

Culinary

Entrepreneurs

Volume 6, Issue 2

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A Magazine for the food, hospitality
and tourism entrepreneurs by



**The female
Mexican star chef**

**Hong Kong's Woman
Culinary Entrepreneur**

*The Homestay
Host in Kashmir*

**The Eco-
friendly Farmstay
in Odisha**

**Custodians of
Pre- Partition Cuisines**

**International
Women's Day**
Special
edition

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Editorial



Happy International Women's Day.

Female culinary professionals are navigating the traditionally male-dominated hospitality industry by challenging stereotypes, increasingly gaining visibility through grit, culinary innovation, and rising leadership roles.

Karime López became the first Mexican woman chef to receive a Michelin star for her work at Gucci Osteria in Florence, Italy. In 2019 she was named Italy's Female Chef of the Year. In this edition, she shares experiences as a female chef working far away from her home in Mexico. Chef Vicky Lau moved from her career in graphics design to become a chef and then a restaurateur. She received her first Michelin star for Tate Dining Room & Bar.

Homestay tourism is a rapidly growing sector providing significant opportunities for women entrepreneurs and couples to generate income and maintain their dream homes. The Cheese Cottage is a boutique luxury mountain vacation home in a private estate at Tangmarg, near Gulmarg in Kashmir, run by Insha Gazi who has also established a pioneering Fashion Designing Institute in Kashmir. Svanir is an eco-friendly boutique homestay run by a couple in Odisha.

The 1947 partition of India caused the largest mass migration in history. In previous editions, we explored efforts to revive Sindhi cuisine. Here, Ananya Banerjee and Sherry Mehta speak about the importance of reclaiming and preserving recipes from Undivided Bengal and Undivided Punjab—ensuring that stories, Flavours, and identities are not lost to history.



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Interviews with chefs and entrepreneurs.



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BEYOND BORDERS

Karime López became the first Mexican woman chef to receive a Michelin star for her work at Gucci Osteria in Florence, Italy. In 2019 she was named Italy's Female Chef of the Year. She talks about her experiences as a female chef working far away from her home in Mexico



What are your childhood memories of Mexican food? How do they influence your menus and culinary styles?

My childhood memories of Mexican food are rooted in family kitchens and local markets, where cooking was guided by tradition, seasonality, and respect for ingredients. I remember the aromas of slow-cooked stews, fresh tortillas made by hand, and salsas prepared daily with simple but bold flavors. These experiences strongly influence my menus and culinary style. I always approach my cuisine from a contemporary perspective, but no matter where I cook, my Mexican identity is present in the freshness of the ingredients, the vibrancy of the colors, and the balance of flavors honoring tradition while expressing it in a modern way.

What inspired you to take up a culinary career?

When I was 18 years old, I moved to Paris to study French in order to apply to the School of Fine Arts. While living there, I discovered a different way of expressing art through cuisine. At that age, I encountered the world of French pastry for the first time, including Pierre Hermé's work and other places that deeply inspired me. Those experiences marked a turning point and ultimately led me to change my path and pursue a career in the culinary arts.

To prepare myself professionally, I moved to Spain, where I studied for three years at the School of Hospitality in Seville. After completing my training, I obtained my first position at the three-Michelin-star restaurant Can Fabes. From there, I continued my career at Mugaritz, Pujol in Mexico, and Ryugin in Japan, as well as Central in Lima, Peru. I later spent eight years as Head Chef at Gucci Osteria, where I led and developed the culinary project.



Did you face challenges of being a woman in the male dominated kitchens? If yes, how did you overcome them?

Yes, I did face challenges working as a woman in traditionally male-dominated kitchens, particularly early in my career. I overcame them through discipline, consistency, and a strong work ethic, letting the quality of my work speak for itself. Over time, I earned respect by leading with professionalism, resilience, and clear standards, while staying true to my values and building teams based on collaboration, respect, and excellence.

Was it difficult being a Mexican woman in European countries and living so far from home? If yes, how did you overcome the challenges?

Yes, it was challenging at times to be a Mexican woman living and working in European countries, especially being far from home and my cultural roots. I overcame these challenges by embracing adaptability while



staying deeply connected to my identity. My background became a strength rather than an obstacle, allowing me to bring a unique perspective to my work. Building strong professional relationships, maintaining discipline, and channeling my cultural heritage into my cuisine helped me grow both personally and professionally.

You are the first Mexican woman to earn a Michelin star. Which are the top achievements and highlights of your culinary journey?

Becoming the first Mexican woman to earn a Michelin star is one of the most meaningful milestones of my career, as it represents both a personal achievement and an

important moment of representation. Among the top highlights of my culinary journey are working in some of the world's most influential kitchens, leading and developing long-term international culinary projects, and earning recognition for consistency, technique, and vision. A key achievement has been building a personal culinary identity that reflects my background and perspective without being defined by a single cuisine, allowing me to contribute authentically to contemporary gastronomy on a global stage.

How have you promoted Mexican ingredients and memories in the

Asian and European worlds with their different palates? What have been your approaches to popularise Mexican heritage cuisines in the contemporary world?

I have always promoted Mexico with great pride. Mexico has extraordinary ingredients and a deep culinary history behind them, and that heritage is something I carry with me wherever I work. In Asian and European contexts, my approach has been to introduce Mexican ingredients and culinary memories in a thoughtful, respectful way, adapting them to different palates without losing their essence. Rather than reproducing traditional dishes, I focus on highlighting flavours, techniques,



and products in a contemporary language that feels natural within each cultural context. Through this approach, I aim to contribute to a broader understanding and appreciation of Mexican culinary heritage on an international stage.

Which are your top dishes?

I have a special connection to cer-

tain dishes that tell the story of my career and my identity. The tostada has always held a place close to my heart, as it represents my roots and early influences. At this new stage of my journey, other creations have become equally meaningful, such as the uni tlacoyo, the margarita scallop, and the roasted corn soft serve, each reflecting an

evolution of my perspective and craft.

The tlacoyo and the margarita scallop in Xaak restaurant are signatures.

As a chef who broke gender and cultural barriers in the Michelin ecosystem, and led the way for Latin American women in professional kitchens, what are your thoughts on inclusivity in the kitchen and restaurant?

Inclusivity in the kitchen and restaurant is essential for the future of our industry. Professional kitchens thrive when they are built on respect, equal opportunity, and diverse perspectives. Breaking gender and cultural barriers has shown me that talent, discipline, and vision are not defined by background or gender. I believe it is our responsibility as leaders to create environments where people feel valued, supported, and challenged to grow. An inclusive kitchen not only strengthens teams, but also enriches creativity, innovation, and the overall dining experience.

What are your future aspirations?

My future aspiration is to open my own place and continue doing what I love that is cooking.

The Chef Who Tells Edible Stories

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Vicky Lau, a culinary entrepreneur and award-winning chef, founded and runs several F&B businesses in Hong Kong. Born and raised in Hong Kong, she draws inspiration from the city's rich heritage of East-meets-West cuisine. Her upbringing instilled in her a deep appreciation and understanding of ingredients, as well as a passion for blending traditional techniques with modern interpretations.

”





What are your childhood memories of food in Hong Kong?

I grew up in a traditional Chinese family in Hong Kong, where my grandfather placed great importance on food. The focus was always on fresh ingredients, and fresh fish was a must at every meal—mostly steamed. That upbringing trained my palate to appreciate the textures and pure flavors of fish, which has deeply influenced my culinary philosophy. My dishes today reflect that simplicity and respect for high-quality ingredients.

After graduating from New York University, chef Vicky Lau initially embarked on a career in advertising as a graphic designer. She was inspired to enroll in classes at the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu in Bangkok. Having changed her career path, Vicky Lau honed her skills at the Michelin-starred Cépage in Hong Kong under the tutelage of Chef Sebastien Lepinoy. In 2012, she opened Tate Dining Room & Bar serving French-inspired dishes with Asian influences. In 2013, chef Vicky Lau's received her first Michelin star for Tate Dining Room & Bar, awarded by the prestigious MICHELIN Guide Hong Kong & Macau.

