

A Unique Odyssey of Parsi Cuisine: from Persia to Mumbai

Dr. Rukshana Billimoria

Principal

Anjuman-I-Islam's Institute of Hospitality Management, Mumbai, India

Abstract: *This research delves into the distinctive Parsi cuisine, an authentic culinary tradition rooted in the fusion of Persian and Indian influences. The Parsi community, originally hailing from Persia, migrated to the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Mumbai, where they settled and developed a rich gastronomic heritage that reflects their historical journey. This cuisine combines the flavours, ingredients, and culinary techniques of both Persian and Indian origins, creating a unique and delicious tapestry of dishes.*

The study primarily focuses on the city of Mumbai, which is fortunate to host a variety of authentic Parsi restaurants and cafes, such as the well-known establishments like Kyani and Co, Britannia and Co, and Café Universal. While these venues have gained recognition for their Parsi offerings, this research endeavours to explore the intricate journey of Parsi cuisine from Iran to India. To achieve this, the study draws insights from various articles, journals, blogs, websites, and also incorporates the researcher's perspective, who, being of Iranian descent, was born and raised in Mumbai, maintaining a direct connection to the Persian roots that enrich this unique culinary tradition.

Keywords: Zoroastrian, Parsi cuisine, Persian influence, Flavours, Technique, Parsi restaurant.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Parsees, also known as Parsis, constitute an ethno-religious group originating from Persia who migrated to the Indian subcontinent. Their faith is anchored in Zoroastrianism, and they were permitted to establish their community in India by a benevolent Hindu prince. The terms of this settlement required them to adopt the local language, culture, and abstain from carrying weapons.

The core objective of this research is to investigate the diversity and abundance of Parsi cuisine within both Parsi households and restaurants in Mumbai. Mumbai is particularly fortunate to host a multitude of genuine Parsi dining establishments, boasting the highest concentration of Parsi restaurants in India. Parsis hold a profound affection for their culinary heritage, and their kitchens are a hub of creativity and happiness. They possess a remarkable ability to transform any dish into a delightful khattimeethi delicacy, combining sweet and sour flavours with finesse.

Explore the authentic Zoroastrian Persian Cuisine – Researcher's point of view

Before the migration of Zoroastrians to India, Persian cuisine differed significantly from the Parsi cuisine that is now prevalent in India. Authentic Persian cuisine was notably drier and more condiment-focused compared to the current Indian Parsi cuisine, which has been influenced by various factors. The traditional Persian culinary tradition didn't incorporate the rich sauces and gravies that are a hallmark of contemporary Parsi dishes. Unfamiliar delicacies like Chello kebab, Os-e-Brenj, Os-e-Mir, and Abgoosht were part of the Persian repertoire. Furthermore, a wide array of kebabs, including Shish kebab, saffron burg kebab, Bakhtari kebab, Joojeh (chicken) Kebab, and meat koftas, were served with flatbreads like Taftaan or Taftoon, as well as a variety of pilafs (pulao) in the original Persian cuisine.

It's worth noting that the original Persians were primarily vegetarians, but the necessity of survival led to the inclusion of meat in their cuisine. This resulted in dishes where meat was integrated into vegetable preparations, such as ladyfingers, bottle gourd, green beans, and various dried beans.

One popular dish, Chello Kebab, features long, well-seasoned meat skewers served on a saffron-infused bed of rice, making it one of Iran's most renowned and beloved dishes. Kofta, which is seasoned ground meat formed into patties or thicker, shorter kebabs, is another culinary specialty in Iranian cuisine. Additionally, there are one-pot broth-style

dishes like Os-e-Brenj, a nourishing blend of rice, legumes, meat, and various spices, and Os-e-Mir, a tangy, sweet, and sour dish featuring pulses, legumes, spinach, beetroot, and optional meat, garnished with freshly prepared wheat flour noodles.

The world of Parsifood: Discussion with NilouferMavalvala

According to (NilouferMavalvala) Parsi cooking is made up of very simple and fresh ingredients and they focus more on healthy spices - cinnamon, garlic, clove, turmeric, ginger, onion, are the base of their recipes as these ingredients provide healthy and important nourishment to their meals. Parsi cooking is neither Indian nor Persian, but it's a refined fusion of two deep rich and ancient food culture and this is what describes the Parsi cooking for the world.

