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Cuisine of Awadh: An overview

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Abstract
The cuisine of Awadh is a cuisine native to the city of Lucknow and adjoining areas. The cooking pattern of Awadh is greatly influenced by the cuisine of Mughals. The Awadh cuisine comprising both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes of northern India. It bears similarities to those of Central Asia, Kashmir, Punjab and Hyderabad. The city is also known for its nafasat (refinement) and nazakat (delicateness) and for its Nawabi foods.

Keywords: kabab, dumpukht, Ganga-jamuna tehzeeb, cuisine, pulao, quorma

Introduction

The cuisine of the Awadh region of the north India, with its capital in Lucknow and the city's unique culture thriving amidst fertile and scenic Gangetic plain, is a sprawling and diverse one. A rare tradition of etiquette, high sophistication and well-defined social customs outline the flourishing regional cuisine-enriched and nurtured by Sharqi Sultanate of Jaunpur and then early Mughals between the mid-14th c and the early 18th c. Aromatic spices, exotic herbs, a rare creative energy and a romantic ideology coupled with a mix of racial traits and customs have produced this exclusive line of food and hospitality- the Awadh cult of cuisine.

The Nawabs of Awadh were renowned for their extravagance and their patronage of best craftsmen of all the arts that flourished then, cooking was considered one of the finest, and its practitioners were among the most sought after. Famous for its *nafasat* (refinement) and *nazakat* (delicateness) Awadh cuisine blends spices over a slow fire to achieve seasonal harmony with the nature.

As it is said, even the drinking water of Lucknow tastes different. Traditionally stored in clay vessels in the summer heat and often sipped after adding fresh mint leaves, it changes hue and flavour with the seasons. Offered in tall silver embossed tumblers in winter with a sprinkling of fresh rose petals, the special tradition of serving water spells out the creative passion surrounding the culinary habits of this region. Most of the people who migrated to this fertile and lush green Gangetic plain made Awadh their home particularly after their first taste of the local food and water.

Since the time immemorial, settlers in this region have enjoyed a mouth-watering variety of food grains and vegetables harvested several times a year. These agrarian communities have traditionally lived in the company of a host of cattle that helped them to till and irrigate the fertile alluvial soil and also gift their owners a daily supply of milk. Milk products like ghee, cheese, buttermilk, *kheer, khoya* and yoghurt can be produced in abundance from plentiful, high quality, creamy milk.

The first non-vegetarians who came with the army of the Persian speaking Turkic warrior Mahmud Ghazni must have sensed the abundance supply of food grain from this region. As Mahmud Ghazni proceeded further to find out what else was cooking in the kitchens of the home in the luxurious corners of this part of the Indo-Gangetic plains, he left his brother-in-law *Salar Sahu* in charge of the vast fields already conquered by him [1].

Following the waft of the alluring scents of countless herbs and spices that grew in abundance, entire armies of Pathans, Persians and Turkic warriors soon followed. They marched down the highlands of Central Asia, loaded with generous chunks of dried and salted meats, often barbequed and flattened on the saddle, beneath the seats of their respective horses. At the end of a day when the nomadic battle worn warriors from the vast deserts and the dry and treeless grassy steppes-too rugged from farming-camped for the night, they dug a pit and lit a fire.

Using swords as skewers, they made a simple but hearty meal of grilled meat snatched from the stock reserved beneath their saddles. The leftovers were returned to the saddle as warriors moved on the follo+562wing morning in search of new territories and fresh battles [2].

It is only in the late 17th c that this diet of sheer meat-high in animal protein- earned the name *'kabab'* derived from the Persian word for roasted meat. After Arab armies had conquered Central Asians lands inhabited by a mixed population of Turkic and Persian people, the word underwent a transformation and came to be pronounced *'kebap'* by those of Turkic origin. Much later when similar warriors thundered down the Himalaya into plains of south Asia, the pronunciation of the original word '*kabab*' was not only further altered but it came to be prepared differently as well. Aromatic spices and exotic herbs were far more easily available in south Asia than anywhere else in the world in those days. Cumin seeds, cloves, cardamoms, cinnamon, pepper corns, ground gram lentils, raw papaya were added in different proportions to the meat, adding heavenly aroma to

the kabab and making the marinated meat softer and easier to cook and digest, particularly during the treacherous heat of summer months. Even when off the fire, the platter of a wide variety of kababs was made more delicious with fragrant garnishes of fresh coriander leaves or mint leaves-all of which went into whipping up a meal fit not for mere warriors, but for kings [3].

