

His majesty's secret spices

THE ROYAL KITCHENS OF AWADH,
MAKSUDPUR, MEHMUDABAD... WERE
FABLED FOR THEIR ENDLESS ARRAY OF
EXOTIC DISHES AND MAGICAL RECIPES

By Mandira Nayar



Tiny makeshift shops crammed with books line the narrow streets leading to Amina Bagh in Lucknow. It is like driving between the shelves of a giant library with the horn blaring. The 'library' suddenly gives way to endless rows of *chikan* in every conceivable colour as Tunday Kebabi approaches—the hero of countless foodies.

His melt-in-the-mouth *kebabs*, packed in cardboard boxes and carried lovingly for relatives in Lucknow and beyond, are spoken of in hushed, reverential tones. Big fat Delhi weddings usually have a stall of the *kebabwallah* where people of all sizes line up for a bite of the sizzling meat and those sinfully heavy but incredibly soft *parathas*—the kind of softness only Olay promises.

Like the Bara Imambara in Lucknow—the must-see destination in this city of *nawabs*, *kebabs* and *shabab*—a visit to Tunday is an expe-

rience that you cannot miss. It is not just about eating but also about the nostalgia, ambience, flavour, leisure and refinement—food was a way of life.

Tunday is a remnant of this bygone era and is far from representative of the kind of food that once graced the Indian tables. Tunday, for many, may be the only window to this world of famed Awadhi cuisine, but it is still a tiny incorrect picture. Like the Karims in Delhi which traces its roots to the last Mughal and even had the Musharrafs calling, these are McDonald's compared with what came out of the royal kitchens of India. They offer only a slice, a minute fragment, of the real McCoy.

Full of stories as colourful, bizarre and exotic as the lives of the Indian maharajas, the kitchens of India (before they became an ITC brand) formed the most important part of the rulers' lives—sustenance.



These were huge rambling places, where cooks battled it out to get the right flavours, intrigues were plotted, secrets were literally simmered and, in theatrical Hindi movie style, taken to the grave.

Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, transported his whole court to Metiaburz in Kolkata when he was exiled. Poets, dancers, musicians, chefs and even his *paanwallah* moved to recreate the magic of Lucknow in Bengal. Centuries later, descendants of his court still live in this area of Kolkata. Shakeel Hossain, a resident of the area, remembers the man who made *ballia*—a sweet made of layers and layers of cream. The frothy top of the milk was sliced off in incredibly thin layers—of barely-there-tracing-paper thickness—with a jackfruit leaf. These layers were then placed on top of each other to create a sweet. “It was delicious,” he says. “We asked him a million times for the recipe but he wouldn’t part with it, even to his own son. He died recently.”

The importance of food in the lives and loves of the royals cannot be underestimated. Vikramaditya Singh of Sodawas jagir, near Jodhpur, refers to the recipes as ‘heirlooms’. Food played a crucial role in politics, too. Man Singh decided to take on Rana Pratap of Udaipur because he felt insulted that Pratap didn’t turn up for dinner. And if you believe Ashutosh Gowariker’s version of history, Jodha won Akbar’s heart through her cooking.

But poetic licence apart, it will be simplistic to refer to what was produced in the kitchens of princely India as just food. It was about wellness—a word that has acquired a buzz recently was a given in the past. Ingredients were used to create a mood, enhance a feeling or meant to dazzle.

“Most of the erstwhile royals were gourmets. Dining for them

The Maharaja of Patiala, Bhupinder Singh, who had chefs from across the world, is said to have equally loved his 365 wives and his chefs, the latter strictly for their culinary skills, of course.

was not just a routine exercise. It was a sacred ritual to be thought about carefully. The arrival of every dish was a ceremony,” says food historian Salma Husain. “The mood was set by drowning the corridors with marigolds and suffusing the air with *attar* and incense.”

The kitchen chronicles of princely India are full of twists that Rowling can only dream of, and of magical realism that would render Rushdie an amateur—birds flew out of *pooris*, gold and silver coins transformed into candy and a milk pudding had pearls instead of rice.