Beyond the kitchen, Vicky is dedicated to promoting social and environmental responsibility in the food industry, advocating for sustainable practices and supporting local communities.

What inspired you to enter the culinary profession?

Cooking offers endless possibilities—it evolves every day and connects you to nature. I was drawn to the added dimension of flavour and the immediacy of seeing guests enjoy your creations on the spot. It's an incredibly dynamic field where no two days are the same, and that energy is what inspired me to take the leap.

Did you face any challenges adapting to a new environment and career? If yes, how did you overcome them?

Of course, especially in the beginning it was difficult. Transitioning from an independent designer to becoming a team player in a fast-paced kitchen was a challenge. Plus, standing on my feet all day was a big adjustment. But over time, I adapted by focusing on the craft, embracing teamwork, and building resilience.

What was your journey from chef to becoming a restaurant owner?

As a chef, you always want the best ingredients, but as a restaurant owner, you're balancing that with cost management. It's a constant push and pull, but I've learned to work with the cards I have and make the most out of them. It's about finding that balance and staying resourceful.

You are known as a pioneer of modern Chinese cuisine and for bringing memory, emotion, and cultural identity into fine dining. Can you explain the key nuances of your culinary style and edible storytelling?

Food is deeply tied to culture, and culture is filled with stories. A single dish can evoke memories, emotions, and connections to



history. I explore the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western cuisines, choosing elements from both that feel relevant today. My goal is to present these stories in a way that resonates with diners and feels authentic to the modern world.

Your restaurants have earned strong recognition, and you have earned many awards. What are the highlights of your journey as a culinary professional?

The biggest highlight is seeing the restaurant grow and evolve. I've become more comfortable

experimenting with new ideas while maintaining the excitement of creating dishes. Guest satisfaction is always a highlight—there's nothing quite like seeing someone enjoy something you've crafted.

Which are your top dishes, and why are they your signature?

One of my top dishes is Grilled Kinki with kumquat sauce. The richness of the fish pairs beautifully with the brightness of kumquat, creating a balance of flavors without overpowering the natural taste of the fish. It's a dish that embodies subtlety and harmony.

Why are your restaurant's dishes special?

My signature dishes are special because they represent an "East meets West" philosophy. I'm not afraid to tweak traditions while respecting their roots. It's not just about presentation—everything is thoughtfully crafted to be full of flavour, creating a sensory experience.

How do you and Romain work as a team? What are your respective roles?

Romain is incredibly organized, while I'm more of the creative one who sometimes needs a little chasing after! He handles much of the operational and business development side, which has

been instrumental in helping us grow. We complement each other perfectly.

You are known for inclusivity and respectful kitchens with empathy, structure, sustainable principles, and creativity. What are your messages for the aspiring food entrepreneurs of today?

In the age of AI, food and beverage remain vital. At the end of the day, humans need food, and we love good food. Cooking is an energy transfer—a form of creativity and connection that machines cannot replicate. It's a field that allows you to express yourself while building meaningful relationships with both guests and your team.

What are your tips for young women chefs in Asian countries?

Speak up, think deeply, and don't just focus on the daily grind. Understand the art, craft, and science behind cooking, and invest time in learning things outside the kitchen. Staying connected to the world beyond your workspace is essential for growth and maintaining inspiration.

What are your future aspirations?

My aspiration is always to do better than yesterday—to constantly improve in knowledge, skills, and hospitality. The goal is to stay at the forefront of the culinary world while continuing to create meaningful and memorable dining experiences.



THE HOMESTAY HOST IN KASHMIR

Insha S. Qazi, a Lancaster University alumnus, is a civil engineer, an interior designer, and the founder of the SSMD School of Design, an institution that not only nurtures creativity but also equips the youth of Kashmir with the skills to compete in the global marketplace. She talks about **Cheese Cottage**, a homestay that is an ode to her love for the valley



Cheese Cottage was born out of a deeply personal desire to re-imagine how Kashmir could be experienced—beyond hotel rooms and tourist checklists. Growing up between Kashmir and the UK, I was exposed early to the idea of homes as places of storytelling, where food, architecture, and hospitality were inseparable.

I wanted to create a space that felt intimate, cultivated, and deeply local—a home that welcomed guests into the rhythms of the valley rather than insulating them from it. Cheese Cottage is not a commercial accommodation first; it is a lived-in idea of Kashmir—quiet, layered, warm, and soulful.

The biggest challenge was doing things slowly in a region where tourism often pushes for speed and scale. Craft-based architecture, local sourcing, and culinary experimentation take time—and patience.

Another challenge was perception. Convincing travellers that a boutique homestay in a rural pocket could offer an experience superior to large hotels required trust. We overcame this by focusing on quality over volume, organic word-of-mouth, and hosting guests who valued culture, food, and design.

Authenticity became our strongest marketing tool.



Highlights of the homestay

Cheese Cottage is a dialogue between Kashmiri craftsmanship and restrained European sensibility.

Key highlights include:

- Use of local timber, stone, walnut wood, and handmade finishes
- Kashmiri textiles, namda textures, and subtle references to khatamband geometry
- Spaces designed around light, warmth, and winter living—rather than spectacle

Nothing is ornamental without meaning. Every material has a reason and a story.

The most memorable moments are always at the Chef's Table—when guests fall silent mid-meal, realising they are tasting something entirely new yet deeply rooted.

Another achievement has been seeing Cheese Cottage featured and spoken about not as “a stay” but as an experience—one that blends food, design, and cultural immersion. That distinction matters deeply to us.

Cuisines

My childhood food memories are steeped in slow cooking, ceremonial meals, and seasonal discipline—wazwan kitchens, winter greens, saffron rice, hand-ground spices.

British exposure brought with it an appreciation for:

- Artisanal cheeses
- Bread culture
- Plating restraint
- Comfort food elevated with technique

At Cheese Cottage, these worlds meet naturally. Kashmiri ingredients are treated with global confidence—never diluted, never caricatured.

Signature Kashmiri Fusion at The Cheese Cottage:

- Daès-Laab Cheddar Treasures

Warm, molten artisanal cheddar folded into velvet bread cubes—comfort with character.

- Trout Cakes with Sweet Garlic Sauce

Valley trout elevated with citrus zest and subtle aromatic infusions.

- Olive & Lavaas Canapé

Mediterranean notes layered over traditional Kashmiri

flatbread.

- Bakirkhein Beef Patties

Local bakery heritage meets modern craftsmanship.

- Deconstructed Aab Gosht

Slow-cooked lamb, saffron milk crisp gravy, fried shallots.

- Shodkhèn Macch Shyami

Sculpted, poached, delicately spiced—heritage with finesse.

- Malllow Pesto Pasta

Farm-fresh wild mallow reimaged through a modern lens.

- Taher & Dudh Wagreh

Ceremonial saffron rice and slow-finished milk rice—served as they should be.

- Modùr Shufta with Biscoff Crumble

A playful, respectful reinterpretation of a Kashmiri classic.

- Noon Chai, Kehweh & Traditional Condiments

Including walnut-based dooñ chetin, lotus root crispies, gulkand, and gund chetin reductions.

The Chef’s Table Experience is where these dishes truly come alive—each plate narrating a chapter of Kashmir.





- Curated food trails and chef residencies
- Storytelling around ingredients—not just destinations
- Positioning Gulmarg beyond snow tourism, into year-round culinary travel

Kashmir has the raw material to become a global gastronomic destination—it only needs thoughtful curation.

Future aspirations

My vision is to develop Cheese Cottage into a benchmark for

experiential hospitality in the Himalayas—a place where food, design, and culture coexist quietly but powerfully.

In the future, I see:

- Limited-seat chef collaborations
- Deeper farm-to-table integration
- Cultural residencies
- And perhaps replicating this philosophy—not the property—in other regions

Always slow. Always rooted.

Always intentional.

