and names for dishes. I won't say "curry", as I feel part of the experience is also understanding it. I love to use as much descriptive language as possible for my guests. Even if the room is full of native Gujaratis, it's important to share what people can expect, and also invite them to keep an open mind for what they may not expect!

I think my top dishes to share are Gujarati Daar, because it is so different to the tadka dal or other dals that people are used to. It is different in how it looks and the flavours are so impactful and layered that people really enjoy it. Then you have Kadhi, again, something very rarely found at an eatery in the city; no one really serves Kadhi the way it is made at home, if at all. I love its simplicity,

and people are always taken aback by the sour yoghurt and spicy flavour combos. Lastly, I love sharing Dhokla! They are a Gujarati staple and even more than sharing them itself, I enjoy the process of soaking lentils and how it is such a careful and long-preparation process, even to the point where, after it is steamed, you still finish it with a light vaghar!

There are a few key moments that have stuck with me, some big, some really small and only feel like a big thing for me. The first has to be the first time I ever got a tip. A Guest just left a £20 note on the table as a sort of gratuity and it was a silent and small gesture that went a long way! The second has to be, being flown out with my team to host and cook for a large Gujarati family in the USA. We spent four

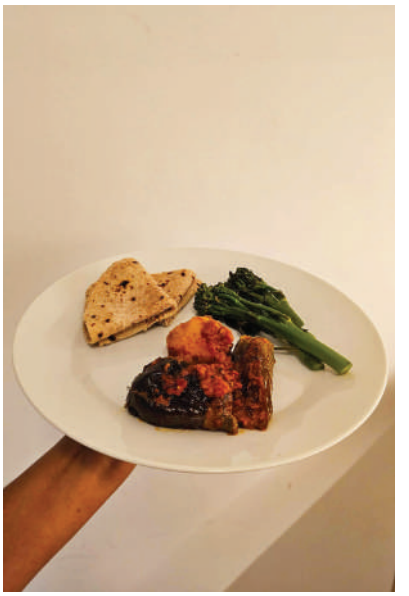




days having a great time cooking dishes that were both Gujarati and not, and spending time with this wonderful family. For my work with Gujarati food and for hosting such unique supper clubs, I have received many accolades. CNT mag recognised me as their one to watch in 2024, In 2025 I received a lot of magazine coverage from London and India, and this year, the international salt brand Maldon gave me the recognition to go on their Maldon Salt Top 50 for 2026 alongside some of the world's top chefs and food creators. This journey has allowed me to share both my love for Gujarati food not just in London, but all over the UK, Portugal, Australia, India and the USA, and I hope to continue to be able to do so.

I absolutely believe supper clubs can become a strong platform for promoting not just a different culture, but the history and stories of its host, the food is just a gateway in doing so. I have had many people approach me after they have been to one of my events, asking if I am planning to create a tour or group visit, as they feel so intrigued by the culture and not just the food!

I want each guest to leave with an understanding that there is more to Indian food than just chicken tikka masala. I want people to understand that vegetables can be at the forefront of a meal, just as delicious and interesting as a meat or fish dish. I also love when my guests mingle with each other, and so overall, I'd love them to take away an enriching and fulfilling feeling, like they've been to my



home and are walking away with a full belly and heart too.

We launched Khao Stores last year - this is a place for curated items for the kitchen as well as merchandise, a way for people to recreate Gujarati cooking at home, plus some fun and quirky T-shirt designs. I have been asked often about a khao restaurant, and whilst we'd love a permanent space, I still haven't decided "what" and "where" this will be ideal! Keep your eyes peeled!













AN ASSAMESE EXPERIENCE IN BENGALURU

Upen, Florine, Roikka and Chayanika heard the same question from colleagues and friends: where can one find authentic Assamese food in Bengaluru? This led to the start of Rongali Table, serving the food of Assam including specialties of the the Mising ethnic group.

UPEN AND ROIKKA



Rongali Table started quite organically. We are college friends and were roommates during our engineering days. After working in different cities for several years, they found ourselves living as neighbours again in Bengaluru, this time with our families.