From the big kingdoms of the Mughals with their mighty armies and their huge kitchens to smaller ones like Maksudpur in modern Bihar famed for its *asrafi ka muraba* (candied gold coins), the *riyasat* of Rampur (famed for the best kitchen), a 42-course-meal just of corn from the Udaipur kitchen, and the never ending *kebabs* of the Nizams—the Indian plate or thali was filled to the brim with wondrous delectable things. There is the fiery fare of the Kolhapur *khana*, the sweet-spicy-tangy *mélange* of flavours of Mysore and the *kebabs* of Rajasthan—the list of food gharanas and their influence on the ordinary Indian thali is never ending.

The advent of the British in India brought with it the spice laden winds of change. It was the decline of the Mughals and their subse-

quent dalliances with the British that allowed the rajas to spend time on finer things of life such as intricately stitched *jamawars* that took generations to complete and also bring about a sort of revolution in the Indian kitchens. “It allowed time for leisure,” says Ajai Singh, the erstwhile raja of Maksudpur.

Cooks with generations of spices in their blood carried on their culinary legacies. No less than poets or writers or singers, they moved from court to court for patronage once the Mughal empire disintegrated, creating a fusion of foods. The mantle of the supreme food then passed on to Awadh. But there were many smaller principalities with their own taste and flavour. Passionate about food, the Nawab of Rampur had 300 of the best chefs, and each a master of a special dish. Maharaja of Patiala, Bhupinder Singh, is said to have equally loved his 365 wives and his chefs, the latter strictly for their culinary skills, of course. “He had chefs from all over the world,” says gourmet Jiggs Kalra.

Sailana, near Ratlam, the station of Jab We Met fame, has preserved the wisdom and recipes of the best of the kitchens in India. The maharaja of Sailana’s son Digvijay Singh has put together some recipes in a book, *Cooking Delights of the Maharajas: Exotic Dishes from the Princely House of Sailana*. Published a decade or so ago, the book has been so popular that a copy was found in Iraq in the library of Saddam Hussein.

However, with dwindling fortunes, these recipes have been lost over time. The famous Rampur kitchen has literally disappeared off the culinary map as the chefs refused to part with their recipes even to the begum. “We didn’t realise that one day all these dishes would disappear. I now only have the memories of these wonderful flavours,” says Noor Bano, the begum of Rampur. ■



PHOTOS: ARVIND JAIN

ROYAL REPAST: Tikarani Shailja and her husband, Tikaraj Aishwarya Katoch, having dinner at the Sailana palace

The seeker of flavours

The Maharaja of Sailana was a true seeker of the wisdom of the spicy kind. In an age where food was an essential part of the court etiquette, entertainment and one-upmanship, recipes were state secrets. Sailana, a gourmet, refused to let a little secrecy stand in his way in the search for the perfect flavour.

The maharaja went around the country visiting the kitchens of India to figure out their recipes. He had a trick, legendary in the world of the cuisine and a lesson for anyone in the hotel espionage business. Welcomed into the homes of the royals, he found that the warm invitation didn't extend to the kitchens as the chefs never parted with their true recipes. This did not deter him. He would take along a box of

spices and ask the cooks of the royal households he visited to use only the ingredients from his box of spices. At the crucial moment when the spices were to be put into the dish, he would vanish to the relief of the

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cooks. However, they didn't know that he had carefully weighed every ingredient so he knew the exact quantity that had been used.

"We have trunks of recipes which have been tried till they have been perfected," says Tikarani Shailja, who continues to bring this cuisine in a different way to commoners in Surajgarh Fort in Jhunjhunu. "We have recipes from every part of India. We even have an *aloo* from a railway station.

"My grandfather had eaten these *aloos* in the railway station and he then decided to replicate it. He would cook every afternoon. The whole family would help out, sit around giving their opinion to ensure that the dishes tasted perfect." ■



