

Up, Up, Upma!:

Top Indian chef in NY wins \$ 100,000 culinary prize with humble tiffin snack

Bangalore/Washington: South of the Vindhyas where it is a breakfast and 'tiffin' staple, the humble upma is sometimes derisively dismissed as "fertilizer" by snobbish foodies. Its down-to-earth origin is evident in its Tamil etymology, the word upma coming from uppu (salt) and maavu (flour), hence uppuma(vu). Also known as uppindi in Telugu and uppittu in Kannada, there's nothing uppity about upma; it's utterly plebeian, something maamis crank out as fast food.

But in the hands of the New York's celebrated chef, Mumbai-born Floyd Cardoz, the unpretentious upma shot into international culinary limelight on Wednesday. Asked to prepare an item based on food memories, (or dishes that inspired them in their lives), in the final of the much-watched Top Chef Masters contest in Los Angeles, Cardoz whipped up an upma of semolina and mushroom to beat two other favorites and win the top prize of \$ 100,000.

The result stunned food critics and viewers who had put the two other finalists, Mary Sue Milliken of Los Angeles' Border Grill and Tracy Des Jardins of San Francisco's Jardiniere, ahead of Cardoz, who co-founded and ran the upscale New York eatery Tabla with restaurantur Danny Meyer before it closed last year. In fact, Cardoz had lost to Milliken several times in the recent past, and ahead of the finale had wishfully told viewers, "She's my friend, but I can't wait to beat her."

It didn't look possible when the finalists rushed out to the market to buy ingredients for the courses the judges asked them to make. Cardoz was held up in the LA traffic worsened by rain even as local Milliken anticipated the snarl-up and beat him to the kitchen. Besides making a dish that inspired them, they also had to make a dish named by one of the judges. Cardoz caught up with Milliken by cranking out an improvised Malaysian rendang (meat cooked in coconut milk and spices).

But it was the personal food memories section that Cardoz upped the ante with upma, which critics loosely described a semolina pudding, or an Indian version of the Italian polenta.

"In the end, Cardoz impressed because of the spice and passion that infused his final meal of the season," Wall Street Journal food critic Charles Passy said, "(He) won by doing exactly what he does at Tabla – that is, honoring his Indian gastronomic roots and finding a way to reinvent his native cuisine at the same time." One of the judges, Saveur magazine editor James Oseland was quoted as saying, "You cooked a meal that was deeply skilled and very, very memorable."

Cardoz, who admitted to being shocked by the win, will donate his prize money to the Young Scientist Cancer Research Fund in memory of his father, who died of cancer. "Winning means a lot to me and my family because my family has always sacrificed our family life for me to do what I do," he said after he triumphed.

It wasn't always so. In fact, in an interview with this correspondent in 2005 at the height of Tabla's fame, Cardoz recounted how his family didn't want him to be a chef. He was strong-armed into a bio-chemistry course in Mumbai's St.Xavier College for some time before he wriggled out and enrolled in a catering and hotel management course in a Pedder Road institute.

He went on to do an advance hotel management course in Switzerland and returned to India and worked at Oberoi for two years. He moved in 1988 to New York, where he struggled in a small Indian restaurant near Columbia University before getting a break at Henry's, a French restaurant near Rockefeller Center.

Cardoz' big move came in 1998 when he teamed up with Danny Meyer to co-found Tabla, one of the first upscale Indian restaurants in NYC. "We got a lot of flak because we did not have a \$ 4.99 buffet," he joked in that interview. "Till Tabla came along Indian food was seen as something spicy, something which gave heartburn. We dispelled a lot of pre-conceived notions and showed Indian food does not have to be spicy."

Strictly speaking, Tabla was more Indo-French cuisine than purely desi. It ran for 13 years before shuttering last year under the weight of recession and increasing competition with a slew of new Indian restaurants. In that time, Cardoz was nominated twice in a row for the James Beard Foundation's Best Chef award and was featured several times in prestigious foodie magazines such as Food and Wine. At the business end of cuisine, he is scheduled to open a seafood-heavy North End Grill in Battery Park later this year.

But in the meantime, at the culinary end of the business, winning the Top Chef Masters is, to flog an old cliché, the icing on the cake.