Friends and colleagues often asked where they could experience authentic Assamese food. We would sometimes invite people home, cook for them, and explain the dishes — where the ingredients came from, how they were traditionally prepared, and the memories associated with them.

Those evenings made us realise people weren't just interested in eating Assamese food; they were curious about the culture and stories behind it.

That is what led to Rongali Table. We wanted to create something that felt less like a restaurant and more like being invited into an Assamese home — where food, stories, hospitality and people could come together around a table.

The biggest challenge was probably taking an idea that started as a casual conversation and actually making it happen.

We decided to experiment with the idea and moved very quickly. Within a week, we created our Instagram page, set up a basic website and hosted our first supper club on 9 August 2025.

Another challenge was introducing a cuisine many people in Bengaluru had never experienced. We didn't want the food to feel intimidating or have to change it to make it familiar. Instead, we focused on storytelling and hospitality.



We explain the ingredients, techniques and stories behind the dishes, and because we have only around six guests per batch, we can actually have conversations with everyone.

The response to our first event was a huge encouragement — all the seats were booked. That gave us the confidence that there was genuine curiosity for Assamese



and Mishing food in Bengaluru.

A lot of our recipes come from lived experience. Assamese food is something we grew up eating and cooking, so many of the recipes are connected to our families and memories rather than coming from a cookbook.
Each of us brings a slightly different connection to the food. Upen has a strong connection to Mishing cuisine, particularly traditional pork and fish preparations. Chayanika brings many Assamese flavours to the table, including her homemade pithas and dishes such as haanh kumura.

We also think about the context in which food is traditionally eaten — festivals, family gatherings, seasons and everyday home cooking.

The recipes are therefore only one part of it. The memories and stories behind them matter just as much. When we serve something, we want to be able to tell guests why it matters to us.

We usually start with the story we want the menu to tell. We look for dishes that represent Assamese or Mishing food meaningfully, then consider how they work together as a meal.

Seasonality and ingredient availability also play a role.

For someone tasting Assamese food for the first time, we believe context makes a big difference. Rather than changing the food to make it familiar, we explain it.

Even our welcome bites are part of that introduction. We often welcome guests with Assam tea, Assamese pitha and homemade narikol laddu. Chayanika's pithas have become something our guests really look forward to, and Florine's homemade narikol laddus have also become a favourite.