The melting pot: The expansion of Parsi cuisine

As per Kaushani Banerjee, classic Parsi cuisine embodies a harmonious fusion of flavours, featuring the aromatic notes of saffron and cinnamon, the sweet undertones of jaggery, and the delightful tanginess of barberry. A distinguishing characteristic of Parsi dishes is the generous use of dried fruits and nuts, resulting in a symphony of flavours. Historically, Parsi weddings traditionally featured mutton as the primary meat, but with the introduction of poultry, chicken became a welcomed addition to the spread. The contemporary popularity of patranimacchi, as KurushDalal suggests, is a relatively recent phenomenon. The majority of individuals first encounter Parsi cuisine during weddings and Navjotes (the initiation ceremony into the Parsi faith), where sumptuous feasts are laid out. It's noteworthy that vegetables also play a significant role in Parsi culinary traditions. Although many might assume Dhansak is the quintessential Parsi dish, Mason clarifies that it holds a specific role in Parsi rituals, typically served four days after someone's passing.

Parsi cuisine - renewing an ancient cuisine

Parsi culinary traditions have been influenced by two ancient cultures: firstly, Persia, their place of origin, and then India, where they settled. This unique historical backdrop imparts Parsis and their cuisine with a diverse and distinct flavour profile. Persian roots brought forth recipes featuring nuts, dried fruits, and sweet shirni, while India introduced ingredients like ginger, garlic, and green chilies. Centuries-old elements such as saffron, jaggery vinegar, ginger, cinnamon, and turmeric, integral to Parsi cooking, are now revered for their health benefits in modern times.

For Parsis, the heart of their cuisine lies within their homes, with meat and eggs being two favoured ingredients. Onions, ginger, garlic, and tomatoes are prevalent in most Parsi recipes, and spices like cinnamon, turmeric, cumin, and chilies are commonly employed. The finishing touches to Parsi dishes are achieved through the combination of jaggery and vinegar. The sacred trinity of Tikhu-khatu-mithu is highly regarded in Parsi cooking, and achieving the perfect balance of these elements is crucial to any Parsi dish.

One of the iconic names in Parsi cuisine is Dhansak, a beloved dish featuring lentils and meat, often referred to as the king of all Parsi foods. Another Parsi favourite is curry rice, a dish where each family has its own unique blend of spices and flavours.

Pickles and achar are the trusted companions of Parsi cuisine, such as gharab nu achar (roe cooked in spices) and gajarmewa nu achar (carrots, dried fruits, and whole mangoes stewed and cooked in spices). In Parsi desserts, cardamom, rosewater, nutmeg, and occasionally vanilla are commonly used, along with almonds and various nuts. All-time favorites in Parsi dessert offerings include lagan nu custard, sev, mithudahi, and malido. Endorsed treats like mango ice-cream and kulfis are integral to the cuisine.

For tea time, Parsis enjoy delightful snacks to accompany a strong cup of tea, including batasa, savoury butter biscuits like nankhatai, and sweet baked semolina biscuits like bhakra. Their traditional saffron cake, kumas, is a delicious indulgence. Other delectable treats encompass daarnipori, khajoomnaghari, khamannaladoo, and sweets like coconut balls, chappat, and sweetened pancakes. Parsi recipes are not intended to be overly complex; rather, they represent a harmonious blend of health, balance, and flavour. The interplay of spices, saltiness, sweetness, and sourness renders every Parsi dish uniquely classic.

The uniqueness of Parsi cuisine and what sets it apart.

In many Parsi culinary creations, a distinctive harmony of sweet and tangy flavours known as "khattu-mithu" is artfully employed. One renowned and delectable Parsi dish showcasing this technique is the beloved "patio" curry, a tomato-

based delicacy. Another celebrated Parsi culinary masterpiece is "patranimacchi," a flavourful fish dish where fish is marinated, coated with a zesty green chutney, and steamed within a banana leaf, resulting in a truly delightful dish.

The term "Per edu" signifies the addition of a crowning glory—an egg. Parsis have a tradition of incorporating eggs into their dishes, often breaking a raw egg over vegetables such as okra, tomatoes, potatoes, or coriander, where the beaten egg forms a frothy, sumptuous layer.