Legends of valour and fiery

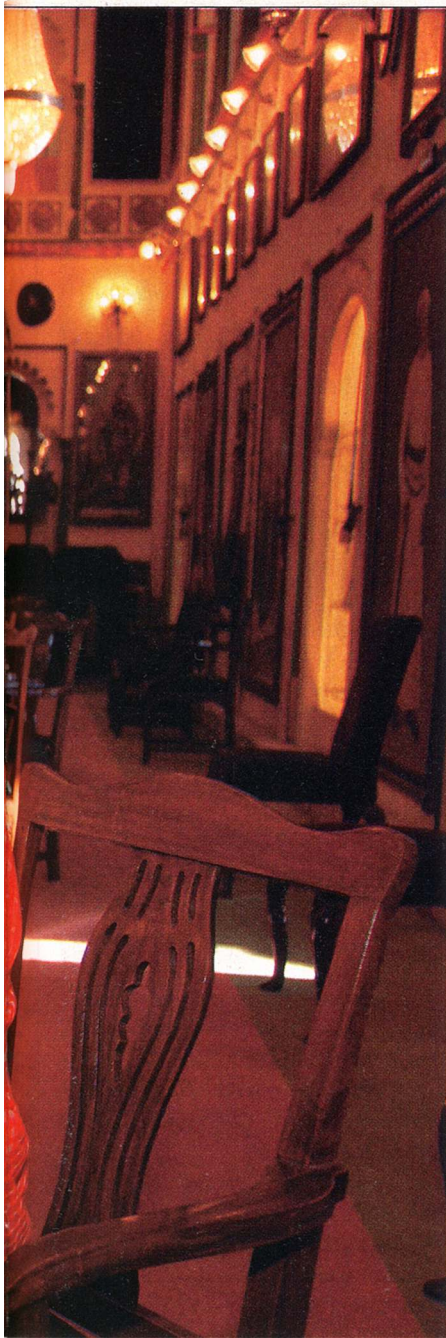
In the heart of the Rajput kingdom, Udaipur is known for its legends of brave warriors, violent honour wars and beautiful women. In this perfect fairy tale world, food, too, acquires a folklore quality. From a hundred different kind of *chapattis* from the kitchens of Jaipur royal family, to *laal maas*,

the meat in red chilli of Jodhpur, to *aran ghata* (wild boar in a gravy) of Udaipur, the cuisines in these parts are not subtle; they are hot and spicy.

"Banquets in the palace were an occasion to look forward to," says Gajendra Singh, administrator of the Crystal Gallery of Udaipur. "The food

would be discussed for months after the event. The royal kitchens ensured that the fare was exotic and worth talking about. The nobles would be seated according to their ranks. Women and men ate separately."

Unlike other cuisines where there are secret ingredients that chefs would never part with, in Rajasthani



EXOTIC DESERT FLAVOURS:

Padmaja with the traditional Udaipuri thali, which includes the *laal maas*

Hunting was a serious sport that included shooting a particular variety of fish in Udaipur. The *khad kargosh* was famous in these parts. A rabbit was shot and buried two feet under the ground with masalas on a bed of charcoal. It was left open, ghee was poured into its mouth and it was left overnight to cook in its own juices. "Even the thought of it makes my mouth water," says foodie Jasleen Dhamija.

The Jagirdar of Sodawas was one such nobleman who went to Africa with his box of spices along with the Maharaja Umaid Singh of Jodhpur. His diary of recipes was found in a dusty cupboard by his grandson Vikramaditya, who preferred fowl to game. So *khad kargosh* turned into chicken. The flavours are just the same incredibly basic spices to enhance the taste of the meat and make it tender.

"Cooking was entertainment," he says. "Our recipes have been safeguarded because we have managed to turn them into written form. However, there are some secrets we still have." Potent liquor is one of them. His father, Sunder Singh—indispensable to Gaj Singh, the erstwhile Maharaja of Jodhpur—remembers a time when his jagir had the licence to brew 2,000 bottles a year. The Indian version of whisky for the Scots was developed by his father after getting it just perfect. *Mawalín*, which was his father's recipe, was a digestive with ingredients like apples, *gur* and *amla*, brewed in autumn when the days were warm and the nights cool. "It had to brew for 21 days," he says.

There was even a recipe in which a whole goat was cut, cleaned and put into it before it was distilled. These recipes have been acquired by Ganganagar Sugar Mills in Rajasthan as its royal heritage liquor collection. ■

The king's table

In the heart of the sprawling red sandstone city of Fatehpur Sikri is an open place that tourist guides believe is Jodhabai's kitchen. Historians may argue till they are blue in the face about the authenticity of this claim, but post Ashutosh Gowariker's film, this bit of folklore is likely to become firm fact.