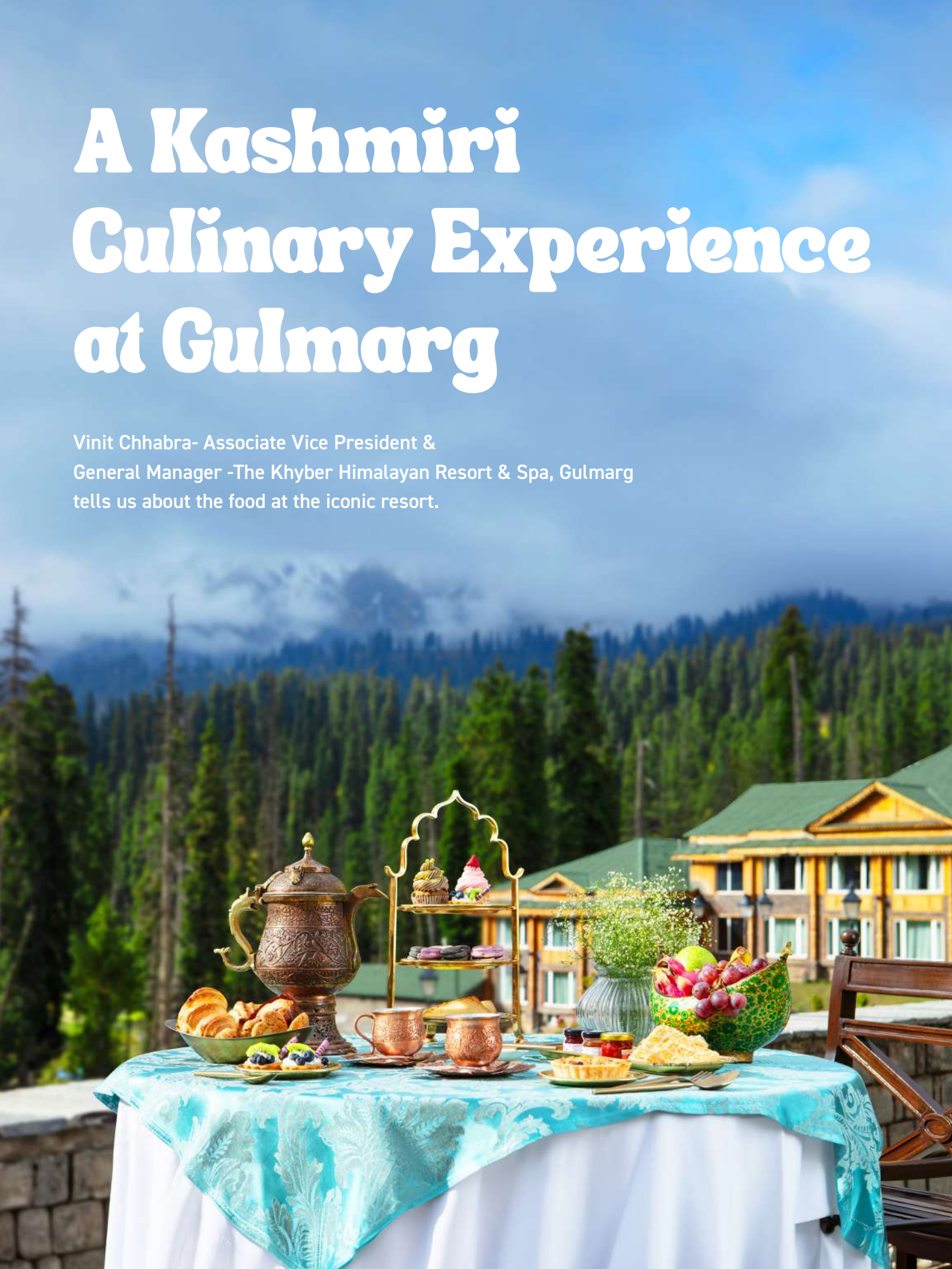
These little things give guests a gentle introduction to the flavours and the feeling of Assamese hospitality before they move into the main meal.





A Kashmiri Culinary Experience at Gulmarg

Vinit Chhabra- Associate Vice President &
General Manager -The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa, Gulmarg
tells us about the food at the iconic resort.



At The Khyber, our culinary philosophy is rooted in the idea that a mountain destination can offer both a strong sense of place and a broad culinary experience. Kashmir is central to that identity, reflected through its produce, flavours and culinary traditions, while our menus also span Indian, Italian, European and Asian cuisines. The intention is to offer guests familiarity alongside discovery, with each cuisine approached with the same emphasis on quality, freshness and thoughtful preparation.

The Kashmiri culinary heritage

Kashmiri culinary heritage is an important part of The Khyber's identity. Wazwan, in particular, represents the depth and ceremonial nature of Kashmiri hospitality and is an experience we are proud to introduce to our guests. Dishes such as Rogan Josh, Gushtaba, Rista and Yakhni are important expressions of the region's culinary repertoire.

Our approach is to respect the fundamentals of these dishes—the ingredients, techniques, balance of spices and method of preparation—rather than unnecessarily modernising them. The objective is to preserve their character while presenting them in a way that is



accessible to today's guests.

The Wazwan

We see Wazwan as much more than a meal; it is an expression of Kashmiri hospitality and tradition. For guests experiencing it for the first time, we introduce them to the dishes and the sequence of the meal, allowing them to understand the significance behind what is being served.

The presentation is intentionally immersive but not overly formal. We want our guests to appreciate the flavours, techniques and generosity associated with Wazwan, while understanding that it is an important part of Kashmir's cultural and culinary identity.

Beyond the Wazwan

We believe Kashmir's culinary story extends well beyond Wazwan. Ingredients such as haak, nadru, morels or gucchi, saffron and locally grown fruits and vegetables offer tremendous culinary possibilities.

