

The Lucknawi Dastarkhwan

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Abstract

Lucknawi cuisine brings to the imagination all things rich and royal. It has its own distinct individuality and identity. The nawabs of Lucknow are believed to like a lavish food spread for which expert chefs were hired and paid a good amount for their services. A very high degree of flair and finesse was required to prepare the elaborately rich Lucknowi cuisine. This practice was passed down the generations which led to the development of the Awadhi cuisine. The royal kitchens were famed for producing gastronomic gems for the royalty, before passing on the age old knowledge to their next generation to carry forward the legacy. It will not be wrong to say that the mere presentation of Lucknowi food makes the mouth water.

Keywords: Cuisine, Gastronomy, Chef, Nawab, Rich, Aroma.

Introduction

The relish on my plate is Awadhi, a tangy blend of spicy flavors. I can easily identify some of the ingredients—spices and mince mutton—right away. I however wish to dwell, in the forces that came together to create this exquisite melt in the mouth dish. Yes, I am referring to the galawat ke kababs which form an important component of the Lucknowi cuisine. The food and the cuisines of our legendary city find fame across the world. The richness of the cuisine of Awadh lies not only in its variety but also in the ingredients used in creating such a variety.

Objective of the Study

To explore the gastronomic history of the historical city of Lucknow. To throw light on the popular Lucknowi menu and to discuss about the various innovative techniques used in the royal Nawabi household some of which continue to be used in the modern Indian kitchens.

The Nawabs of Awadh were famous for their extravagance and the patronage given by them to the various artists and craftsmen. One of the arts that flourished well and gained prominence under the Nawabs was the art of cooking. The cuisines from the kitchens of Awadh were the most sought after. The Chefs of Awadh enhanced the traditional dastarkhwan with elaborate dishes like kababs, kormas, kaliya, nahari-kulchas, zarda, sheermal, roomali rotis, and parathas. It would be right to say therefore, that the food from the dastarkhwan of Awadh is an experience—of aromas and visual delights. In an era of fast food and two minute noodles the taste and flavours of the Nawabi kitchens are still a gourmet's delight which consists of traditional food and irresistible recipes.

Cuisine refers to any style of cooking, including its practices, traditions and recipes¹ and the cuisine of Lucknow can be a tough competition for any place known for its lip scrumptious dishes.

Cuisine is a word of French origin that means "kitchen", but it originally comes from the Latin word *coquere*, which means "to cook". The foods and methods of preparation are traditional and local to a region or population. The major factors which contribute towards the shaping of any cuisine are climate, which in large measure determines the native raw materials that are available to the cook; economic conditions, which regulate trade in delicacies and imported foodstuffs; and religious or sumptuary laws, under which certain foods are required or prescribed.² Another important Persian word related to Awadhi food is dastarkhwan which literally means a meticulously laid-out ceremonial dining spread. It was customary in the kingdom of Awadh to sit around the dastarkhwan and share it. The practice still continues in many families of old Lucknow.

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The most famous of all dishes are the Kebabs and some of the most famous varieties of Kebabs are Galawat kababs, Kakori Kebabs, Shami Kebabs, Boti Kebabs, Patili-ke-Kababs, Ghutwa Kebabs, and Seekh Kebabs all being a variety prepared with minced meat. These kababs involve a different methodology for cooking and use a variety of spices in their preparation.

The royal kitchen in the court of Awadh was commissioned to try innovations and inventions wherein food of such kind was prepared where the nawab would be able to eat without difficulty in chewing and still enjoy the finesses of the master chefs of the times. A trip to Lucknow without having a serving of any of these delicacies is akin to sacrilege.

It was the rich Mughlai dishes which actually attained final shape in the kitchens of the kingdom Awadh and a new cuisine took shape. Talking about the cuisines it is imperative to refer to the culinary styles of the royal kitchen. One very important style used was of Dhungar or the quick smoke procedure for giving a smoky flavor to the dish. Under this method a piece of live coal is placed in the center of the dish and some ghee is poured over it and covered immediately with a lid to prevent the smoke from escaping. Galawat is also kind of procedure used for tenderizing meat for the purpose of softening the meat of kababs. Another method used popularly was the use of the Dum technique which requires sealing the cooking utensil with flour dough and cooking on slow fire. This lends some high aroma and flavor to the food item being cooked and hence the name 'Dum Pukht'.³

Besides, the novel and innovative procedures the utensils used for Awadhi cooking were also unique. Worth mentioning here are the Bhagona or the patili, degchi or the pear shaped pot, laganor the shallow concave utensil and seeni or the big round tray. Most of these utensils were made of brass or copper and were used for producing the culinary delights of the dastarkhwan of Awadh. It would be worth quoting here that "Pahle taam badahu kalaam" i.e. first food and then communication applied well to the nawabi style of food spread which was like a wide canvas used for creating a variety of recipes. The masalachi i.e. the one in charge of preparing a blend of masalas/spices, Bawarchis i.e. the cooks and the Raqabdars, those who served the food perfected the art and the finesse in cooking to such a great extent that it was not to be found in any other part of the country.

