

August 6, 2006

Chutney Meri

Learning some months back that the total value of Indian spice exports is a crummy \$ 500 million annual despite the world developing more adventurous taste buds left me hot and bothered. A mere \$ 500 million for condiments that sparked off great expeditions 500 years ago, resulting in colonization of large parts of the world? Clearly, something is amiss. One can only hazard that there has been a major marketing failure and we have just sold ourselves cheap.

Blame some on timid Americans – the big market -- who for the longest time regarded salt as the frontier in the spice world. It's been changing slowly. Recent surveys show up to 15 per cent Americans eat hot/spicy/fiery foods and the number is growing. Proponents of fiery foods are pumping out stories about hot being healthy, so expect Americans to soon stagger around with red faces and tears in their eyes for reasons beyond Iraq.

Jokes aside, I was provoked into a culinary rant by a recent story in an American publication that introduced its readers to chutney, the great desi relish, and declared that it is 'India's answer to salsa.' I won't get into which came first, except to point that while salsa is primarily tomato-based (with chillies, onion and coriander thrown in), chutneys are concocted from an assortment of crops such as coconut, onion, garlic, mango, mint, tamarind, and of course, tomato.

Still, one has to acknowledge that chutney is a wooden spooner in the western relish sweepstakes despite getting a head start in the 1600s, when it was first shipped to Europe. By the 19th century, branded chutneys like Major Grey's and Bengal Club, calibrated to Western tastes, were being exported from India at a time when tomato was still considered a poisonous plant in the U.S until Thomas Jefferson grew it on his homestead and sparked off a craze.

But somewhere along the way, chutneys were swept aside in the west and lost out to other relishes, dips and sauces such as ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard, barbecue sauce, and finally salsa, the sauce-come-lately. Today, salsa is the hottie among relishes. According the Association of Dressings and Sauces (only in America!), salsa sales has crossed \$ 1 billion. It is hot on the heels of salad dressings and mayonnaise, both at around \$ 1.5 billion. Poor chutney is not even on the table, except in Indian restaurants.

Clearly, salsa has given chutney a pasting, and we have only ourselves to blame. Dammit, it's galling that we couldn't even copyright the expression "fingerlickin' good" before Colonel Sanders got his grubby little hands on it. The word chutney, I gather, comes from the Hindi/Urdu expression 'chatana,' which means to lick one's fingers. And salsa? Derives from sal, Spanish for the humdrum salt.

Of course, proximity issues aside, salsa had its slice of luck during World War II when rationing of ketchup in America brought it to the forefront. But we have been slackers in promoting our condiment. Even the acclaimed Chutney Mary, London's famed Indian restaurant, fails to explain the provenance of its eponymous relish that is made in so many flavorful ways in almost every corner of India.

In the U.S meantime, once food giants like Pepsico's Frito-Lay got its teeth into the Hispanic food market with Tostitos, salsa was off and running before chutney got its shoes on. Catching up now will be a hard grind, despite endorsement from the U.S that "chutneys are more complex than salsa, and adventuresome Americans are discovering just how flavorful and versatile this condiment can be."