We also look at preparations that highlight the produce itself rather than always relying on elaborate recipes. This allows guests to discover another side of Kashmiri food—one that is seasonal, ingredient-led and closely connected to the landscape.

The ingredients

Wherever practical, we source from the region and work with suppliers who can provide fresh, quality produce. Kashmir's agricultural landscape gives us access to an interesting range of fruits, vegetables, herbs and other ingredients.





Our sourcing philosophy is ultimately guided by freshness, quality and consistency, while supporting regional produce wherever the supply chain allows. Our aquaculture initiative is an extension of this thinking. The Khyber Himalayan Trout is being developed through a controlled, state-of-the-art aquaculture system in Kashmir, with a focus on producing high-quality trout in clean, carefully managed conditions. Importantly, the initiative extends beyond The Khyber's own culinary requirements, with the larger vision of making quality Himalayan trout available to the wider HORECA sector. It is an effort to develop a consistent, locally produced source of trout for hotels, restaurants and other professional kitchens while creating a stronger farm-to-table ecosystem within the region.

The cuisine mix

The starting point is always our guests. The Khyber welcomes travellers from India and across the world, and our culinary offering needs to reflect that diversity without losing its sense of place. We therefore look for cuisines and dishes that complement the setting and the expectations of a luxury mountain resort. Italian, European, Asian and Indian offerings provide variety, but the common thread is the quality of ingredients, careful execution and an emphasis on flavour.

Preparing international dishes using Kashmiri or Himalayan ingredients

We find this particularly exciting. Kashmir offers an extraordinary palette of produce, and we increasingly look at how it can interact with different culinary techniques and cuisines. The idea is not to create fusion for the sake of it, but to allow the ingredient to lead. The Khyber Himalayan trout is a good example—it can work beautifully with different preparations and flavour profiles, while retaining its own delicate character. Fresh Kashmiri produce can similarly add depth, freshness and a distinct sense of place to international preparations.

The season-focused menus

Seasonality is particularly important in a mountain destination because the landscape and its produce change dramatically through the year. We look at what is available and at its best, and allow seasonal produce to influence our menus and specials. Kashmir's fruits, vegetables, herbs and distinctive ingredients offer different possibilities across seasons, while winter naturally lends itself to more warming, hearty preparations.

Spa cuisines

The Khyber is a luxury mountain resort with a spa, and wellness is



an important part of the overall guest experience. Our approach to wellness through food is centred on fresh, wholesome ingredients, balanced preparation and dishes that are nourishing while still being enjoyable and flavourful.

Rather than treating wellness cuisine as a completely separate culinary identity, we focus on offering considered choices that complement the resort experience. Our menus can be adapted to individual dietary preferences and requirements, with an emphasis on lighter preparations, fresh produce and balanced flavours.

The signature dishes

Our Kashmiri offerings, particularly Wazwan preparations, remain an important part of the culinary experience because they give guests an opportunity to connect with the destination through food. At Brava Italian Pizzeria & Grill, pizzas and Italian preparations are particularly popular, while our risottos and pastas allow us to work creatively with seasonal produce. The Khyber Himalayan Trout is another distinctive offering and represents a new chapter in our culinary story. It brings a product nurtured in the Himalayan landscape to the table, while the wider aquaculture initiative has the potential to take this regional produce beyond The Khyber to hotels and restaurants across the HORECA sector.

What makes these dishes special is not simply their popularity, but their ability to reflect different facets of The Khyber: Kashmir, the mountains, international culinary traditions and a continued interest in high-quality produce.

Operational challenges

Operating in the mountains naturally presents logistical challenges. Weather, accessibility and seasonality can affect the movement and availability of certain ingredients, particularly during winter.

It requires careful planning and strong relationships with suppliers, as well as maintaining the right balance between sourcing locally and ensuring consistency for our guests. The location also encourages us to think creatively about what is available around us rather than simply trying to replicate a city-based supply chain.

The settings

Food at The Khyber is designed to be experienced across a number of settings—from Wazwan and Kashmiri specialities to Italian dining at Brava, Asian and Indian offerings, and more relaxed all-day dining.