Sustainable tourism and gastronomy

Homestays decentralise tourism income. They:

- Create direct livelihoods for local families
- Preserve culinary and craft traditions
- Reduce ecological strain caused by mass tourism
- Encourage longer, more meaningful stays

When done responsibly, homestays become cultural custodians, not just accommodations.

We need to move from tourist food to regional gastronomy.

This requires:

- Supporting local dairy, trout farms, bakers, and foragers



A Farm Stay In **Odisha**

Svanir Wilderness is an Ecostay in Odisha where Indrani and Soumya have turned their family land into an eco-friendly retreat. Indrani tells us about the journey.



© Soumya Mukherji

Svanir is a miracle for us. Our family-run eco-homestay is nestled on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar, offering slow, nature-centric stays and local food and craft-based cultural experiences rooted in Odia rural life. Both my husband and I dreamed of living a sustainable life, planting more and more trees where we live, and sustaining ourselves through Svanir (the homestay) seemed to be the best way to earn a living while enjoying the company of our guests and providing them with an environment where they can feel at home and reconnect with nature. The positive feedback from guests who stayed with us is reward enough. We are delighted when guests stay in touch with us even after leaving Svanir and express interest in contributing to our community projects.

The Inspiration

GB Mukherji is a retired IAS officer from Odisha Cadre. After retirement, he chose to settle in Odisha. He bought this piece of land 40 years ago and was on the verge of selling it to help us settle down in Delhi. Fortunately, at the same point in our lives, we were thinking of an escape to build something we could call our own. We too wanted to be close to our family and were drawn to Odisha's rich cultural heritage and beauty, deciding to set up something of our own here.

The homestay emerged as a natural progression, combining our passions and expertise:

Soumya has over 10 years of experience in the travel domain, traveling throughout the Indian subcontinent, making friends with locals, and using their insights to develop unique experiences for inquisitive and savvy travellers. Indrani's skills as a hardcore marketing specialist helped build connections, and her penchant for culinary excellence brought home-cooked fusion cuisine to the table for guests seeking to experience India's rich culinary heritage.

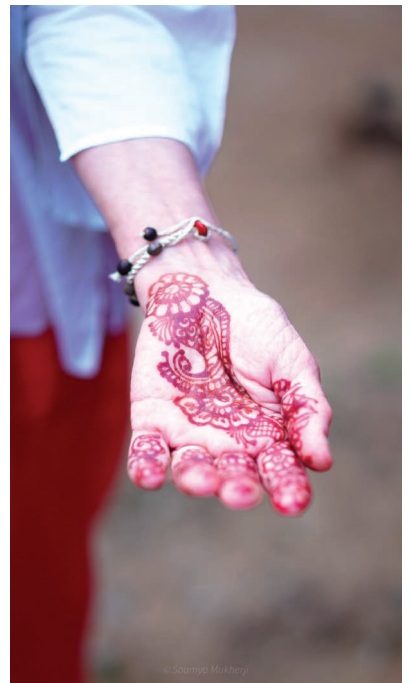
The Connection to Local Area and Community

Subsequently, over the years, we have garnered a deep connection with the villagers and ensured

that all our staff comes from the village community. We consciously train local girls for roles in housekeeping, kitchen work, gardening, and guest care, turning our homestay into a source of dignified livelihoods.

Challenges

Starting and promoting Svanir Wilderness Ecostay was fraught with challenges, including Cyclone Fani in 2018 devastating our roofs, furnishings, and trees just before launch, necessitating a year-long rebuild, followed by COVID-19 halting tourism in March 2020. Locals distrusted our architect-free, bootstrapped project, mistaking it for an industry, while local travel agents were





reluctant to grasp our sustainable homestay concept, preferring familiar hotels and hesitant to partner due to a lack of knowledge about the homestay model. We overcame these hurdles by living on-site to build trust, hiring and training six village women whom we share accommodations with, sourcing produce fairly from local farmers and fishers, educating partners and guests on authentic eco-experiences rooted in Odisha's heritage, and crafting compelling narratives that attracted meaningful travelers. We began curating our own tours centered on community-based experiences—art, craft, culture, and food—which earned accolades like the TripAdvisor Traveler's Choice Award 2023 and 2024, Outlook Traveller's Homestay of the Year 2024, and the Wildlife Harmony

Homestay Award 2025 by TOFT Tigers, bolstered by strong family support.

Vernacular Design

Four spacious cottages mimic traditional tribal Santhal architecture using only locally sourced materials, featuring earthy tones, hand-painted Santhal art motifs on walls depicting wildlife and celestial bodies, and large verandas for immersive nature views.

Rainwater harvesting systems capture and store runoff, while grey water from bathrooms is recycled directly into the garden; drip irrigation minimizes water usage, and bathrooms employ a traditional bucket-and-mug system instead of showers to further reduce consumption.

Our garden follows the Miyawaki concept. We have planted all trees native to Odisha, along with numerous fruit trees such as mango, guava, chikoo, pomegranate, custard apple, and Singapore cherry for birds. Our site comprises only 10% construction, with the remainder dedicated to trees in our one-acre ecosystem; leaf composting, vermicomposting, and organic farming support zero-waste cycles, with minimal single-use plastics.

Six local village women (plus one gardener) handle operations, with fair sourcing of produce from nearby farmers and fishers, fostering economic sustainability and cultural exchange through home-cooked Odia meals and a TV policy encouraging mindful disconnection—though we offer

fast-speed WiFi for those needing connectivity.

Curated Activities

Experiences depend on guests' interests: They can enjoy a relaxed day at Svanir, accompanied by us for a village walk to meet elders and children, or opt for customized itineraries exploring artisan clusters alongside mainstream sites, birdwatching in wetlands, or learning crafts.

- a) Culinary classes at the property, where guests can learn to cook Odia dishes.
- b) Birding tours to Manglajodi wetlands, led by us.
- c) Craft and textile tours led by us to lesser-known village clusters.

- d) Old Town temple tour with folklore and stories, led by us. Also included: An Old Town food tour taking clients to historic spots for special sweet tastings, chaat sampling, and more.
- e) Cultural tours to Puri, Konark, and the Buddhist Circuit.
- f) Street photography tours in Bhubaneswar and beyond.
- g) Mangrove Forest tour in association with OPSA.

We actively support this cause and have already crowd-funded the one-year patrol expenses of the team through contributions from friends, family, and guests. h) Our endeavor has always been to bring the voices of lesser-known artists to the forefront through

our blogs. In our *Voice of the Artist* series, we connect these marginalized artists to a broader audience.

- i) All our craft, textile, and conservation itineraries are community-based only.
- j) Before any stay, we exchange emails with guests to understand their interests (we are not available on any online booking platforms) and thus aim to minimize misunderstandings. Many of our tours/workshops depend on the availability of individual artists or communities, and if unforeseen circumstances prevent a particular experience, we substitute it with a similar alternative.

Cuisines

At Svanir, we serve home-cooked food rooted in Odia cuisine but also reflecting our Bengali-Assamese family traditions and my own experiments with global comfort foods. We focus on everyday Odia ghar-style meals, seasonal sabzis, dalma-style lentil-vegetable dishes, santula, borichura, pakhala-inspired rice plates in summer, simple fish curries, and accompaniments like stir-fried greens or bhaja—using vegetables, herbs, and fruits from our garden or nearby village produce. We



also cater to special dietary needs, such as Jain food, Vegan options, and No-Oil Vegan meals. Guests experience festive or temple-influenced flavors from coastal-central Odisha, particularly the Bhubaneswar-Puri microregion, through lightly spiced, minimal-oil preparations that mirror local home kitchens rather than restaurant fare.

On the other hand, we incorporate family recipes from our Bengali and Assamese sides—comforting fish curries (macher paturi, khorika maach, or tanga maach), Gouri’s homely Bengali dishes, and sweets like patishapta or crispy malpua with ice cream, which guests frequently praise in reviews. On



some evenings, I enjoy preparing “travel-inspired” dishes—simple continental bakes or occasional Asian/Korean bowls—so the table might feature an Odia rice thali alongside a pan of baked vegetables or noodles, depending on guest preferences. Through this blend, Svanir’s food represents: coastal-central Odia households around Bhubaneswar and Puri, rural Dalua village produce and forest-adjacent communities via our sourcing and cooking methods, and an interwoven Bengali-Odia-Assamese family kitchen—all shared in an intimate homestay setting rather than a formal restaurant style.

