

FOODIE TALKS

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The haleem evolution

With boatloads of meat now stockpiled in the freezer post Qurbani, all sorts of recipes now fight for attention in my mind. This brainstorming took me down the road of 'haleem' craving and I set a goal of finding out the origin of this popular dish and the result was extremely interesting.

Of all the things that come up, the most important finding I had was that haleem has an ancestor called 'hareesa', which is an Arab delicacy and the medieval Andalusian Jews ate it on Saturday, a day of Sabbath for them.

The Lebanese and Syrian Christians make hareesa to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption. In Iraq, Lebanon and the sub-continent, Shias make it in the month of Muharram to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at Karbala.

The Arabic word 'Harasa' and another older word 'Harasu' gives birth to the word 'Hareesa' which refers to pounding of meat with barley or shelled whole grains of wheat. Often, the bone-in meat is cooked separately and then de-boned before mixing it to the wheat mixture, and finally, it is pounded hard to make a smooth paste. This laborious bicep building dish is a popular food for the month of Ramadan in many countries.

From the 10th century book, 'Kitabh al Tabikh' (Book of Dishes) by Ibn Sayaan Al Warraq, which is revered as one of the earliest cookbooks to be discovered, narrated numerous variations of porridge which can provide a fully balanced, calorific and communal meal that replenishes your family's reserves after a day of fasting.

Interestingly, the word haleem means 'patient' in Arabic, advising one to stay home and to remain patient through the long, slow cooking process.

During months of fasting or during long journeys in-between battles, it was a one-dish sailor and soldier food and that is how, some historians believe, harisa came to the sub-continental coast of Malabar with the arrival of Arab traders.

Harees is undoubtedly one of the most ancient and popular iftar dish across the Gulf countries during Ramadan. Its gluey, fatty consistency coupled with minimal spicing attributes to its popularity.

The litmus test for good home-made or commercially prepared harees is that it should possess tender threads of meat or chicken running through the porridge.

Most Muslim cultures prepare some version of harees, especially since many believe that the Prophet Mohammad favoured this dish. Evliya Efendi wrote that the Prophet himself ate hareesa, and called it "the Lord of dishes."

Turkey often showcases their version, known as Keshkek, which has been their

national dish since Central Asia has been linked with Turkish culture. Keshkek, which is usually made from mutton or chicken and coarsely ground meat, is an essential dish for ceremonies such as weddings, religious chants, and seeing-off youngsters for their military service. Salt is not added to keshkek in the beginning; it is added when the desired consistency is achieved. If it is well cooked, they either remove the container from the fire or carry the fire away. The proper consistency of keshkek, the amount of salt and the taste, depend on the mastery of the cook.

As keshkek is an indispensable dish for weddings, religious chants, feasts for the soldiers-to-be and circumcisions, that is sent to the guests in trays. Powdered pepper sauce fried in butter is poured over the plates to make it look more attractive and tastier.

The Iranians prepare their own version of hareesa, or 'haleem,' topped with cinnamon, confectioner's sugar and melted butter for a savoury porridge. An ancient dish, originally prepared in Iran with barley, travelled to Armenia, Anatolia, Northern Iraq, and finally to the Indian subcontinent. In Pakistan, it is prepared on religious holidays.

In a nut shell,

Harees or Harissa, the meat to wheat ratio is 1:1 and the wheat is boiled before its added, soaked overnight or sometimes the wheat is beaten to a paste/pulp form. The spices used are cinnamon, cumin, cardamom and few others

If you travel to Hyderabad in India, in the midst of Ramadan, you would be courted by countless signs for the Hyderabad version of Haleem. In comparison to the subtle, classical flavour of the traditional Arabian harees, haleem throws itself onto centre stage like a heavy metal band on fire. Purists would argue that this haleem is really 'kichda,' a meat-wheat porridge that is enriched with pulses. Personally, I find the traditional bowl of harees a notch too bland and the commercial Hyderabad Haleem is too spicy, often leaving my taste buds in a pile of smouldering ashes!

When I tried to trace the history of Harees coming to Hyderabad, I found the Arab soldiers (mostly from Yemen) who migrated to India to serve in Nizam's Army stayed in the barracks. Similar to soldiers in Arabic countries, haleem used to be served as breakfast and lunch for the people who

used to go to battle so that they have strength throughout the day. This gradually found its way to being served at Iftar's and feasts.

Variants: Hyderabad has two versions of harees, the khari (plain) and the meethi (spiced) available. Khari, true to its name, is bland by Hyderabad standards and available at a majority of the outlets and meethi actually has sugar mixed with it and not so commonly available. Kashmir and a few other places also have rice used instead of wheat in making it.

How harees became haleem: The bland version of harees had a few additions made to it, such as garam masala, onions, garlic, ginger, red chilli, coriander, turmeric etc in the spices section, gram lentils along with a 1:3 ratio of wheat to meat i.e. 1kg wheat to 3kg meat which gives the haleem its thickness and uniqueness.

Difference between harees and haleem in layman's terms:

Ratio of wheat to meat: 1:1 vs. 1:3

Taste: Bland vs. spicy

Consistency: Semi liquid vs. thick porridge

