

Obamas spice up cuisine front with Indian dining on his birthday

Indian cuisine has long been an also-ran in America's \$660 billion eating out business generated by 980,000 restaurants. Although it is the main course in U.K., Indian food hobbles behind Italian, Chinese, and Hispanic chow in the U.S despite impressive strides of late. For reasons that may be hard to digest, even Thai, Greek, and Japanese fare are ahead in the food sweepstakes.

Not that this is going to change anytime soon, but hand it to the Obamas for doing their bite for Indian cuisine. Probably because of the President's incessant boasting about his mastery over keema and daal, First Lady Michelle Obama treated him to an Indian dinner for his 52nd birthday.

In a brief pool report, the White House said the First Couple drove down to Rasika, an upscale Indian restaurant in West End, to celebrate his birthday, which was actually on Sunday, August 4. The family, with kids, spent that day in Camp David, and evidently the First Lady had a special treat lined up for him a little later at a restaurant now ranked among Washington DC's best.

Owned by entrepreneur Ashok Bajaj, the original Rasika in Penn Quarter became so popular with the Washington elite that he opened a second one in 2012 at West End, close to the Indian Embassy, which is the one the First Couple went to. Husband and wife dressed up for the occasion, and according to the Pool report "few people seemed to notice as the motorcade drove down Pennsylvania Ave. stopping at the lights along the way." What they ate was not revealed, but Rasika's menu is far from the regular desi khana.

The Obamas are not the first First Couple to patronize Indian cuisine, which is probably the last of the world's great gastronomic adventures to excite the American palate because of its spice levels. The Clintons put Bombay Club, located right across from the White House in arguable the best restaurant address in town, on the country's culinary map back in the 1990s. In fact, the story goes that Chelsea Clinton pretty much grew up on take out from the Bombay Club, which is also owned by Bajaj, who is a former Ashok Group and Taj Group executive.

While Bill Clinton's familiarity with Indian cuisine came from his days as a student at Oxford and his personal friendship with the late chef Raji Jalepalli of Memphis, Obama's connection is even more intimate. He learned to cook Indian food during his rooming days with Indian and Pakistani college-mates. More than once, he has boasted that he can cook a mean keema and dal, although the claim has not been tested widely. Most recently, while toasting the nomination of Sri Srinivasan to the DC Court of Appeals, Obama said he can "think back on my college years when my roommates were Indian and Pakistanis, which is how I learned how to cook keema and dal."

Despite such hearty endorsement from the President and other American elites, Indian cuisine still lags behind market leaders Italian and Chinese, although lately more and more Indian restaurants and chefs are making news. Eating out and its associated industry is big in America - every day restaurant sales of \$1.8 billion and the industry employs 13 million people, according to the National Restaurant Association.

But purely in terms of mass popularity, the Chinese are way ahead of Indians. In fact, a 2006 report said there are more Chinese restaurants in the U.S than McDonald's, Wendy's and Burger King combined. No sign that that fortune cookie will crumble any time soon.