We grow seasonal vegetables, herbs, and fruits in the property, and purchase the rest from within a 1-km radius of our villages, including fishers, offering a farm-to-table dining experience.

The socio-economic importance of homestay tourism

Homestay tourism significantly benefits local economies by channeling tourist spending directly into regional sectors. By purchasing fresh, seasonal produce like vegetables, herbs, and fruits from small Dalua village farmers at fair prices, we bypass middlemen, stabilizing incomes and reducing migration. It supports fisheries through steady demand for daily catches bought directly





from nearby fishers at premium rates, promoting sustainable small-scale practices over industrial ones. Foraging thrives via sourcing wild greens, forest fruits, and honey from tribal gatherers, preserving indigenous knowledge while supplementing off-season earnings with our garden yields. Additionally, we uplift craft villages by facilitating guest purchases of Odisha artisan works like Pattachitra, Dokra, and textiles, while employing six local women (formerly from brick kilns or forest labor) in hospitality—training them on-site to build skills, fund village infrastructure like schools, and keep families rooted.

Supporting Eco-Friendly Sustainable Lodgings and Cuisines

Governments should assist in promotion through official social media channels, offer low-interest loans, tax incentives, and expedite

eco-certifications for rainwater harvesting, zero-waste systems, and local-material constructions. Platforms like TripAdvisor need “sustainable homestay” badges backed by verified impact metrics; media and influencers should spotlight community stories over luxury trends to attract conscious travelers. Mandating 50% local hiring, funding host cooperatives for solar energy or hospitality training, and incentivizing direct bookings would enable models like



Svanir to scale nationally.

Promotion should involve collaborative initiatives like farmer-producer markets, chef-led workshops, and digital campaigns highlighting traceability—from farm to fork—to increase visibility and demand for regional specialties. Partnerships with restaurants, festivals, and export programs can elevate local producers’ profiles, ensuring fair pricing and sustainable supply chains.

Future Aspirations

Personally, I dream of publishing a compendium compiling artisan stories and fusion recipes, bridging generations and geographies. Ultimately, we aspire to position Svanir as a catalyst for resilient rural economies, where every stay fosters empathy, education, and environmental harmony.

Chroniclers of Historic Cuisines

We speak to two women who have worked on reviving cuisines and recipes that were in danger of being lost following the partition of India.



The Reviver of Undivided Bengal Recipes

Chef Ananya Banerjee, a globetrotting chef, author and culinary Influencer has spent many years researching the cuisines of Undivided Bengal, the royal and aristocratic families of Bengal, and temple cuisines of eastern India.

The inspiration

The inspiration came from a deep sense of urgency. Bengal's culinary heritage is layered, nuanced, and deeply intertwined with history, migration, climate, and community—but much of it exists only in oral memory. I felt that if these stories, techniques, and recipes were not documented now, they risked being lost forever. Chronologizing the food of Bengal allowed me to trace how history—especially colonialism, trade, and Partition—shaped what we eat today, and to present cuisine not just as food, but as cultural evidence.

The challenges

Yes, many. The biggest challenge was that recipes from Undivided Bengal were rarely written down. They lived in the memories of

elderly home cooks, often passed on without measurements or structured methods. Language, migration trauma, and fading recollection were additional hurdles. I overcame these by spending time with families,

listening patiently, cooking alongside them, cross-verifying recipes across regions, and sometimes recreating dishes multiple times to arrive at an authentic version. Trust and time were my greatest tools.

The discoveries

One of the most exciting discoveries was the incredible diversity within what is often simplistically called “Bengali food.” Pre-Partition Bengal cuisine showed refined Mughlai influences in some regions, minimalist riverine cooking in other regions, and strong tribal, pastoral, and agrarian food traditions elsewhere. The sophisticated use of bitter,





sour, and astringent flavours, the extensive use of indigenous greens, and forgotten techniques like slow pit-cooking or sun-fermentation were particularly fascinating.

Top Recipes

Some of my top recipes include Macher Ganga Jamuna, Chingri Malai Curry, Chitol macher muthha and certain lost vegetarian preparations from East Bengal using bottle gourd, banana stem, and wild leaves. These recipes are special because they reflect restraint, seasonality, and

intelligence rather than opulence. They tell stories of geography, scarcity, celebration, and everyday resilience—qualities that define Bengal’s culinary soul.

Initiatives

My key initiatives include research-driven writing, curated pop-ups and supper clubs, storytelling-led dining experiences, and collaborations with cultural institutions. I also focus on educating younger audiences through workshops, talks, and social media—presenting Undivided Bengal cuisine not as nostalgia, but

as a living, evolving food culture worthy of pride and preservation.

Micro-regional cuisines

East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) has been endlessly fascinating, particularly regions like Barisal, Mymensingh, and Faridpur for their river-centric food traditions. Micro-regions shaped by marshlands, haors, and deltaic agriculture revealed extraordinary culinary adaptations. Community-wise, I’ve been deeply moved by the food of rural Hindu households, Muslim riverine communities, and lesser-documented occupational groups whose food rarely finds representation in mainstream narratives.

Future aspirations

My future aspiration is to build a comprehensive culinary archive of Bengal—through books, visual documentation, and experiential formats—so that this knowledge is accessible to future generations. I also hope to take Undivided Bengal cuisine to global platforms, positioning it as one of the world’s great regional food cultures, while continuing to mentor and inspire young chefs to look inward, research deeply, and cook with cultural responsibility.

The Custodian of Undivided Punjab Recipes

Childhood memories

is considered an authority in the cuisines of United Punjab and Himachal. stems from a deep-rooted passion fuelled by my childhood in a Punjabi family nestled in Himachal Pradesh, where my grandmother's kitchen was a living archive of ancestral recipes and zero-waste wisdom. From age 13, I immersed myself in family cooking rituals—watching my grandmom craft tandoori rotis and slow-cooked dals that drew the entire community together every Sunday. These experiences instilled a deep reverence for the etymology and techniques of Himachali and Punjabi dishes, many of which are now fading, motivating me to revive them through dedicated research and thoughtful innovation. No recipe is truly “lost” they evolve with personal creativity while honouring core essences like medicinal kachchi haldi ki pinni or seasonal pickling, which I document to bridge borders

and generations via ventures like Kanak by Sherry and pop-ups. My work, honoured by the Himachal Pradesh government, ensures these flavours from Himachal and Punjab endure for modern palates.

Challenges

Uncovering authentic recipes from Undivided Punjab presented significant challenges, primarily due to the Partition's disruption, which scattered families, oral traditions, and access to original ingredients across borders. Many recipes existed only in fragmented family memories or were altered over generations in India and Pakistan, lacking written records and complicated by regional variations from Lahore dhabas to rural homes. Sourcing pre-1947 staples like specific wheat varieties or pickling spices proved difficult amid modernization. I drew from my grandparents' Lahore migration stories and community elders' recollections, cross-verifying through persistent

travel, home visits, and shows like “Lost Recipes of India.” This hands-on research, blended with creative adaptation while preserving essence, allowed revival in ventures like Kanak by Sherry proving no recipe is truly “lost,” just reinterpreted with heart. I have deep dived into more than 300 years of Punjab's culinary history and extracted many recipes of the yore which laid almost forgotten in the annals of time.

Pre-partition Punjabi cuisines

The most exciting discoveries in pre-Partition Punjabi cuisines that I found, trace back to ancient Persian influences from the Ghaznavi empire around 100 BC, revealing how dishes like pulao, seekh kebabs, naan (from Irani naanva), and paneer (from peynir) were borrowed and adapted with local produce.