Whether Jodhabai ever cooked or not may be the stuff of academic debate, but the Mughal obsession with food is one aspect that still continues today. The house of Timur has had a lingering effect on the Indian tastebuds. The legacy of the Mughals continue, perhaps, not in terms of the Mughlai cuisine that restaurants serve across India.

But it was the chefs of Hindustan that taught them the power of spices, claims gourmet Jiggs Kalra. The Mughal *dastarkhwan*, a cloth spread out on the floor, which was the 'table' in India, was vast and varied. Military wisdom about the army marching on its stomach certainly applied to the emperors, Mughal or otherwise.

Manucci, an Italian traveller to India, claims that it was the kitchen that travelled first when the emperor was on the move. Salma Husain, in her book *The Emperor's Table—The Art of Mughal Cuisine*, talks in great detail about how the kitchen moved at night so that the emperor would get his breakfast in the morning. The entourage of the kitchen had, "50 camels who carried the supplies, 50 well-fed cows to pro-

cuisines

food, the key is what is added and when. "That is what makes a difference in the flavour," says Singh. The palace was the first place where exotic flavours were tried out. Ice-cream was first brought within these walls with an ancient machine. "Women used to eat ice-cream wrapped in quilts," he says.



Gold was not just used in 'trick' food, but was thought to cure mental illness. In Mehmudabad, gold coins were put into the food of a ruler who was known to have a melancholy disposition.

were fed on a special diet of cotton seeds, sugarcane, cinnamon pulses, bamboo leaves and perfumed green grass. Sheep, goats and fowl were put on a special diet of gold, silver, pearls and *saffron laddus* mixed with sugar so that the meat would taste delicious. This was apparently a common practice; animals in Sodawas jagir in Rajasthan were fed oil and haldi (turmeric) for a month before they were slaughtered to be eaten.

Gold was not just used in 'trick' food, but was thought to cure mental illness. In Mehmudabad, gold coins were put into the food of one of the rulers who was known to have a melancholy disposition. Once the food was cooked, the coins were taken out.

The musk-melon that Indians take for granted with its fresh smell and its incredible sweet inside gave Babur many a sleepless nights. Far away from home, Babur missed the slopes and fruits of Kabul. Once settled in India with their pleasure gardens, the Mughals decided that they would get the best from far and wide—even in a pre-flight age. Fruits were from Babur's beloved Kabul, ducks, water fowls and vegetables from Kashmir; water from the Ganges, ghee from Hisar and rice from Gwalior, Rajouri and Nimlah.

The royal kitchen had its own budget and every day Rs 1,000 was spent on the king's table, according to Husain's research. ■

vide milk, 200 coolies to carry china and other serving dishes, a number of mules to carry cookwares..."

Eating was a private activity. Except in banquets, no outsider ever saw any emperor while dining. Writes Husain in her book: "Fussed over by women—in the sensuous quarters of the harem—emperors feasted on their food."

The *Ain-i-Akbari*, the book on the administration of Emperor Akbar, has an extensive chapter on the kitchen. Vegetable patches were watered with rose water and musk to get an aromatic flavour. Cows



RECIPES AS HEIRLOOMS:

Vikramaditya Sodawas of Jodhpur with kebabs made of *shikaar*.



PRESERVING HISTORY: Raja of Mehmudabad keeps the art of the royal cuisine alive

Reflection of refinement

The drive to Mehmudabad is about an hour from Lucknow through a landscape that seems to have been frozen in time. A railway *phatak* (crossing) announces the arrival of the *riyasat* of Mehmudabad transporting you back in time for it still has Awadh printed in brackets on the board.

The stately white fort of Mehmudabad is barely visible through the thick mango trees that dot its front. A sprawling building with endless corridors, with floors that gleam like mirrors, is quiet, atmospheric and the perfect place as J.P. Dutta discovered when he wanted to shoot his epic *Umrao Jaan*. It is like walking into Mrs Havesham's house—where things have remained untouched—and you can actually smell history here—the perfume of thick old paper that books were once printed on.