It is important to discuss here some of the most popular items on the royal menu. The first in the list would be the kaliya which is a mutton gravy item

cooked in turmeric and acts as a stimulant for the jaded appetite.

Next worth mentioning here is the mutton korma which is a smooth gravy with a rich aroma and holds popularity to this day and also finds a variation in chicken korma.

Savouring the pièce-de-résistance in the Awadhi Dastarkhwan is the layered bread known as kulcha served with nihari. This bread is a crispy baked bread which is an inseparable partner in crime to the nihari. Nihari as the word suggests comes from the word nihar which implies something that is eaten before anything else in the morning. So basically nihari was the breakfast food meant to be primarily had by the working class, after being cooked overnight making it a rich and nutritious broth for the day's hard work.

Over the centuries, biryani one of the most relished food item of Lucknow, acquired rich Indian flavours and specially famous versions being the Hyderabadi and Lakhnawi biryani. No party is complete without biryani on the menu with children craving for the same, any day of the week. Biryani has been satiating the hunger of many for centuries but Awadhi biryani has its own story to tell. The word biryani is derived from the Persian word birian, which means "fried before cooking" or birinj, the Persian word for biryani.

Lakhnawi biryani is regarded to be unparalleled by the hard Lucknowites and many outlets in the old part of the city are thronged by people for the foodies delight.

Kakori kababs are the beautifully done kababs on skewers over charcoal fire and are renowned for their melt in the mouth quality. Kakori kababs derive the name from Kakori which is a small village near Lucknow and finds a mention in history of the Indian National movement for the famous Kakori conspiracy case.

Abdul Halim Sharar's work Lucknow mentions in detail certain episodes related to the gastronomical delights of the royal Awadhi kitchen. King Ghazi ud din Haider's chef is known for preparing parathas for him. He is reported to have used thirty seers of ghee in six parathas which speaks largely of the richness of the royal dastarkhwan. Shirmal, which is also a variety of bread was developed in the kitchens of Lucknow and is credited to Mehmudu, a non Lucknowite.⁴ He introduced many innovations and improvements in the regular bread and produced the shirmal which is a very popular bread in Lucknow and is a must on a fancy menu in any household. Another exotic variation was a large pie which contained some birds and when opened the birds were released and flew away.⁵ This preparation was found on the dastarkhwan of King Nasir ud din Haider and definitely boasts of some superior achievements. Another interesting anecdote deals with Malika Kishwar wife of Nawab Amjad Ali Shah whose breakfast spread consisted of rojini tikia (bread rich in ghee) and balai (cream). During summers a cooling drink was made of diluted pearls

and was served before lunch. Her dinner was a lavish affair where the menu consisted of twenty to thirty items. The dastarkhwan boasted of two or three types of pulaos, several kinds of qormas, kababs, strong broths of meat, vegetables, dates and sweets.⁶

Talking about sweets the most popular desserts were the jalebi, imarti, balushahi, halwa and peda.⁷ Imarti is believed to be a Lucknawi invention while jalebi came from Arabia and Persia and was originally known as zalabia. The Awadhi cuisine used a lot of milk and milk products especially cream which was known as malai or balai. Sharar writes that Nawab Asaf ud Daula renamed malai as balai, because it came from the top of milk bala⁸ as known in Persian and all the more as it sounded more eloquent and refined. The art of table decoration was inspired by the English in the way of laying the table with flowers and other embellishments.

It is absolutely correct to say that the culinary art reached its height under the patronage of the nawabs of Awadh who appreciated and relished the refinements in food. These refinements of the kitchen were picked up by the nobility and the aristocratic families and later became the way of cooking in most

of the households of Lucknow....and hence the love for Lucknawi food.

Conclusion

This paper explores the cuisine of the royal household of the nawabs. It gives an insight into the various items of the nawabi dastarkhwan ranging from the starters to the desserts. Studying about the Culinary arts of Lucknow helps in developing an understanding of the different ways in which the art of cooking has developed and evolved in Lucknow over the centuries.

References

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