Research across Lahore, Peshawar, Amritsar, and Multani communities uncovered shared rice preparations, mutton dishes, and pickles – dishes that traveled from Persia, such as zershk pulao, jujeh kabab torsh, and badambura, featured in menus like The Sharing Table.

Similarly, the British Raj's legacy in

Punjabi cuisine cannot be ignored. The addition of cream in our robust sauces, usage of quail and many other British culinary influences have greatly impacted the cuisine of the region which the rest of India is yet to experience.

Another culinary lineage was that of Maharaja Ranjit Singh ji – who was an avid foodie himself. His dishes like Katwa Gosht, Meat Belliram and the ubiquitous Maa di Daal are to be celebrated.

Reviving specifics like gudumba sweet mango pickle—made in brass vessels for enhanced flavor—and girda bread paired with noon chaa highlighted nuanced, family-evolved recipes now showcased in Undivided Punjab pop-ups.

Forgotten recipes



Partition led to the fading of community-specific recipes on both sides of Punjab. Hindu vegetarian traditions diminished in West Punjab (now Pakistan), while Muslim meat-inclusive preparations waned in East Punjab (India).

In West Punjab (now Pakistan), the Hindu and Sikh communities particularly the **Multanis** and **Khattris** left behind a legacy of intricate vegetarianism and unique preservation techniques that are now rare in those regions.

• **Multani Sabz Kadi:**

Unlike the yogurt-based kadhi popular in East Punjab, this is a vegetable-heavy, tangy preparation that relies on seasonal produce and specific tempering.

• **Panjrattani Saag:**

While everyone knows Sarson da Saag, the Hindu households of West Punjab often made a “five-jewel” version using five different types of greens, often slow-cooked in brass vessels to enhance the mineral depth.

• **The Art of Fermentation (Kaanji):**

While still known, the specific fermented carrot and rai drink used as digestive aids in the harsh winters of Lyallpur (Faisalabad) and Lahore have largely faded

from commercial West Punjabi menus.

• **Breads Before the Tandoor:**

We often associate Punjab with the tandoor, but Hindu households frequently used the tawa and angeethi for heirloom breads that didn’t survive the shift to restaurant culture.

Conversely, in East Punjab (India), the refined meat-heavy traditions of the **Muslim peasantry and royalty** (like those in Malerkotla or Jalandhar) were often overshadowed by the post-partition “Butter Chicken” narrative.

• **Ludhiana Safed Murgh:**

A delicate, white-gravy chicken preparation that eschews the heavy tomatoes and red chilies we now associate with Punjabi food, focusing instead on seeds, nuts, and yogurt.

• **Jalandhar Methi Aloo ke Sharle:**

A technique-heavy dish where potatoes are treated with a specific “sharle” (shredding/frying) method that was common in Muslim households of the Doaba region.

• **Attock Katwa Gosht:**

Originally from the Attock district, this slow-cooked earthen pot meat was a staple of communal gatherings. It is a “forgotten”

dish in East Punjab because the specific clay-pot technique and the communal sanjha chulha (common kitchen) culture changed after the migration.

• Etymological Shifts:

Many dishes like Shinwari Murgh Kadahi or Namakmandi ki Chaap originated in the Northwest Frontier but were staples in Undivided Punjab. Today, they are often misclassified or forgotten in the East.

These dishes feature abundantly in my Pop Ups and Secret Suppers and I am putting a conscious effort into bringing them to the tables of gourmands all across the world.

Special Recipes

My recipes are more than just a list of ingredients; they are “edible archives.” Each one represents a specific time, a geography that no longer exists on a map, and a technique that requires the one thing modern kitchens lack: patience.

Here are my top signature recipes and the stories that make them special:

Chaa Gosht

(Himachali Buttermilk Lamb)

This is the crown jewel of my Himachali repertoire. While most



meat dishes use tomatoes for acidity, this ancient recipe from the Chamba region uses slow-cooked buttermilk.

Meat Beliram

If there is one dish that defines “Undivided Punjab,” it is this. Named after Chef Beliram, the head cook in the kitchens of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, this dish is a testament to the shared history of the region.

Sepu Wadi

An ambassador of the Mandiyali Dham (the traditional feast of Mandi), this dish consists of split black gram (urad dal) fritters cooked in a luscious spinach and yogurt gravy.²

Attock Katwa Gosht

A recipe I brought back from my research into the Attock district

(now in Pakistan). Traditionally, this was a communal dish served at weddings, cooked in large earthen pots (katwas).

Gucchi Pulao

Made with the elusive Himalayan Morels (Gucchi), which are among the most expensive mushrooms in the world, found in the high altitudes of Himachal and Kashmir.

USPs of popups

I often say, “Authenticity isn’t about repeating the past; it’s about honoring its spirit.” My recipes are special because:

• Vessel-First Cooking:

I advocate for cooking in Kansa (bell metal) and Brass, which changes the very molecular structure and taste of the food.

• Ingredient-Forward:

I source my Chamba Chukh (chili paste) and Guccchi directly from the hills to ensure the flavor profile remains “un-urbanized.”

• Deep Etymological Research:

I don’t just cook; I trace. Whether it’s the Persian influence in a Kabuli Pulao or the Greek roots of certain Punjabi breads, the history is the first ingredient in my pot.

Key initiatives

To promote the culinary heritage of Undivided Punjab, I have launched several initiatives that bridge the

gap between historical research and the modern plate. My goal is to move the conversation beyond “Butter Chicken” and showcase the diverse, cross-cultural flavours that existed before the borders were drawn.

• The “Undivided Punjab” Nationwide Pop-up Series

Through a long-standing partnership with Ishaara (Bellona Hospitality), I have taken the “Undivided Punjab” menu across major Indian cities including Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore, Lucknow, and Ahmedabad.

The idea is to recreate a Punjab that knew no borders, featuring dishes from cities like Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan. We feature items like Ludhiana Safed Murgh, Chapli Kebabs, Attock Katwa Gosht, and Multani Sabz Kadi.

• A Culinary Tale of Unchronicled Punjab”

Currently, I am hosting a specialized festival at Kanak, Trident Hyderabad (running through January 2026). This initiative focuses on “Unchronicled” recipes—those that have lived only in the oral traditions of families and trade-route influences.

We emphasize pre-tandoor techniques, using slow-braising

in clay pots (deghchis) and hand-ground spices to maintain historical integrity.

• Kanak by Sherry & “A Girl from the Hills”

These are my core culinary ventures where I document and serve recipes from my roots.

• Kanak by Sherry:

A celebrity-favorite brand that serves as a platform for my research into the etymology of Punjabi food. We do our Secret suppers under this venture too where we showcase unique recipes from the region.

• Stree by Kanak:

This is my social initiative where I empower and support single mothers, training them in these heirloom culinary techniques to ensure the knowledge is passed down and provides a livelihood.



• Culinary Research & Etymology

I spend a significant amount of time “tracing” food rather than just cooking it. This involves:

• The Persian Link:

Researching how the Ghaznavi empire and Persian neighbors influenced Punjabi staples like pulao, naan (from naanva), and paneer (from peynir).

Cross-Border Collaboration:

I stay in constant touch with home cooks and food bloggers in Lahore and Peshawar to compare how recipes evolved differently on both sides of the border.

Community-based cuisines

In my quest to map the soul of Undivided Punjab, I have found that the most exciting information doesn’t come from history books, but from the living memories of communities that were displaced. My research focuses on the “North-Western corridor” the ancient trade routes where Persian, Central Asian, and Punjabi cultures collided.

Some of the most compelling sub-regions whose culinary roots I have been deeply immersed in exploring include:

1. The Multan & Lyallpur Micro-Region (West Punjab)

Being from a Multani community, I feel that the Multan region is a goldmine for what I call “Technique-Heavy Vegetarianism.”

This community has a highly sophisticated way of using tanginess and fermentation. Their use of amchoor (dried mango) and citrus is distinct from the heavy cream usage we see in modern Punjab. Finding the original recipe for Multani Sabz Kadi which is more a stew of seasonal vegetables than a yogurt gravy, very similar to Sindhi Kadhi, was truly exciting.