A mathematician by training, Mohammad Amir Mohammad Khan, the erstwhile raja of Mehmudabad, is known as Suleiman

Mian in the Khandani families of Lucknow. He is perhaps the last bastion keeping alive a fading way of life. The past may be history for the rest, but for him, it is a legacy that he is trying to preserve.

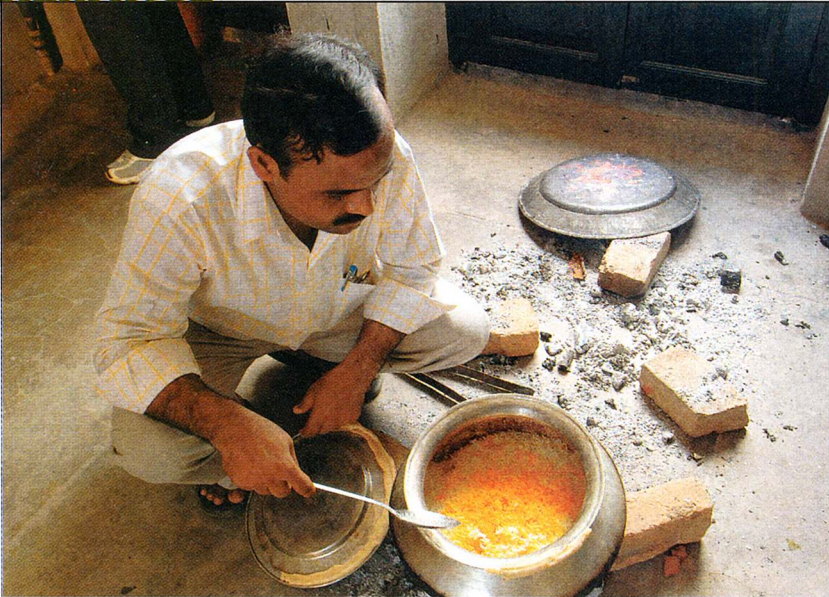
“It is about a way of life that is disappearing. But it is the way of life and history,” he says as he juggles two cell-phones. “People in the past would have been pained to see people eating today. There was no concept as standing and eating as we do today. Eating was more than just about food.”

One of the most powerful states after Awadh, Mehmudabad can stake claim to a rich culinary legacy. There were several *darogahs*—chamberlains—in charge of food. “The cooks were technocrats and the engineers were the *darogahs* who would supervise the kitchen and the working,” he says. “The banter between the *darogahs* and *bawarchis* was constant. They would say things to provoke each other and it would go back and forth.”

Flavours of this cuisine are subtle. Unlike the mass produced fast food versions of *kebabs* that Tunday produces—which may be melt-in-the-mouth soft but leave behind a fiery hot chilly sensation—the *murgh kebab* is a huge chicken with the sweet taste of burnt onions and the sharp flavour of juliennes of ginger. Not the *tikka* kind of *kebab*, this is a whole chicken, tender, succulent, juicy and delicately spiced. The sourness blends easily with the hint of chilli.

A young Azfal who has been trained by his grandfather, a *darogah*, in the art of cooking has been up since 5 a.m. preparing lunch. The kitchen still has a place for a coal *chullah* for the smoky taste. There is a smell of roasted garlic in the air, more mellow than the freshly cut garlic, and the tart smell of curd.

He whips out a cell phone with a picture of a round pastry decorated with tiny pieces of silver which is too beautiful to eat. The *naan-e-*



ne'mat is a kind of thick *roti* stuffed with sweetened dried fruit and cooked on a *dum* for a few hours. "It weighs seven kilos," he says with evident pride. This *naan* is a specialty of this *gharana* of food, which can't be replicated anywhere else.

Dum method of cooking, an ancient version of the pressure cooker, is quite common in these parts, and *kachi biryani* (raw biryani), a delectable fragrant rice dish, is the best example of how effective it is. Raw meat is put in with rice and it comes out half an hour later completely cooked with a lingering after-taste of saffron.

Round pieces of *khoya* with a thin silver covering (*vark*) like little fat moons sit on a plate ready to be put on the *kundan qalina*—a meat dish. The *khoya* pieces are salty with a delicate taste of sweet, a bit like a really well done *shammi kebab*.