The local communities of mostly Brahmins and Kayasthas in Awadh were now joined by others who spoke a different language, ate meals cooked in a different way and practised a different religion. Exhausted after many a battle of resistance with each other to begin with, the old and the new inched closer to each other out of sheer curiosity. The settled population tried to understand newcomers' passion for large amounts of meat. The nomads on the other hands, who had begun to lead more settled lives, appreciated and took to agricultural activities. They saw the cow help in ploughing and irrigating land and learnt how milk was used to prepare curd, yogurt and local sweetmeat like *halwa* and *kheer* [4].

Once the newcomers and the host population made friends with each other, they also exchanged recipes.

The warriors were pleased to have found land to build not only home but also deep tandoors (clay ovens) which they used for making fresh *Naan* (leavened, oven baked flatbread originally popular with meat dishes in central and west Asia)-now sprinkled with local herbs and spices. The Turkic warrior were already introduced to some spices and pulses like saffron and legumes while still in central Asia-on Persian lands-but they were amazed to finds the endless variety of lentils and *daals* served to them in Awadh, with garnishing of white cumin seeds, carom seeds or asafoetida fried in *desi ghee* (country made fatty cooking medium, usually made from whole milk) [5].

While the Brahmins are said to have been somewhat reserved, the Kayastha Community-comprising mostly scribes and administrators employed at the royal court- was little more curious about the newcomers in the midst. Very soon many Kayasthas had mastered the Persian language and had gingerly started experimenting with food by stuffing the belly of the pale green baby pumpkin with a generous portion of minced meat [6].

By adding potatoes to pieces of mutton and left to simmer in thick gravy made of a combination of condiments, the Kayastha whipped up the most delectable of all non-vegetarian dishes called the *aloo gosht.* The local people had watched the Turks knead dough into stiff consistency, filling many portion of it with raw meat that was left in a tandoor to become crisp in their own fat. The Turks called this snack *samsa*, which the locals very soon converted into a *samosa* that over time became one of the region's most beloved triangle shaped savoury stuff with spiced potatoes and other vegetable and are sold to every street corner to this day [7].

Muslims first penetrated this area late in the 10th c. A.D. at the end of the 12th c. A.D-after the conquest of Kannauj-Awadh fell to the sultan of Ghazni and was annexed to the empire of Delhi. In 1590 A.D during the reign of Akbar, Awadh became a *subah* or province of the Mughal Empire. *Sheikh Abdur Rahim* of Bijnaur was appointed the Subehdar of Awadh. The new rulers were known as *'Sheikhzada'* and were given the title of Mahi Martab in the imperial court of Delhi with a *jagir* in Lucknow [8].

By the time the Nawabs of Persian families had set up home first in Faizabad and then in Lucknow; the Sheikhs, Pathans and the Afghan population of Awadh already had busy kitchens smoking out aromas that continued to beckon all and sundry-including conquerors- to Awadh from far and wide [9].

Faizabad during Shuja-ud-Daulah was the centre of cultural activities. After the decline of Delhi, the legacy faced the crisis of patronage and identity. The entire population of Shahjahanabad shifted to Faizabad; artists and craftsmen were in search of new masters and patrons; the court of Awadh, Hyderabad and Mysore were tempting places to take refuge. Thus Faizabad became the cradle of art and culture, music and dance. By this time Awadhian aristocracy was in the process of evolving its own distinct culture [10].

Defeat of Nawab Shuja-ud-Daulah in the battle of Buxar opened a new chapter in the history of Awadh. The pact of mutual defences opened the doors to the British influences in Awadh.

Asaf-ud-Daulah, who moved the capital from Faizabad to Lucknow, made the latter a prosperous and glittering city. During his time the fame and luxury of Avadh rivalled that of the Nizam [11].

Asaf-ud-Daulah was a generous and sympathetic ruler. He built the *Bara Imambara* with its intricate *bhul-bhulayya* and the adjoining masjid-primarily as a relief project-to create employment for his subjects during the famine of 1784 and save them from hunger and poverty [12].

Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah's philanthropy not only relieved the people of Lucknow from the hunger pangs of an empty stomach but also led to the invention of a new form of cooking called *dumpukht* [13].

Since time immemorial, the most famous cuisine of Awadh conjures up images of affluence and opulence. The highest recommendation a chef could have was that he hailed from Awadh-Lucknow, as it is now known. Avadh was the birthplace of some of the finest food in the land. Creativity was not just encouraged but demanded. The urge and the passion to create the ultimate dish for their patrons was a continuous process with the chefs of Awadh. With the basic culinary vocabulary- *quorma (korma), kabab, pulao (pilaf),* and *naan,* Awadh produced a great number of variation as the Nawabs always craved for the best.

Each kitchen had its own line of speciality and flavour and created its own variation of the dishes. The stately kitchen of Awadh abounds with legends of exotic food including a dish that had live birds flying out of it when uncovered.

The subtle addition of flavours, texture and taste was an art form which evolved with time; elaborate recipes using the finest inbreeding were created as a result. In a nutshell, the Nawabs of Awadh remained to be great patrons of art, culture and cuisine following the Mughals. For the Nawabs of Awadh, food remained the most important part of their life. Culinary art of Awadh reached the highest degree of sophistication under the patronage of the rulers of Awadh. The *masalchi*, the *bawarchis,* the *rakabdar*- all of them perfected the art and food reached the zenith of its glory in Awadh [14].

The rulers of Awadh engaged in peaceful pursuit since the

battle of Buxar and under their patronage developed a cuisine which did not remain the prerogative of royalty alone, but travelled to the kitchens of many royal courts in the country, and from there, gradually to the kitchen (*bawarchikhana*) of ordinary people [15].

At the time of Shuja-ud-Daulah, food for the Nawab and his wife, the Bahu Begum, came from six separate kitchens. A total of sixty thousand rupees a month was spent on these kitchens. The nawab's own personal kitchen spent two thousand rupees a day on food, apart from the wages of cooks and other servants. The second kitchen was the royal kitchen where three thousand rupees were spent daily on food. Bahar Ali Khan, a eunuch supervised the kitchen of Bahu Begum. The fourth kitchen was of Nawab Begum, Shuja-ud-Daulah's mother. The fifth of Mirza Ali Khan and the sixth of Nawab Salaar Jang. These last two were brothers of Bahu Begum. These practice continued even after Shuja-ud-Daulah. These kitchens produced delicious food and maintained a uniformly high standard of cooking and presentation [16].

With the coming of British, the tables of the elite added new colour and novelty to their fare. The first few experiments with Anglo-Indian food-blending continental recipes with regional recipes-adorned the tables. The table of Raja of Kasmanda and the *taluqdars* of Sitapur, who entertained the British officers lavishly, were perfect examples of such a table. They hired cooks and got them trained abroad to help them learn the nuances of continental cuisine. These cooks subsequently created exotic dishes, combining their knowledge of both the cuisines [17].

Sadat Ali Khan was of opinion that French cuisine was the best of all and he brought with him from Calcutta a French chef who arranged the banquet described by Viscount Valentia in 1803, where sixteen guests were Europeans out of the twenty-seven who sat down to dinner. The French chef also supervised the public breakfasts, which were semi-formal occasions where the Resident, who had complete power over the administrative affairs of Awadh would be invited. The public breakfast was a useful meeting place where discussions extended much beyond the actual meal and continued for hours across the table. Banquets celebrating Eid and other festivals were held in Shah Manzil palace followed by fireworks. Musicians and dancers provided entertainment. With the worsening of relations between the Nawabs and the company, these entertainments ceased [18].

Once a renowned writer of Urdu that once a well-known wrestler who was invited to lunch by Hakeem Banday Mehndi, a connoisseur of good food, and was offered just a small plate of *pulao*. The wrestler, whose daily diet included about twelve kg of meat, an equal quantity of milk and three kg of dried fruits, was taken aback and felt insulted but he quietly ate the small quantity. A little later, he could not eat another morsel. The little plate of *pulao* had satisfied him completely [19].