Nuts and dry fruits are a constant presence in Parsi cuisine, imparting a distinctive taste. These ingredients were introduced by Parsis when they migrated from Persia. It's not unusual to find fruits like pomegranate and berries enhancing their dishes. "Jardaloosalliboti" is a boneless lamb preparation that combines the savoury and sweet notes by incorporating apricots. "Pulao" is a celebrated rice dish within Parsi cuisine. And, when it comes to dessert, the iconic "lagan nu custard" takes center stage, exhibiting a British influence.

To India from Persia

Parsis, followers of the ancient Zoroastrian faith, hold nature and the sun in reverence as their supreme deities. In the 7th century, Parsis embarked on a migration from Persia due to religious persecution, eventually finding refuge in the western Indian states of Gujarat, Maharashtra (Mumbai), and Goa. Over time, they underwent a cultural and linguistic integration with the attributes of Indian culture, while also assimilating elements from the British and Portuguese, who colonized India. However, they have steadfastly retained many facets of their ancient heritage. The result is that Parsi cuisine stands as a delicate and harmonious fusion of multicultural flavours.

A fundamental rustic dish transformed into a cherished specialty is known as "Dhansak," where "dhan" signifies grains and "shak" represents vegetables. Dhansak features a hearty medley of lentils, peas, beans, robust vegetables like squash, tomatoes, eggplant, and onions, fragrant herbs including ginger, mint, and cilantro, aromatic spices like cumin, fennel, and chilies, along with meat or chicken, often served as the core component. Dhansak stands as the iconic dish of Parsis and is also highly popular among Indians. Traditionally, it graces Sunday lunches, accompanied by brown rice. Parsis skilfully employ seafood and an array of spices to craft an extensive range of curry preparations, from the mild and creamy "saasnimacchi" to the fiery and hot "shrimp patio."

Two specific spice blends hold a special place in Parsi cuisine, imparting distinct flavours to their dishes. The first is "garam masala," a highly aromatic blend comprising nearly eighteen ground spices. The second is a wet seasoning blend that incorporates garlic, ginger, cumin, and chilies, serving as the foundational element for most Parsi sauces and gravies.

The manner in which the Parsi community embraced Indian Cuisine.

The ancient Persians were renowned for their distinguished cuisine, an enduring allure that continues to echo in the culinary creations of India's Parsi community. In the 17th century, Parsis migrated to India, settling along the western coast. During this time, they cultivated a culinary tradition that was truly unique, unlike any other. Parsis eagerly embraced and adapted a variety of recipes, creating a diverse cuisine that proudly showcases influences from Gujarat, Maharashtra, Iran, and Britain.

This distinct and delectable cuisine of the Indian west coast represents a harmonious amalgamation of flavours, seamlessly blending elements of spiciness and sweetness, balancing the nuances of both heat and coolness. Rooted in their Iranian heritage, Parsis incorporate a tradition of stews, succulent meats, and the inclusion of dried fruits. British influences are also discernible in certain Parsi dishes, such as custards, jellies, and sauces.

Parsis are passionate food enthusiasts who relish extravagant feasts. Each Parsi family boasts its own unique recipes, ensuring a distinctive touch in every household's culinary creations. Parsi cuisine, although not excessively spicy, artfully utilizes the "khattu-mithu" principle, skillfully combining sweet and sour elements to enhance the flavours of their dishes, even when the dish isn't overly sweet or tart.

Spices like cardamom, nutmeg, and clove, whether used whole or ground, are generously employed to impart rich flavors to both savoury and sweet dishes. Delving deeper into Parsi cuisine and its spices reveals the presence of unusual and lesser-known spices like "Jardaloo" (dry apricots), along with ingredients such as kharik, dates, almonds, and golden raisins.

Parsis display a profound fondness for eggs, evident in dishes like "bheedapeedu," "tomato per eedu," and "sallipeedu." The cuisine is further renowned for its tantalizing curries, ranging from the green coconut curry, crafted with chilies, coriander, and cumin, to the red curry, featuring raw peanuts, Kashmiri chilies, and coconuts, as well as a sweet and sour white sauce that complements fish and khichdi perfectly.

This charming and exceptional cuisine offers a wealth of culinary delights, from Dhansak to chicken farcha to salliboti, inviting all to savor its exquisite flavors.