• **The Peshawar & Attock Frontier**

This is where the “Meat Culture” of Punjab was born. Peshawar wasn’t just a city; it was the gateway to the Silk Road.

The Shinwari and Baluchi

Influence:

I have spent years studying the Shinwari community’s minimalist approach to meat—using only fat, salt, and tomatoes. I love making Shinwari Kadahi and am often impressed by its simplicity and richness of flavours.

Attock:

The discovery of the Katwa (clay pot) cooking method from the Attock district changed how I view

slow-cooking. It’s a “primitive” science that produces flavors a pressure cooker can never replicate.

• **The Majha & Doaba Heartland (East & West)**

The cities of Amritsar, Lahore, and Jalandhar form the cultural heart.

The Khatri & Arora Kitchens:

My own roots in Batala (near Amritsar) and my research into the Khatri community revealed a “Royal Home Cooking” style. This community was the bridge between the Mughal courts and the Punjabi streets. Dishes like Meat Beliram are products of this specific social cross-pollination.

Jalandhar’s Muslim Heritage:

Before 1947, Jalandhar had a thriving Muslim population that contributed refined techniques like sharle (the intricate shredding of vegetables) which I’ve highlighted in my recipe for **Jalandhar Methi Aloo ke Sharle**.

• **The Persian Influence (The Ghaznavi Legacy)**

My research into the etymology of our food led me to the **Ghaznavi Empire**. I find it fascinating that our “Punjabi” staples are actually of

Persian origin:

- **Pulao** from the Persian Pilau.
- **Naan** from the Irani Naanva.
- **Paneer** from the Iranian Peynir.

As you see, I don’t just look for ingredients; I look for the “**Why.**” Why did the people of Lyallpur ferment their carrots into Kaanji? Why did the chefs of Maharaja Ranjit Singh prefer coriander seeds over cumin? These are the questions that intrigue me and often lead me to discover flavours which were long forgotten and help me revive the past.

By connecting with food bloggers in Lahore and elders in the Multani colonies of Delhi, I’ve realized that while the politics of 1947 divided the land, the **palate remained undivided**. I have several Pakistani food bloggers as friends with whom I am in constant touch. We compare how a dish like Kunna Gosht is made in a village near Sahiwal versus how a displaced family makes it in Ludhiana. The differences are subtle, but the soul is the same.

Your future aspirations?

My future aspirations are not just about opening more kitchens; they are about building a **living museum of flavour**. I want to ensure that the

recipes of Undivided Punjab and Himachal are not just remembered as “nostalgia” but are integrated into the daily vocabulary of modern Indian dining.

My goal is to take the “Undivided Punjab” and “Himachali Dham” concepts global. I want to build a legacy that travels across borders, showing the world that Indian cuisine is far more nuanced than the globalized versions of curry. I envision establishing permanent culinary hubs that serve as reference points for these specific micro-regions.

My social initiative, **Stree by Kanak**, is incredibly close to my heart. My aspiration is to scale this into a national movement that empowers single mothers by training them in heirloom culinary arts. I want to create a decentralized network of “guardian chefs”—women who preserve their own regional secrets while gaining financial independence through my brand, **Kanak by Sherry**.

I plan to formalize my research into the **etymology of Punjabi and Himachali food**. I aim to document these “unchronicled” recipes in a way that serves as a resource for future chefs. This includes:

• **The “Pre-Tandoor” Archive:**

Documenting the slow-cooking techniques and clay-pot methods used before the commercialization of the tandoor.

• **Technique Standardization:**

Ensuring that while we innovate, the “soul” of the dish the specific hand-grinding of spices or the use of Kansa vessels remains a standard.

4. Zero-Waste and Traditional Preservation

I want to reintroduce the “Scientist in the Kitchen” philosophy I saw in my grandmother. My future projects will focus heavily on traditional preservation (pickling, sun-drying, and fermentation) as

a way to combat food waste and maintain seasonality in urban kitchens.

My Vision Statement

“I don’t just want to be a chef; I want to be a bridge. A bridge between the hills and the plains, between the past and the future, and between a divided land and its undivided palate. My mission is to ensure that the next generation doesn’t just eat; they inherit a story.”

The first step towards this vision – my book “A Girl from the Hills” is set to release soon and I would love for our readers to read it to explore a piece of history through my eyes and kitchen.



Can you cite specific examples of endangered dishes from Undivided Punjab and Himachal?

In my years of traversing the hills of Himachal and the plains of Undivided Punjab, I have found that “endangered” doesn’t mean gone. It simply means these dishes have retreated into the private kitchens of grandmothers, away from the glare of commercial menus.

For example Khatta Maas cooked with wild souring agents (West Punjab River belts) was not the modern vinegar-based preparation seen today. It relied on fermented whey, dried citrus peels, or indigenous sour greens. The technique demanded long, low heat and was practised across communities. With the loss of access to wild souring agents and the decline of slow hearth cooking, the dish has nearly vanished in its original form.

Another example is the Mixed-lentil daal without aromatics; Prior to tomatoes and onions becoming dominant, many Punjabi and hill-plains daals were cooked using technique rather than spice—long simmering, controlled fat usage, and seasonal tempering. These daals survive today only in diluted, standardised forms.

These dishes exist today primarily as oral residues—remembered but not practised.

Here are some examples of dishes that I am working to bring back from the brink of obscurity:

From Undivided Punjab (Pre-Partition Treasures)

These recipes represent a Punjab that was a melting pot of Persian, Greek, and local influences.

• Ludhiana Safed Murgh:

A ghost of a dish in modern India. Unlike the vibrant orange of Butter Chicken, this is a silky white gravy chicken. It relies on a delicate base of yogurt, seeds, and nuts, with zero tomatoes and very minimal red chili. It represents the refined Muslim palate of East Punjab before 1947.

• Jalandhar Methi Aloo ke Sharle:

The term “Sharle” refers to an almost forgotten technique of intricate shredding and frying. This isn’t just a potato-fenugreek stir-fry; it is a high-skill dish where the texture of the potato is transformed into something crispy yet melt-in-the-mouth, a hallmark of the Doaba region’s Muslim heritage.

• Attock Katwa Gosht:

Hailing from the Attock district, now in Pakistan, this is arguably the ancestor of the “slow-food” movement. It must be cooked in a Katwa (an earthen clay pot) over a wood fire for 6 to 8 hours until the meat fibers completely break down into the gravy.

• Multani Sabz Kadi:

Most people think of Kadhi as pakoras in yogurt. The Multani version is an endangered tangy vegetable stew that uses seasonal greens and specific souring agents like amchoor or kachri, reflecting the resourcefulness of the Multani community.

• Namakmandi ki Chaap:

Originating from the salt markets of Peshawar, this dish uses a minimalist, ancient preservation technique by cooking meat in its own fat with nothing but salt and black pepper. It is endangered because modern palates are now habituated to heavy masalas.

From the Himachal Hills (Indigenous Treasures)

The food of the hills is endangered by the “Maggi and Momo” narrative that has simplified a very complex cuisine.

• **Chaa Gosht (Traditional Version):**

While I serve a modern version with Lamb Shanks, the original Chamba recipe is becoming rare. It uses fermented buttermilk and roasted gram flour to create a sour-savory profile that is entirely unique to the Himalayan belt.

• **Pataud:**

These are the Himachali version of Patra, made by smearing colocasia leaves with a spiced lentil paste, rolling, steaming, and then frying. Because of the labor involved and the seasonal nature of the leaves, it is rarely found in homes today.

• **Aktori:**

A traditional cake-like preparation from the Lahaul-Spiti valley made with buckwheat and wheat flour. As globalized grains take over, these indigenous, gluten-free, high-altitude crops and the recipes associated with them are disappearing.

• **Sepu Wadi:**

The hallmark of a Mandiyali Dham. These are steamed lentil dumplings cooked in a spinach and yogurt base. The technique of twice-cooking the wadis (steaming then frying) is a dying art that I insist on preserving.

