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GOURMET FILES

A classic meal

VASUNDHARA CHAUHAN

Innovation may be good but when it comes to food what people notice are colour, flavour and texture.

Photo: S. Siva Saravanan



Something from everything...

We were invited out for dinner some weeks ago, to the outer reaches of the National Capital Region. The day temperature had been 46°, and the drive was long but a storm came and the evening became fresh and cool. Augured well. To cut to the chase, hors d'oeuvres were served on the lawn. Many chips and dips and a large platter of small potatoes, each on a toothpick. The potatoes were "herbed", à la mode, with minuscule bits of pickled gherkins and a hint of basil and oregano.

Incomplete circle

Quite delicious but for the small snag that the potatoes slipped off the end of the toothpicks, landing on our party clothes. But we were hungry — it was well past dinner time, and saris could always be dry-cleaned — so we tucked in. When dinner was served, the table was laden. With lukewarm pooris stacked on a square of aluminium foil, gravied potatoes, dry potatoes and arbi for variety.

Unfortunately the raita wasn't of potatoes, so the circle remained incomplete. I love potatoes, but that dinner made me realise that I love them more if they're offset by greens. I scooped all the sliced cucumber off the salad bowl, but it wasn't enough to do the job.

Then, the following week, another friend called us to Sunday lunch, at the other end of the National Capital region. The food was delicious and the menu amazing: Idlis for starters; lemon rice, slightly tart and crunching with peanuts; dosas, made of rice-and-something batter, served with white butter; mutton biryani; vegetable biryani; steamed rice and two curries. Again the hostess missed her chance and didn't complete the circle: there was no rice kheer for dessert.

Another Sunday, another lunch. Jivi is an accepted style guru, so I shouldn't have been surprised at his table. When he does anything, he goes the whole hog. Silver thalis, each set with four katoris; matching glasses, even a lota with a spout for the water. No crystal jug. But it wasn't just the sparkle and gleam; the food was so beautifully planned that one cannot imagine a better menu: baingan kachrito start; followed by hot, golden pooris brought straight from the kadahi to the table; potatoes in a thin red-yellow gravy, redolent of hing and zeera; matar paneer; khatta-meetha kaddu,

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sweet-and-sour pumpkin; mutton chops cooked Punjabi style, with dark fragrant masala; spinach raita; and a lovely take on the chana that is usually curried to serve with pooris: in a "salad" with raisins and fresh mint. Four kinds of achar, the best of which was of red chillies, cut about an inch long, in a wet, oily masala that smelt of sesame. He said it was from Fabindia. Dessert was chilled phirni. Could one ask for more, bar a handy chaise longue to crash in and then a crane to lift one home? What made the lunch memorable and perfect was the integrity of its components; from table setting to food, each part worked perfectly with the others.

Which brings me to my favourite topic, of confidence and purity. I'm a great admirer of innovation, for variety as well as for convenience. But very few of us can fiddle with classics and do it well. Jivi's chana salad is a good instance of a variation that worked. Chanas are usually served with poori, but this salad was a refreshing variation. With all the other hot, spicy food, another curry would have been much of a muchness. But the rest of the menu was a classic combination and served in the traditional way. Quite the opposite of that abomination, a mixed, "multi-cuisine" menu. Maybe our exposure to hotel buffet lunches is responsible, but it has become de rigueur to serve a salmagundi, an unholy assortment of dishes that don't complement each other. My mother's generation would serve a predominantly Indian dinner and add a "bake" of vegetables (with the obligatory white sauce and cheese), with cold bread rolls on the side. Why? Now it's a rule to serve moussaka and two Thai curries along with the usual chicken curry, palak paneer and parathas. Why?

Lack of confidence

I think it comes from a lack of confidence; in the taste of one's cooking and in how our hospitality will be rated. Our table must be so laden that it's creaking, our biriyani mightn't be good enough, so let's add a goulash, our payasam mightn't be good enough so let's add ice cream and chocolate sauce... and the list goes on. But I don't know which is worse: too many things or too much of the same thing. The problem with too many things is that they don't go together; one has limited capacity so can't eat several courses to do justice to the combined Indian, Thai and Hungarian menu — unlike a cohesive menu, which is deeply satisfying. And too much of the same thing is clearly too much of a good thing. Three preparations of potatoes in one meal — four, if you count the arbi? And here I am, fretting about serving spinach on the same table as methi, tomatoes in the fish and in the dal, both mutton and fish in curries, and rice with dinner and in dessert. I might be the only one who obsesses about or even notices whether ingredients are being repeated. But what others do notice is a meal that has a variety of colour, flavour and texture.

Vasundhara Chauhan is based in Delhi and works with Pratham's ASER (Annual Status of Education Report).

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