"Food didn't reflect only a sense of taste, but it was also reflective of the time, season and mental state of a person," says Suleiman Mian. "There were dishes cooked only during happy occasions and things like *halwa*, made out of wheat, were meant for mourning periods like Muharram."

Ingredients that went into the food were not simply about enhancing flavours but also about calming temperament or curing illness. *Unnani hakims* were employed to

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ensure that all the humours in the body were balanced through food. Gold was considered the antidote to mental illness and pearls were eaten to ward off smallpox. Happy occasions called for *pakawans* and a period of mourning ended when a relative sent *sevaiyan* (a milk pudding), which suggested it was time to move on.

There was also a difference between the food made by men and women. The *halwa*, for example, is now made by women. Dal, the everyday kind, is also a woman's domain," he says. Steeped in centuries of history and layers of symbolism, food in Awadh was also a reflection of refinement. Prosperous men were people of distinction, remembers Wajid Ali Shah, and food was just one aspect of this refinement. ■

A sacred affair

There is a story swirling in the old *khandani* families of Lucknow that illustrates the extent of the lavish spread at the Rampur house. Begum Habibullah, the wife of Major General E. Habibullah who helped set up the National Defence Academy, once invited the begum of Rampur, Noor Bano, for a meal. Habibullah apparently went all out, keeping in mind the kind of spread that Rampur was famed for. Her table, according to the story, was crammed to the last inch with dishes. Noor Bano is believed to have remarked, "Hamida, I am so glad you kept it light."

Married into the family at the age of sixteen, Noor Bano was not always used to a lavish spread. As a blushing bride she was overwhelmed by the extent of the dishes at each meal. Her first breakfast at the Rampur palace had tables groaning with *parathas* of every conceivable type. "I remember being shocked," she says with a smile.

Each meal was equally elaborate and there were 20 to 25 dishes for lunch and dinner. "I once had the courage to ask my father-in-law why we had so many dishes every day just for the four of us. He told me that if he did not continue cooking their specialties then the skill would vanish from their hands," she says.

Very serious about their food, the nawabs of Rampur—apart from their deep interest in poetry and music—had over 300 cooks on their staff. Meals were sacred affairs and the timing for meals was strictly adhered to. "Everything worked almost to clockwork precision. Food

HERITAGE



had to be eaten fresh. A certain time was maintained to boil the rice and the exact temperature it was to be served was also observed," she says.

Masters in only one dish, the chefs would refuse to part with the ingredients used—for love or money. The food had Mughal, Turkish and Iranian influences. The legend goes that when the Shah of Iran came to India, cooks from Rampur were called to cook up a feast. They made *dum dukht*, a dish with dried fruits of different kinds, sprinkled with a little unrefined sugar, which gave it a completely different flavour. "Almonds had to be soaked in rose water for it. The ingredients for the dish were so expensive that it remained only within the royal households. The Shah of Iran apparently was so overwhelmed by the taste that he claimed that he hadn't eaten anything like it even in Iran and it came from there," Noor Bano says.

From dried-fruit-stuffed partridges to sweets that were straight out of fairytales—one that had the froth of milk and had to be left out on a moonlit night for the dew to settle on it—the Rampur *dastarkhwan* had exotic delicacies. Unfortunately, like the once famous *kakori-kebab* which was from the Awadh area, these too, have been lost with time. ■

The fable of the gold coins

The lingering sweet smell of *parijat* fills the air almost overpowering the sharper smell of grass. A pond sits in the midst of a garden, covered with a thick layer of white, the silver light from the sky unable to make even a glimmer in the water. Tiny stars crowd the expanse of blackness, shimmering away quietly, light pollution doesn't exist in Bihar.

The *phat-phat* of the generator seems louder at night drowned occasionally by the clanging of temple bells—soul-stirring yet strangely peaceful. There is a cloud of smoke that accompanies the bells; it is sweet but with a slight edge that smarts your eyes. Kali, the goddess, who emerges from behind is draped in white.

The first step into the Naach ghar of Maksudpur with its coloured glass doors takes you back a few hundred years. A cushioned palanquin sits in the middle of the sprawling room under the gaze of benevolent ancestors.