We also curate special culinary experiences and events around chefs, ingredients and regional traditions. Our Sufi & Savour weekends, for instance, brought



together Wazwan and Sufi music, creating an experience that connects food with the cultural character of Kashmir.
Our culinary programming also increasingly explores specific ingredients and techniques, allowing the destination itself to become part of the dining experience.

Culinary programs

Our collaboration with Chef Vicky Ratnani, Smoke, Mountains, Fire & Alchemy, is particularly exciting because it explores the produce of Kashmir through his distinctive, fire-led culinary approach.
We are looking at future collaborations selectively. For us, a chef partnership needs to have a genuine connection with The Khyber's philosophy, the destination and the ingredients available here. Rather than pursuing collaborations simply for their names, we want each one to bring a new perspective to Kashmir and create something meaningful for our guests.



Future plans

Our culinary strategy will continue to evolve around three key ideas: Kashmir, quality and discovery.
We want to deepen our engagement with the produce of the region while continuing to offer the international breadth expected of a luxury resort.
There is considerable scope to explore Himalayan ingredients, seasonal produce and new culinary techniques without losing the authenticity of the destination.
Our aquaculture initiative is an important part of this larger vision. While The Khyber Himalayan Trout is being introduced into our own culinary repertoire, the ambition extends beyond the resort. We see an opportunity to build a sustainable supply of quality Himalayan trout for the wider HORECA industry, creating greater access to a locally produced ingredient while strengthening the region's culinary ecosystem.
Alongside this, we see opportunities to develop more distinctive culinary experiences and bring in chefs and culinary voices who can interpret Kashmir in fresh and relevant ways.
Ultimately, our ambition is for food to be an important part of how guests experience The Khyber and Kashmir—not simply something they enjoy while staying here, but one of the ways they remember the destination.



Championing Kargil's Cuisines



Stories from a Kargil Kitchen, produced by Muzzamil Hussain (Roots Ladakh) in collaboration with the author Yash Saxena and the researcher Sneha Nair, presents the diverse foods of Kargil.

AM: What inspired you to start Roots Ladakh? What gap did you see in the way Ladakh's food heritage, agricultural traditions and culinary knowledge were being documented and represented?

MH: Roots Ladakh actually began before food was the focus. It started as a response to how narrowly Kargil was understood by the outside world, mostly through the lens of the 1999 war. Once we began bringing travellers into Kargil and Zanskar, food became the fastest, most intimate way for people to understand the region, faster than history or geography ever could. But when we looked for anything written down about Kargili food specifically, there was almost nothing. Leh, Nubra, Zanskar had some documentation; Kargil had none. That gap between how rich the foodways here actually are and how little of it existed on paper is what eventually led to Stories from a Kargili Kitchen.

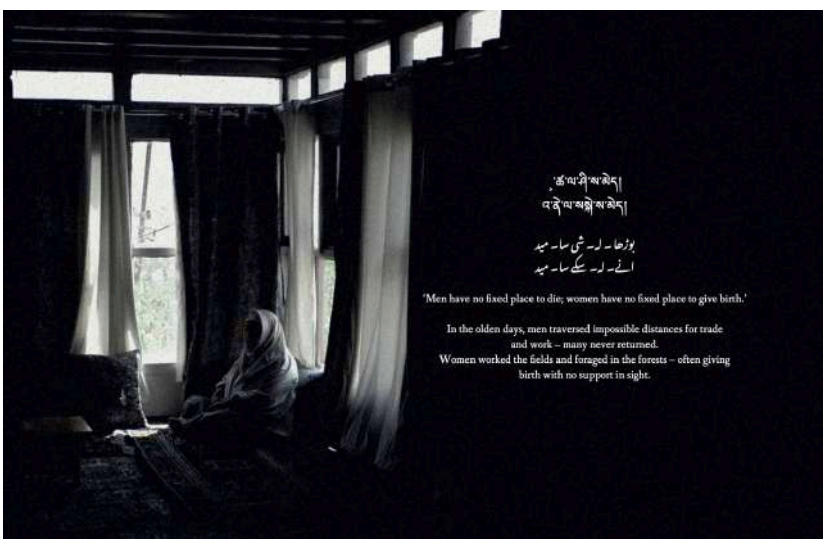
AM: What were the biggest challenges you faced when you started Roots Ladakh? How did you overcome them?