Mumbai's Iconic Irani café's

Kyani and Co, Marine lines

The most seasoned and the foremost well known among the Parsi cafes is Kyani& Co, which has been serving the bustling Mumbai swarm for more than a century. Built up in 1904 by KhodramMarezaban, Kyani& Co is right now run by FarokhShokri, child of AflatoonShokri whose representation still decorates the divider of their humble house. Having served a few of the greatest names in expressions and cinema, this bakery incorporates a wide spread and takes pride in its moderation and reasonableness. The must try dish from this old and classic restaurant is Irani chai kheemapav Cheese omelette and Cream puff.

B Merwan& Co

Another cafe that gloats of century ancient ancestry is B Merwan& Co. Named after BomanMerwan, it is found just outside the Grant Road station. Serving customers their trademark Bun Maska, Chai, Akuri and fragrant Mawa cakes, this bakery shop is impossible to miss. The billing counter is more often stacked with jars of cookies and tea cakes, one merely doesn't want to miss out on.

Jimmy boy

It has earned glory for itself over a long time by serving a genuine Parsi devour. The lagan nu bhonu or the wedding patru (banana leaf) which may be a seven course meal really exhibits excellent Parsi cooking. From patranimacchi to mutton and chicken dhansak to the Jardaloosalliboti, this cafe too has an a la carte menu as well. The must try dish here is chicken farcha and patranimacchi.

Parsi food is more than dhansak

Parsi cooking, Parsi food has for a long time remained circumscribed by generalizations, recognized to a great extent by the dhansak-saliboti schedule popularized by Mumbai's iconic Irani cafés and Parsi eateries. Outside the Parsi community, be that as it may, few have known the tongue-tingling deliciousness of pickled roe, the early morning consolation of sweetened milk foam enhanced with nutmeg and an imply of cardamom, the sensitive wobble of toplina paneer, or the unctuous eggs cooked, unhurried, on a bed of clotted cream. We moreover cook fresh prawns on clotted cream," says Kurush F. Dalal, Take, for instance, the chicken malaiwala, a legacy Parsi recipe for chicken cooked in egg whites cream and dried fruits. The Parsis may have acquired their love for fish and prawns, from their coastal beginnings, but it is the normal bawa's meat obsession that's amazing. And when we say meats, we mean offal as well. Parsis love their bheja-kaleji-bukka as much as they adore their boti. A one of a kind dish within the Parsi collection, the papdi ma kebab, may be a case in point—small minced-meat kebabs are added to broad beans. Parsis moreover cook cluster beans (gawar) with prawns and an extraordinary summer formula calls for chunks of kakri (Armenian cucumber) slow-cooked with mutton. But the foremost famous Parsi combination of meats and greens may be the bhajidana ma gosh, cooked with green peas and greens like spinach, fenugreek and dill. "Traditionally, the bhajidana ma goswas obligatory at Parsi feasts, says Dalal. Parsi cuisine, at that point, is as wealthy and perplexing as the community's history within the nation.

The legendary "Sugar in Milk" Parsi tale.

There are several legends surrounding the Parsis' arrival in India. When the Parsis first set foot on the shores of Gujarat, they were met by the local ruler, Jadi or Jadhav Rana, who presented them with a vessel filled to the brim with milk. This symbolic gesture was meant to convey that the region was already fully inhabited and could not accommodate any more people. In response, the Parsi high priest discreetly added some sugar to the vessel, signifying how the newcomers would enrich the local community without displacing them. Just as sugar dissolves and sweetens milk without disrupting it, the Parsis would assimilate harmoniously into the society. Jadi Rana, moved by this compelling metaphor, allowed the exiles to settle and practice their religion freely, under the condition that they would lay down their arms,

adopt local attire, respect indigenous customs, perform weddings and other ceremonies exclusively at night, and learn the Gujarati language.

Parsi Cuisine in today's age

Parsi food is vanishing with us. Our numbers are waning," Lord says. "Parsi cooking is one of the rarest known cuisines within the world," she includes. Present day and Conventional Parsi Cooking is a captivating and bizarre family story and the story of a culture that's battling to preserve itself. In two or three eras, this culture will be down in numbers to the estimate of what is considered a tribe.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the fascinating journey of Parsi cuisine, originating in Persia and flourishing in the vibrant heart of Mumbai, tells a story of cultural amalgamation, adaptation, and heritage preservation. The Parsi community, driven by their deep-rooted history and Zoroastrian heritage, embarked on a journey to India in the 7th century, ultimately finding a welcoming haven on the western coast. This migration marked the inception of a culinary voyage that skilfully melded Persian, Indian, and even British influences, giving rise to the distinctive and diverse realm of Parsi cuisine.