Maksudpur, now just a tiny dot on the map of a forgotten state, was once a powerful kingdom. It has had its share of ambitious and eccentric rulers.

Constantly at battle to keep their borders secure, the rajas were preoccupied with defence for the most part. It was the decline of the Mughal empire that gave them time for the finer things in life—the art of cooking was one among them. *Bagari ki poori* and the fabled *asrafi ka muraba* (candied gold coins) came from that preoccupation. These recipes are now dusted out every year during Dussehra and cooked as offerings to the goddess.

The secret of the gold coins, mysterious and magical, will unfortunately remain that, as the proponent Sinhansan Rai or Munniji has taken it to his grave. But it did exist once. The last time such a feast was prepared for the kings was in 1967, at a wedding. The coins, which didn't change shape and retained even their engravings, were edible and were exhibited around Patna in a glass jar in the 50s.

"It was one-upmanship," says Ajai Singh, the erstwhile raja of Maksudpur. "There were many durbars bigger than Maksudpur, but no one could produce the *asrafi ka muraba*. Even the richest of them all, the Nizam of Hyderabad, didn't possess the skill."

Patronised by Raja Chandreshwar, the lover of everything refined, Munniji created an array of food and a host of other trick specialities. Going beyond just eating, Chandreshwar had managed to gather the best and the brightest to mix the subtle art of cooking with wellness benefits of ayurveda and unnani medicine.





The raja may have encouraged the flourishing knowledge of varied culinary art but he himself was a gourmet. He didn't eat anything that wasn't produced by Munniji, his wife or himself. "There are still about 10 to 12 trucks full of documents—handwritten, which have recipes and his experiments with old medicines," says Singh.

The *hakims* were given 300 grants of land around the area. Unlike the modern-day version of calorie content and ingredients of food printed on the back of boxes, Chandreshwar had a more thorough approach. He had analysed the effect of all the ingredients on the body. So each recipe that is pulled out of the book and whipped up even now will tell you the benefits of what you are eating. So there will be dishes that will increase *pitta* or decrease it and sound advice about why fish in a well is not such a good idea.

In Maksudpur, there was this fairytale quality—like the Arabian Nights—birds flew out of pooris, silver and gold coins transformed into candy and huge pearls soaked in milk were eaten.

Years of experimenting with food has left this princely *riyasat* with an elaborate cuisine. It was subtle as there was no onion or garlic used. Tomato, a base of almost everything in Indian cooking now, was absent then. And it was all about the right spices.

"You can make anything taste good if you add enough tomatoes and onions, but the trick is about using the right spices to get the right flavour," says Singh. Even the water tastes of roses, and the pulao with a tinge of yellow has the warming delicate taste of saffron, just the right amount to be detected, a whiff, not dominant.

A seasoned cook, Munniji, came from a long line of skilled chefs. His father was famous for his *pooris*. Fluffy, light and perfectly round, the

pooris were put on the table on a large silver *thali* as the first course. "Most people would wonder why they were served a *poori* without any accompaniments," he says. "But when they broke it open a tiny bird flew out."

There was this fairytale quality—like the *Arabian Nights*—birds flew out of *pooris*, silver and gold coins transformed into candy and huge pearls soaked in milk were eaten—all this made the culinary tradition of Maksudpur fascinating.

Not convinced that *asrafi ka muraba* was the genuine article, the neighbouring raja asked Munniji to go to Gaya and make the *muraba* in front of them. In a Rumpelstiltskinesq move, Munniji was put in a room and asked to produce the *muraba* endlessly. "The process takes about 15 days. At the end of the exercise, Munniji is believed to have said that they didn't need to have put him through the ordeal. They could have just asked a goldsmith to burn the *muraba* and it would have turned back into gold. The process was reversible," says Singh with a smile.

And there is this whole tradition of *dhoka* which literally means to deceive in terms of food. A magician in the culinary world, Munniji could alter the taste with his secret spices. Fish would lose its smell to become melt-in-the-mouth sweet *burfi*, *atta* would taste like meat and garlic would lose its pungency. If that is not alchemy, then what is? ■

THE FINAL TOUCH: The Rani of Maksudpur with chefs preparing royal food

