



From the imperial kitchens: Food fit for the Mughals

Culinary knowledge distinguishes man from beast. Not my words! The thought was explicated in a 16th century Mughal text when detailing the workings of Emperor Akbar's kitchen. With such a philosophy towards food, it follows that the royal chefs during the Mughal era had crafted grand dishes and brilliant recipes. Today, these delicacies form a rich part of the Mughal

legacy in the Sub-Continent. But when we celebrate an occasion with the exquisite 'kachchi biriyani' for example, or perhaps relish that 'jorda' afterwards, little do we ponder about the efforts of those imperial cooks who had long ago mastered them, or the keenness of the patrons who first introduced or promoted them. Ah! The things we take for granted. Let's



achievement was the introduction of Persian cuisine into the royal kitchens of Delhi," he wrote in his book, Recipes from the Rasoi. "The Persian cook came skilled in the technique of preparing famous Persian delights..." Lizzie Collingham too, in the book, Curry: A Tale of Cooks & Conquerors, agrees, explaining that this phenomenon most likely occurred after he came back from exile —

"On his return, Humayun brought with him a strong preference for Persian culture and a large number of Persian cooks. These cooks imported into India a Persian cuisine..."

In fact, many delicacies such as faluda and jorda are Persian. The latter is even mentioned in Ain-i-

A LOOK INTO EMPEROR AKBAR'S KITCHEN

The great emperor remains celebrated and legendary. I shall not dwell upon his political or military acumen, no sir, but what he did for my palate!

Abu'l Fazl had penned down, in the 16th century manuscript, Ain-i-Akbari, many details about the imperial kitchen and even the emperor's dietary habits.

"His Majesty even extends his attention to this department (i.e. imperial kitchen), and has given many wise regulations for it..." Fazl began the elaborate description of gastronomy. After all, according to him this 'knowledge distinguishes man from beasts.'

not, for a little while at least, to get a better understanding of what we fondly call Mughlai cuisine.

THE PERSIAN CONNECTION
As you dig up on the makings of this cuisine, the Persian connection becomes very easily apparent.

Persian influence is written all over Mughal heritages, and food is not an exception. This connection should be a good starting point in understanding Mughal heritage, including food. Keep in mind too that a large number of Mughal officials had Persian roots.

Shawkat Osman, chef, researcher, and author, attributes this influence in food to Humayun, the second Mughal emperor.

"Humayun's most lasting



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Akbari, as 'zard birinj.'

The Mughals created a happy marriage between Persian food and the local ingredients of the Indian subcontinent.

"Given the availability of spices in this region, the Persian delicacies in the hands of the Mughals became more flavourful," Shawkat Osman later explained in an interview.

And of course there were other delicacies too.

"Use of tandoor, naan, keema, and kebab were already introduced by Delhi sultans before the Mughal emperors, which nevertheless at a later date became a major part of Mughlai cuisine," he further informs in the book. The technique of cooking food in pressurised steam, known as 'dum-pukht,' was also used by the Mughals.

There was a 'Master of the Kitchen' in the staff, and 'treasurers for the cash and the stores, several tasters, and a clever writer.'

And there were chefs.

"Cooks from all countries prepare a great variety of dishes of all kinds of grains, greens, meats; also oily, sweet, and spicy dishes," Fazl tells us. The team was always ever so ready that upon the order, a hundred dishes could be served in a matter of one hour.

Fazl broke down food into three categories: 'such in which no meat is used'; 'such in which meat and rice, etc., are used'; and 'meats with spices.'

He then continued to give brief recipes from each category, from Saag, to Qima Pulau, to Kebab.

"The Persian and central Asian

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