The research aimed to delve into Parsi culinary practices, trace the evolution of Parsi cuisine in India, uncover the history of Parsi restaurants in Mumbai, and explore the customs and traditions that shape Parsi cooking. The findings uncovered that Parsi cuisine is a harmonious blend of sweet and tangy flavours, underscored by the use of spices like cinnamon, turmeric, and ginger. Iconic dishes such as Dhansak, PatraniMacchi, and Lagan nu Custard embody tales of cultural synthesis and culinary innovation.

Mumbai, adorned with its iconic Irani cafes such as Kyani and Co, B Merwan & Co, Sassanian Boulangerie, Café Ideal, Café Universal, Britannia & Co., Ratan Tata Institute (RTI), and Jimmy Boy, serves as a living testament to the enduring legacy of Parsi cuisine. Many of these establishments, some with histories spanning more than a century, continue to offer Parsi delicacies, preserving not only the flavours but also the nostalgic ambiance and charm of a bygone era. The research underscores the pivotal role these culinary institutions play in upholding Parsi traditions, making them accessible not only to the community but also to a wider audience.

While authentic Persian cuisine in Persia differed significantly from what the Parsis have evolved in India, it is evident that the community has embraced Indian elements while steadfastly preserving its unique identity. The Parsis, celebrated for their culinary passion, have masterfully incorporated and adapted recipes from a myriad of cultures, weaving a rich tapestry that proudly reflects Gujarati, Maharashtrian, Iranian, Portuguese, and British influences.

Despite the challenges associated with a declining Parsi community, Parsi cuisine endures as a vibrant and flavourful tradition. The research underscores the significance of appreciating and safeguarding this exceptional culinary heritage, recognizing it as more than just a collection of dishes but as a cultural narrative intricately woven into the tapestry of India's diverse gastronomic landscape. In a world of ever-evolving cultures, Parsi cuisine stands as a testament to the resilience and opulence of traditions passed down through generations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1]. Singh, V., Asia, S., &Raghvan, A. (2015, August 1). Circuits of Authenticity: Parsi food, Identity and Globalisation in 21st century Bombay. academia.edu. https://www.academia.edu/19912977/Circuits_of_Authenticity_Parsi_Food_Identity_and_Globalisation_in_21st_Century_Bombay
- [2]. Banerjee, K. (2016, August 12). The melting pot: The evolution of Parsi cuisine. hindustantimes.com. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/more-lifestyle/the-melting-pot-the-evolution-of-parsi-cuisine/story-T7uFW6pKAJ36olwTGh8B3L.html>
- [3]. (2019, August 31). Parsi food in Mumbai - Best Parsi cafe in Mumbai. Indiachronicles.com. <https://indiachronicles.com/7956-parsi-food-in-mumbai-best-parsi-cafe-in-mumbai.html>
- [4]. (2015, July 29). Learn about a history of Parsi cuisine over a lavish lunch. Thedailypao.com. <https://www.thedailypao.com/learn-about-the-history-of-parsi-food-over-a-lavish-lunch/>
- [5]. Prabhu, V. (2016, May 17). An introduction to Parsi cuisine. Theculturetrip.com. <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/parsi-cuisine-an-introduction/>

- [6]. (2012, February 10). Parsi food and why it's truly unique. Petspiceladle.com. <https://www.perisspiceladle.com/2012/02/10/parsi-food-and-why-it-is-truly-unique/>
- [7]. Minwalla, S. (n.d.). The hearty delights of Parsi food in Mumbai. Outlookindia.com. <https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/explore/story/36269/thus-ate-zarathustra-the-hearty-delights-of-parsi-food-in-mumbai>
- [8]. Chatterjee, P. (2017, June 17). Parsi food is more than Dhansak. Livemint.com. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.livemint.com/Leisure/nHlqtlYtrytZeNP51gy2gK/Parsi-food-is-more-than-dhansak.html%3ffacet=amp>
- [9]. Mitra, S. (2021, January 1). Exploring the culture of Parsi cafes in Mumbai, India. epicureandculture.com. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/epicureandculture.com/parsi-cafes-in-mumbai/>
- [10]. <https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/researchdesigns>