

August 21, 2005

Food for thought/ Currying Favors

Some years back, I ate at an Afghan restaurant in a Washington DC suburb that unknowingly or otherwise employed a number of illegal immigrants, including a Goan sailor who had jumped ship in Baltimore. Because the restaurant was located near a branch office of the Immigration and Naturalisation Services (INS), its patrons included immigration officials. The joke in the kitchen among the illegals was that none of them would be caught because "*unhone hamara namak khaya hain* (they have eaten our salt)."

The way to a man's heart is through his stomach it is said, but you wonder if that holds true for a country, especially the United States, which is a melting pot of people and cuisine from all over the world. Thailand certainly believes it can win \$\$\$, if not hearts, via the stomach. Word out of Bangkok is the Thai government wants to tap into 10,000 Thai restaurants in a worldwide operation to promote tourism and foreign investment. By 2008, it hopes to encourage the opening of another 10,000 Thai restaurants as a key element of the country's "Kitchen of the World" strategy. It also wants to soup up Thai cuisine to make it more high end, with better presentation and promotion.

Surely this should be food for thought for India. I have no idea of the number of Indian restaurants in the U.S much less the world, but I bet neither does the government, which has never seen this constituency as an asset. Anecdotally, it seems there is one Indian eatery opening almost every day in the U.S, going by the reviews. This past week, I read about Tandoor of India in Rochester, New York; Taste of India in McAllen, Texas; and Annapurna in Albuquerque, New Mexico, all middling cities with a modest Indian population. The New York Times carried a glowing review of Chennai's famed Saravana Bhavan, which opened a franchise in the Big Apple recently.

One gets the sense that Indian restaurantship is starting to move away from comfort zones. This is evident even in the nomenclature. The Delhi Dhabas, Bombay Bistros, Madras Cafes are giving way to upstarts such as Tabla, Tamarind, Monsoon, Nirvana, Mango Grove, Banana Leaf, Kati Roll Company, and Annapurna Ayurvedic Cuisine. More and more South Indian eateries are opening, not to speak of the occasional Bengali (Babu in New York), Rajasthani (Jaipur in LA) and Gujarati (Sukhadia's in NY.)

Westerners too are opening Indian restaurants. Recently, Heather Carlucci-Rodriguez, a former pastry chef of L'Impero and Veritas in New York, opened Lassi, replacing an Indian spot called Thali which was known for downmarket khana. For that matter, Indian restauranters are themselves becoming bolder and more upscale. So you have New York's Tabla and Washington's Inde-Bleu serving Indo-French cuisine. In Edison, New Jersey, Ming concocts that unique blend -- Indian-Chinese. For the longest time, Indian food has been locked in at the low end of the cuisine chain. Now it's slowly going beyond Curry in a Hurry.

"People don't mind coming to Indian restaurants and dropping \$ 100-\$150 per head," says Floyd Cardoz, executive chef of Tabla. "We are getting over the \$ 6.99 buffet tag." And why not. Cardoz, formerly of Taj and Oberoi in Mumbai, is a celebrated chef, a two-time nominee of James Beard Award for Best Chef. His peers like Thomas John of Mantra, Vikram Vij of Vij's of Vancouver, and Maneet Chauhan of Chicago's Vermillion have gotten rah rah reviews in lifestyle magazines like Food and Wine and Town and Country. Thai is good, but for sheer range, there is nothing like Indian. We can get an even bigger bite.