“My goal isn’t just to save a recipe, but to save the technique. If we lose the sharle or the katwa method, we lose a piece of our history.”

How do regions and micro-regions shape cooking techniques and ingredients?

One of the central findings of my work is that Punjabi and Himachali cuisines cannot be understood without micro-regional mapping. Even within a single district, food habits shifted dramatically due to water access, soil type, altitude, and occupation. Regions and micro-regions dictate the tempo of

cooking, the choice of fat, and the methods of preservation. When you move even fifty miles in the hills or across the plains of Undivided Punjab, the culinary logic shifts entirely.

1. Altitude and Grain Selection

Geography determines what grows, which in turn determines the texture of the meal.

• **Low Altitudes (Plains):**

In the fertile plains of Punjab, wheat is king. This led to the evolution of a vast variety of leavened and unleavened breads (naans, rotis, paranthas).

• **High Altitudes (Kinnaur, Lahaul-Spiti):**



As you climb higher in Himachal, wheat becomes scarce. Here, buckwheat (kuttu) and barley take over. These grains are denser and nuttier, leading to dishes like Aktori or hearty porridges that provide the slow-burning energy needed for mountain life.

2. Climate and Cooking Techniques

The environment dictates the “how” of a recipe.

• Slow Cooking (The Hills):

Because of the cold climate and the use of the chulha (wood-fire stove), Himachali cuisine is built on patience. Slow-braising meat in buttermilk (Chaa Gosht) or yogurt allows the flavors to penetrate deeply while keeping the kitchen warm during harsh winters.

• The Tandoor (The Frontier):

In the rugged, windy North-Western frontier (Peshawar/Attock), the need for quick, high-heat cooking led to the adoption of the tandoor. It was efficient, communal, and perfect for roasting meats rapidly.

3. Sourcing and “The Fat of the Land”

The primary fat used in a region is a direct reflection of its livestock and temperature.

• Yogurt and Buttermilk:

In the lower hills, where cattle are abundant, dairy is the backbone. Souring agents are often yogurt-based (like in Madra).

• Mustard Oil:

In the plains of Punjab, the vast mustard fields made mustard oil the primary cooking medium, giving dishes like Sarson da Saag their characteristic pungent depth.

• Ghee:

In high-altitude areas like Solan or Shimla, Ghee is not just an ingredient; it’s a fuel. It protects the body from the cold and is used generously in everything from Siddu to Dham feasts.

4. Preservation as a Regional Necessity

Micro-climates dictate how people store food for the “off-season.”

• Sun-Drying:

In areas of Himachal where winters cut off supply lines, sun-drying greens and vegetables is a common practice. This gives us ingredients like Bhey (dried lotus stem) or sun-dried apricots.

• Fermentation:

This is a technique I believe we mastered long before the West. In the cooler climates of the hills, fermentation is used to make breads like Siddu (sourdough’s ancient ancestor). In the plains,

fermentation is used for probiotic drinks like Kaanji to aid digestion of heavy winter meals.

The Micro-Regional “Dham”

A perfect example of this geological shaping is the Himachali Dham.

Each district has its own version because of what is locally available:

• Chambyali Dham:

Focuses on Rajma Madra because Chamba grows exceptional kidney beans.

• Kangri Dham:

Uses local chickpeas and is famous for the Telia Mah (black lentils with mustard oil).

• Mandiyali Dham:

Is defined by Sepu Wadi (spinach and lentil dumplings), reflecting the fertile, green valleys of Mandi.

How did caste, occupation, and community shape foodways?

Caste gave us the ‘rules,’ but occupation gave us the ‘reason.’ When I recreate a dish, I first ask: Was this made for a merchant in a city or a warrior in the hills? That answer dictates the spice, the fat, and the fire.

In my journey to map the etymology of Undivided Punjab and Himachal, I’ve discovered that caste and community weren’t

just social identifiers; they were the primary architects of our culinary DNA. Foodways were shaped by religious laws of purity, the physical demands of one's occupation, and the cultural pride of specific clans.

1. The Boti Brahmins: Guardians of the "Satwik" Hills

In Himachal Pradesh, the Saraswat Brahmin community, specifically the Botis, holds a hereditary monopoly over the Dhaam.

• The Ritual of the Dhaam:

Because the Dhaam was originally served as prasad in temples, the Botis developed a highly specialized "Satwik" culinary code. This meant zero onion or garlic.

• Technique over Spices:

To compensate for the lack of aromatics, they mastered the use of yogurt and unique spice blends (often containing up to 20 spices). They are the masters of the Dhuni technique—imparting a smoky flavor to lentils like Telia Mah using mustard oil on a smoldering coal, a practice rooted in Vedic purity rituals.

2. The Khatri and Aroras: The "Persianized" Palate

The **Khatri and Arora** communities of West Punjab (cities like Bhera,

Multan, and Lahore) were the merchant-administrators of the Mughal and Sikh empires.

• The Scribe Influence:

Their closeness to the Mughal courts led them to learn Persian and adopt refined Central Asian tastes. This is how dishes like Pulao, Kofta, and Meat Beliram entered the Punjabi home kitchen.

• Occupational Diet:

As traders and scribes, their diet was more refined and "urbanized" compared to the rustic agrarian diet. They popularized the use of dry fruits, saffron, and intricate slow braising (Bhunao) in their households.

3. The Agrarian Jats: Fuel for the Fields

The Jat community, whether Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh, followed an occupational diet built for high-calorie endurance.

• Dairy as a Pillar:

Their proximity to livestock meant that Ghee, Lassi, and Paneer were not luxuries but staples. The "heavy" Punjabi food we see today is actually a legacy of the Jat farmer who needed 4,000 calories to till the fields of the Majha and Malwa regions.

• The Sanjha Chulha:

This community pioneered the communal clay oven. It was a matter of occupational efficiency, women would bring their dough to a central tandoor after the day's work, fostering a shared, borderless culinary culture. We followed this tradition all the way till the mid 90s when my Chaiji would set up the Sanjha Chulha in our backyards and the ladies of the mohalla would come every evening to make rotis together. This would be our fun time when we would all sit together, share some laughter (and community gossip) as well as learn from each other a few culinary tips and tricks.

4. The Artisan and Muslim Communities of the Doaba

In regions like Jalandhar and Ludhiana, specific Muslim artisan communities shaped the refined "White Gravy" culture.

• Refined Meat Preparation:

While the agrarian meat was rustic and bone-in, the Muslim urban classes of East Punjab introduced high-skill techniques like Sharle (shredding potatoes or meat into fine threads) and the use of seeds (melon, poppy) to thicken gravies like Ludhiana Safed Murgh.

• Occupation and Street Food:

Many of our iconic street foods,

from Kharode (trotter soup) to Keema Samosas, were born from the professional butchers and cooks of the Muslim quarters in pre-partition cities.

I am currently documenting these community-specific techniques for my upcoming book – “A Girl from the Hills”.

Custodian v/s Archivist

I view the difference between being an archivist and a custodian as the difference between a museum and a kitchen. While an archive preserves the “memory” of a dish in a static, cold format, my work as a custodian is about keeping the spirit of the cuisine alive, breathing, and evolving.

So this is my understanding into what I do and how I approach it:

• Transfer of “Touch” over Text

An archive is a book on a shelf - a list of ingredients and measurements. Custodianship is the transmission of “Harkat” (movement) and “Andaza” (sensory estimation).

The Example: You can archive the recipe for Sepu Wadi, but you cannot archive the exact pressure of the thumb required to check if the lentil dumpling is steamed to the right consistency.

My Role: I teach my team and the women at Stree by Kanak the physical techniques the sound of the spluttering mustard oil and the smell of the Dhuni smoke. That is how a tradition survives.

• Reviving the “Vessel Memory”

An archivist might document that a dish was cooked in brass. As a custodian, I insist that the dish must be cooked in brass (Kansa or Pital).

The Science: The chemical reaction between the tin-lined brass and the yogurt in a Chaa Gosht creates a flavor profile that cannot be replicated in stainless steel. To be a custodian is to protect the material culture that makes the recipe possible.