Wajid Ali Shah was once invited to a meal by a nobleman. The cook, Sheikh Hussain Ali, had laden the table with hundreds of delicacies. There was *pulao, zarda, quorma, kababs, biryani, chapatti, chutneys, achaars, parathas, sheermals etc.* in fact every kind of food. However, when tasted they were all found to be made of sugar. The curry, rice, pickles bread all were sugar. It is said even plates, the tablecloth, the finger bowls, and cups were made of sugar. Wajid Ali Shah tasted everything and was taken by surprise each time [20].

An eminent nobleman in the court of Wajid Ali Shah used to send *roghni roti*, a rich bread, a *meetha ghee* (clarified butter), from his house to the king. The bread was so fine and cooked with such care that it was not thicker than paper. In those days the best food was considered to be that which appeared light and delicate but was in fact heavy and not easily digestible; variety and experiments were the norm-one particular dish was cooked using different methods and served in novel ways. Awadh believed and still believes in quality and not quantity. It is considered uncultured to eat large quantities; dainty eating habits and delicate table manners are of prime importance. Connoisseurs in Awadh believe that the food eaten should be rich and nutritious [21].

The Persian speaking Turkic soldiers from ancient times had already tasted their first plate of *pulao* in the verdant Farghana valley in modern day Uzbekistan. In his medical science documentation, *Abu Ali Ibn Sina*, central Asian scholar and physician from the 11th century, pronounced '*pilaf*' in Persian. The measured combination of and fine balance between the seven components of onions, meat, carrots, rice, salt, oil and water that go into cooking a perfect pot of *Pulao* make this universally popular rice dish such a comforting food item for the human body, according to Ibn Sina-considered to be one of the most famous and influential polymaths of all times [22].

The same people brought their *pulao* with them when they made Awadh their home. And once here, kitchens of Awadh went on to beat the original *pulao* in more ways than one. The much more exotic preparations invented here included the art of dying grains of rice in pomegranate juice to make the serving resemble tiny rubies collected in a snow white bowl of bone china [23].

Responsibility of the kitchen was assigned to an experienced cook who was called *Darogha-e-Bawarchikhana* (In-charge of kitchen). He supervised the food being cooked, gave ingredients of correct measure for the dish. *Bawarchis* and *Rakabdaars* were responsible for the preparation of food; a *degshoo* was appointed to clean the pots and pans, *karparzad* carried the food from the kitchen to *dastarkhawan*. There were servants called *khidmatgars* to serve the food. *Rakabdaar* was responsible for cooking special dishes of small quantities in small *degchis* (pans) and *bawarchis* cooked a large quantity of food in big *degs* [24].

The lady of the house maintained a separate kitchen where women cook prepared dishes. A separate staff was maintained to serve and clean the dishes. Garnishing of food was considered to be of utmost importance. Dry fruits made to resemble a flower, floral patterns made with shredded coconut and dry fruit slivers as well as silver and gold leaves were some of the common embellishments which adorned royal dishes. Cooks took great pride in decorating their food to make them look as pretty as possible. Money spent on kitchen was never grudged by the royal court. Utensils were sturdy, made either of iron or copper. Kababs were and even now are cooked in *mahi tawa* (large, round shallow pan) using a *kafgir* which is flat, long handled ladle used for flipping *kababs* and

parathas. Bone china plates and dishes were used for serving and eating since the time of the Nawabs. Water was normally sipped from copper or silver *katoras* (bowls) and not glasses [25].

End Note

1. Salma Hussain, *Flavours of Avadh* New Delhi 2016 P. 16
2. *Ibid*, P 17
3. *Ibid*, P 17
4. *Ibid*, P 20
5. *Ibid*, P 22
6. *Ibid*, P 22
7. *Ibid*, P 22
8. *Ibid*, P 24
9. *Ibid*, P 26
10. *Ibid*, P 26
11. Ibid, P 27
12. Ibid, P 27
13. Ibid, P 28
14. Ibid, P 29
15. Ibid, P 29
16. Ibid, P 29
17. Ibid, P 29
18. Ibid, P 30
19. Abdul Halim Sharar. Trs by E.S Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain. Lucknow: *The last phase of an oriental Culture.* London 1975 P 54
20. Salma Hussain, *Flavours of Avadh* New Delhi 2016 P. 31
21. Ibid, P 31
22. Ibid, P 32
23. Ibid, P 32
24. Ibid, P 35
25. Ibid, P 36

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