MH: The first and hardest challenge was perception - convincing people that Kargil was a place to travel to, not just through, and that it wasn't defined by the war. Beyond that, there was very little existing tourism infrastructure or precedent for the kind of community-based, experience-led travel we wanted to build, so a lot of what we now offer had to be built from scratch; relationships with homestay families, trust with village elders, systems for something as basic as sourcing a proper meal for guests. We overcame it slowly, the way most things in Ladakh get done - season by season, relationship by relationship, letting the work itself change people's minds rather than trying to argue them into it.

AM: How do you gather stories, recipes and culinary knowledge from across Ladakh?

For us, everyone was a source of lived knowledge, but mothers and grandmothers in particular were the ones who could provide real culinary knowledge. Apart from everyday people, translations of Ladakhi epics like Api Tso and the Kesar Saga gave us rich input into community, festivals, food philosophies and the relationship between people and their ecology which was essential since Kargil doesn't have many written records of any sort from the past.

AM: Ladakh is far more diverse than its popular image suggests. How does Ladakhi food change



from one geography and community to another?

MH: The food of Ladakh is largely similar across most regions, given the overlap in what grows here. Some peculiarities stand out:

• Kargil, being a Muslim-majority region, does not produce or consume Chhang (local barley beer) or use animal blood. The only exception within Kargil is the villages of the Aryan Valley.

• Zanskar is the only region that produces soft cheese in Ladakh, apart from Chhurphe or Chhura.

• Drass, closest to Kashmir, shows influence in techniques such as tujji made on hot coals, including a version made from the indigenous, seasonal Shentelli mushroom.

• Regions in the south of Ladakh use more chilli than the rest, largely due to trade with Manali, which brought the dried yellow Manali chilli north.





• The east, in Changthang, sits at a higher average elevation and leans more heavily on pastoral and dairy products.

• Balti communities are particularly skilled with sweet dishes such as Azoq, Tsab Halba and Chuli Halba.

• The Sikh communities in Ladakh may be the only ones who make achaars, rather than preserving food purely through drying.

For our project, we have only focused on Kargil and the western part of Ladakh. There is documentation, academic or otherwise, on Nubra, Leh, Sham valley and Zanskar. But this is the first extensive documentation of the foodways of Kargil specifically

AM: What are some of the lesser-known grains, vegetables, legumes, dairy products, wild herbs, berries, fruits and other ingredients that you believe deserve greater recognition?

MH: Ingredients from Kargil district that I believe deserve greater recognition:

• Gyamrus, or black buckwheat

• Kororo greens, or Moldovan dragonhead

• Shaintha greens, or Chicorium ssp.

• Cherries from Aryan Valley

• Hunderman tobacco

• Filil, or wild Himalayan mint

• Raktse Karpo apricot

• Skotse, or Ladakhi wild chive cakes

• Shenteeli mushroom from Drass

AM: Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan products are increasingly finding markets beyond their regions of origin.



How can products such as wild herbs, spices, berries, apricots, grains, dairy and traditional vegetables be developed and marketed in ways that increase incomes for farmers, pastoralists and foragers without commodifying or eroding traditional knowledge?

MH: Beyond social enterprises and agro-businesses, it matters to have locally processed ingredients present at tourist interaction points such as cafés, homestays, and experience stops. This lets people sell their produce on their own terms, without the pressure of standardisation or commercial scale. Small cooperatives, SHGs and village groups can keep growing, sourcing and processing the way they always have; seasonally, at their own pace. This matters because sudden demand spikes like what happened with seabuckthorn after the PM mentioned it, or Chhurpe after it won an international cheese award create unrealistic pressure that leads to over-foraging and a dilution of quality.

AM: Tell us about Stories from a Kargili Kitchen. How did you collect and select the stories and recipes for the book? Which dishes or food stories have been particularly memorable to you, and which would you recommend as an introduction to Kargili cuisine?