• Food as a Living Language

Languages change, and so does food. An archivist tries to freeze a recipe in one “authentic” moment in time. As a custodian, I allow the recipe to breathe in the modern world while keeping its soul intact.

Evolution: If I serve a Lamb Shank Chaa Gosht instead of a traditional dice, I am using a modern cut to ensure the younger generation engages with an ancient Himachali flavor. I am protecting the “taste memory” by making it relevant to the contemporary palate. I utilised this technique at the first ever

Progressive take on Himachali food at Glenburn Penthouse in Kolkata in 2023. My husband and an equally gifted Chef, Suprio Bose, Helped me create some amazing dishes which while being completely authentic, had a progressive element that appealed to the diners in a very interesting way.

• Community and Social Continuity

Archiving is often a solitary act. Custodianship is communal.

• The Stree Initiative:

By training single mothers in these techniques, I am ensuring that the knowledge doesn’t die with me. I am creating a new generation of custodians. When these women cook Ludhiana Safed Murgh, they aren’t just following a script; they are carrying forward a lineage.

“An archivist saves the recipe, so it isn’t forgotten. A custodian cooks the recipe, so it is never lost. My work is finished only when these ‘endangered’ flavours become staples once again.”

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FROM SINDHI HOMES WITH LOVE BY DEEPA CHAUHAN

Deepa Chauhan presented stories, recipes and traditions from Sindhi kitchens at **MasterChef India season 7**.



Sindhi culture and cuisine is not well-known though Sindh was a cradle of culture from the Bronze Age when the Indus Valley Civilisation thrived at sites like Mohan Jo Daro. The Sindhu River is also where some of the Vedas are said to have been written. Sindh was the epicenter of many trade routes. Over 2000 years, Sindhi cuisine has taken influences from the Arabs, the Persians, neighbouring nations and states, and trade routes. The Sindhworkis went to work in distant lands setting up businesses across the world. The cuisine is therefore very diverse.

Sindhi Koki

We love our koki, and we love hosting with aplomb too. A full size koki can keep you satiated for hours. Perhaps that is why koki almost never features in festive meals or party menus. Lately, I have been putting koki on tasting menus, grazing boards as well as high tea. The recipe below will help you make the basic koki – once you have mastered the art – go ahead and express it in your own way. It can be made ahead when entertaining a large gathering as it keeps well for 2-3 days.

SINDHI KOKI

The most iconic of Sindhi breads, this shortened dough flat bread is the perfect travel companion as it does not spoil for 2-3 days.

Ingredients:

Whole wheat flour – 400 gm

Ghee or oil – 50 gm

Anardana powder – $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp

Black pepper powder – $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp

Green chillies, finely chopped – 1 tsp

Coriander leaves, finely chopped – 1 tbsp

Onion, finely chopped – 1 medium

Ghee or oil for brushing / shallow frying.

Method:

In a mixing bowl, add all the dry ingredients and combine well.

Add room temperature ghee or shortening of choice by pouring it evenly on the surface of the mixture. Now rub the ghee into



the flour with your hands for 3-4 minutes till you get a sandy texture. The dough should hold its shape when held tight in your fist. Now add all the fresh ingredients and combine thoroughly. Add room temperature water one or two tablespoons at a time and make a tight dough. DO NOT KNEAD. Bring the dough together by tightening and knocking rather than kneading. Keep it aside to rest for 10-12 minutes.

Divide the dough into 6 – 8 balls.

Heat a thick griddle or tawa on

medium heat. Gently warm the flattened dough balls on each side on the outer edge of the griddle. This step will help the fat in the dough melt and help you roll it out without using any dusting flour. Roll the dough into a 6-8 inch disk, approximately ½ cm thick. Make a trellis pattern on each side by scoring with a paring or utility knife on both sides taking care not to make deep cuts. These scoring marks help in even cooking of the koki.

Cook the koki on the tawa or griddle like you would cook a

paratha, but flipping often so that the heat is evenly distributed and cooking is uniform.

Apply oil or ghee to finish. Serve with curd sprinkled with salt and pepper. A sindhi papad is the perfect accompaniment.

For most Sindhis, Koki is not just sustenance. It is comfort, home and a balm for the soul in one bite. The koki is a hearty meal as well as a trusted travel companion. As part of my showcasing our iconic recipes in major hotels around India, I present it as a teaser and small bites opening the mind to the feast that is to follow. In pic – Koki as part of a grazing board.

Macchi Maani

• Macchi (fish) with Maani (roti) is a Sindhi classic. I presented it in a different manner.

Ingredients:

For the Methi Fish
 Boneless fish – 250 g (King fish or seer fish)
 Onion – 100 g (finely chopped)
 Tomato – 100 g (finely chopped)
 Methi (fenugreek) leaves – 1 cup lightly packed – cleaned and washed. Finely chopped
 Coriander leaves – ¾ cup lightly



packed – cleaned and washed.

Finely chopped

Garlic – 25 g – finely minced

Mustard oil – 100 mls

Turmeric – 1 teaspoon

Red Chilli powder – 2 teaspoons

Coriander powder – 1 tablespoon

Methi seeds – 1/2 teaspoon

Green Chilli – 1 medium spicy, deseeded, finely chopped and seeds reserved for finishing oil

Salt to taste

For Sindhi Maani (Roti)

Whole wheat flour – 1 cup (100g)

Groundnut oil – 2 tablespoon

Water – for kneading, about ½ cup

Makes: two portions

Method:

- Cut the fish into small 1 inch chunks, apply ¼ tsp salt, ¼ teaspoon turmeric powder and keep aside

- Knead the dough for the roti, saving some flour for dusting.

Apply a few drops of groundnut oil on the surface to prevent drying and keep aside to rest.

- In a wide, shallow frying pan, heat 35 mls mustard oil to smoking point. Add the fenugreek seeds and turn off the flame. Remove the seeds once browned and reserve them for the finishing oil.

- In the same pan, fry the salt and turmeric coated fish till half done.

Remove and set aside.

- Now add the garlic followed by the green chilli and onions and gently brown them. Add a pinch of salt to prevent the garlic from sticking to the pan.

- Once the onions are golden, add half the quantity of the turmeric and chilli powders and all the coriander powder; followed quickly by the finely chopped tomatoes.

- As the oils start to separate once the tomatoes are cooked, add the methi leaves, cook for 2-3 minutes followed by the coriander leaves.

- Add half a cup of water and spread the semi fried fish in the pan in a single layer, taking care that the gravy is at the same level as the top of the fish to prevent it from drying. Cover and cook for 3-4 minutes or until done.

- Divide the dough into 4 and roll the roti. Roll each ball into a 5 inch disc, apply groundnut oil and fold into a triangle (half fold followed by quarter fold). Now roll this triangle into a thin roti approximately the shape and size of the baking dish.

- Cook the rotis as usual but only till 90% done as they will be baked for 6-8 minutes.

To assemble:

On a baking sheet or cookie sheet, assemble the fish and roti in the

square mould as follows: Put half the cooked fish along with the gravy in a single layer and cover with one roti trimmed to fit the shape of the bowl. Repeat the layering one more time and brush the top roti with the balance groundnut oil. Bake in a preheated oven at 180 degrees (top grill only) for 6-8 minutes.

Cut the leftover trims of the roti into small bits and fry in a little oil till crisp. Reserve for garnish

For the finishing oil: Heat the balance mustard oil in a tadka pan till it reaches smoking point. Pour this over the reserved crushed methi seeds, turmeric and chilli powders, green chilli seeds, a few methi leaves and ¼ teaspoon salt. Cover immediately and allow the flavors to infuse.

Plating: Let the baked macchi maani rest for 4-5 minutes before removing the mould. Slice it into two equal rectangles. Remove part of the corner from one of the pieces to make it look like it has been eaten / tasted. Place the two pieces in the platter slightly away from each other. Drizzle the finishing oil on the top crust as well as the platter. Garnish with slivers of tomato, onion and fresh methi and coriander.



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