MH: The curation of which stories and recipes made it into the book was just as difficult as sequencing the chapters. We wanted the reader to gradually get immersed in the world of Kargil, so we deliberately rejected the standard food-book format, divided by course, macro, or season. Instead, the sequencing moves from simplicity to complexity: the early chapters build from the essentials of Kargili food such as sattu, papa, taki, cha toward more elaborate or ceremonial dishes. The stories follow the same arc, moving from what an outsider might presume about Kargil toward the more nuanced realities of its different communities and faiths.

The book itself was written by Yash Saxena in collaboration with me (Muzammil Hussain) and Sneha Nair over roughly three years spent living in, cooking in, and listening to Kargil. One through line readers keep responding to is how it treats food as a way of narrating a place shaped by conflict, without letting the conflict define it. It opens with an analogy between the human body and the borders of the state, and traces foodways shaped as much by topography and scarcity as by the military presence that still looms over the region. If I had to recommend a single entry point, it would be khambir with apricot, or a simple bowl of skyu or paba - the gentlest introduction, and fittingly, close to where the book itself begins.



AM: How important are food and culinary traditions to preserving cultural identity in Ladakh today? Are younger generations continuing these traditions, or are some recipes, techniques, and food practices at risk of disappearing?

MH: It's extremely important to preserve culinary traditions, but the catch is that "preservation" as a word often turns culture into something stagnant. Food traditions need to be lived, not archived as part of daily life, not a display case. For most young people today, these traditions aren't part of everyday reality anymore. Foraging, hunting, preserving feel distant when even the dishes themselves aren't regularly cooked at home — many young people say they struggle to digest the fibre-dense food their grandparents ate. Having said that, there are glimmers of hope: some younger people are starting to look at their foodways differently, and asking what caused this distance from their own traditions in the first place.

AM: What can culinary tourism contribute to Ladakh? How can visitors experience local food in a way that benefits communities and encourages the preservation of traditional agriculture, recipes and food knowledge rather than simply creating demand for tourist versions of Ladakhi cuisine?

MH: Culinary tourism has picked up in a big way across Ladakh in recent years, but in Kargil it's still at a nascent stage. Kargilis are only just waking up to the fact that there's real tourist interest in food exactly as it is — that it doesn't need modifying. It's new





information for most shops in Kargil town and homestays in nearby villages alike: that there's genuine demand for food grown the traditional way and served the way it would be at home. The best entry points into this are food experiences like the Sarai Food Experience, or homestays like the Apricot Homestay in Hardas.

AM: What is currently on the menu at your café? How do you balance traditional recipes and ingredients with contemporary tastes and the expectations of visitors to Ladakh?

MH: Unfortunately we don't run an extensive local-cuisine menu at the café itself. But since the book, we have started curating something called the Sarai Experience - a full-course meal built around some of the best local Kargili dishes. Each

session comes with an explainer menu, so guests understand what they're eating and why, rather than it just arriving as an unfamiliar plate of food. The food itself is prepared by local village women, who source all the ingredients locally, and it's a pre-booked experience rather than something you can walk in for. In a way, it's a more honest answer to the "contemporary tastes" question than a fixed café menu would be. Instead of adapting the food to visitor expectations, we adapt the format around the food, and let context and explanation do the work of making it accessible.



AM: What role can the government, NGOs, researchers, chefs and food entrepreneurs play in protecting Ladakh's agrobiodiversity and indigenous food systems? What are the most urgent interventions needed — from seed conservation and farmer support to documentation to market access and culinary education to livelihoods and income enhancement, value additions, etc.?

MH: The most urgent gap is documentation itself not just of recipes, but of who still holds this knowledge, because that list is getting shorter every year. That has to come before anything else, because you can't conserve seeds, protect a market, or build livelihoods around knowledge that hasn't even been recorded. After that, I'd point to three things: seed and variety conservation done in partnership with the farmers actually growing these crops, not in a lab disconnected from them; market access that goes through cooperatives and homestays rather than middlemen, so value stays





protecting agrobiodiversity through policy, backing local infrastructure rather than as the one designing the intervention itself. This region already has NGOs, researchers and entrepreneurs doing the on-ground work; what's missing is coordination and consistent backing, not more actors.

AM: Looking ahead, what is your vision for Roots Ladakh? What would you like the organisation to have achieved in the next five years?

MH: Over the next five years, I'd like Stories from a Kargili Kitchen to be the first of several documentation efforts, not a one-off. We're already working on a proposal to map and document trekking and adventure routes across Kargil, Drass, Suru and Zanskar in partnership with the Ladakh Tourism & Culture Department, and I see that as part of the same initiative to record what exists here, in detail, before



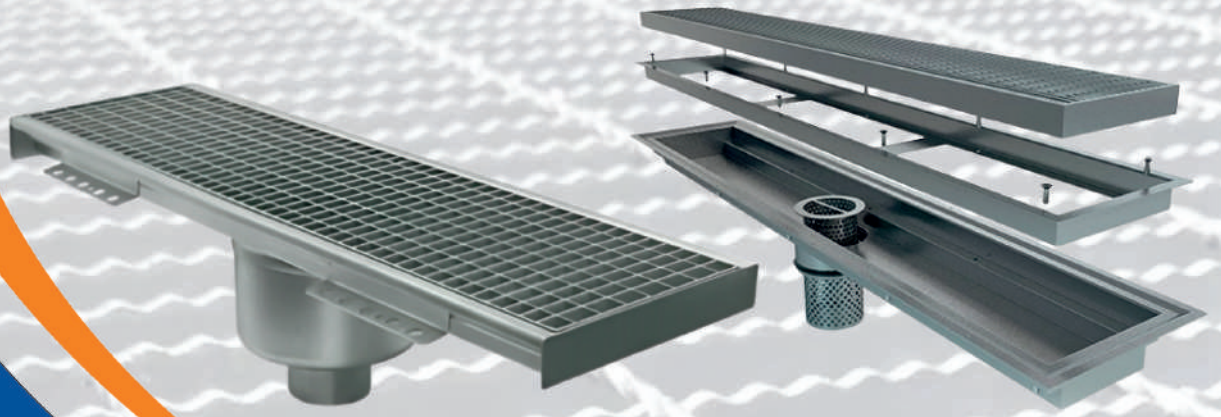
it's lost or flattened into a single tourist narrative. On the food side specifically, I'd like to see the ingredients we've documented - the black buckwheat, the wild chive cakes, the Shenteeli mushroom actually reach small, sustainable markets in a way that puts income directly into the hands of the farmers and foragers who grow and gather them, without the volume pressure that ruins something the moment it becomes popular. And I'd like Kargil, five years from now, to not need explaining anymore, for people to arrive already knowing it as a place of food, culture and hospitality, rather than something we have to first correct their assumptions about.

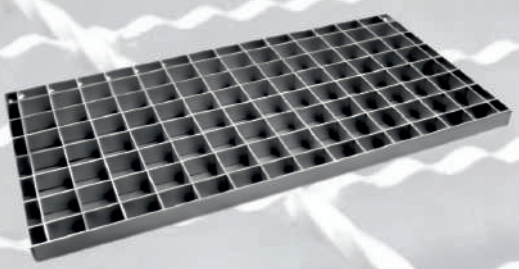


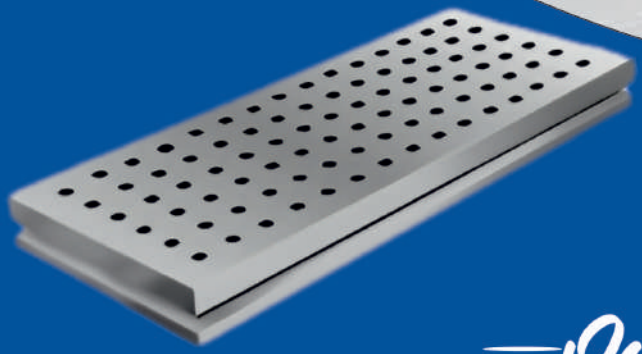
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