

November 12 , 2006

Leaning towards pizza

Some 15 years ago, when MTV and KFC -- and their likes -- first came to India, there was a furor about how we would be corrupted by western song and overrun by fast food. In time, we Bollywoodized MTV and spun off clones in our own languages -- for who has better song and dance than us? We copied McDonalds' system of fast food and quick getaway to gin up local chains like Darshinis and Dosa Camps. Somewhere down the line, we lost the fear of western influence. Save for a few food fundamentalists, not many people in India are agitated today about fast food, even as Americans are having a rethink about it.

Word out of Bharatvarsh is that pizza, of which it is said it reaches your home before the police, is making inroads into small town India. The desi pizza industry is now estimated at more than \$ 400 million and growing at 25 per cent plus annually. Pizza outlets are opening at the rate of knots in every town from Patiala to Pudukottai. It took the pizza, originally from Italy (broadly from the Mediterranean region), more than a century to become America's staple. Looks like we may roll over in a decade.

Zaroor pitenge; so we might as well call it pitjah.

It's hard to stop the march of cuisine across international borders these days. Greater travel and shrinking distances means people get to taste a variety of foods. As is well known, chicken tikka masala (CTM) is now Britain's national dish. The Caribbean treats curry -- which is derived from the Tamil word 'kari, which means sauce -- as its very own. Lacking their own distinctive cuisine, Americans are starting to embrace every kind of food, from Mexican to Malaysian, Indian to Indonesian.

But pizza still tops the chart. The baseball wiseacre Yogi Berra once asked for asked for a pizza to be cut into four slices because he was not hungry enough to eat six. Believe it or not, joked the TV journalist Boyd Matson,

Americans eat 75 acres of pizza a day. Many immigrants ease into America via pizza delivery and pizza consumption. It's a slice of American life.

Indian immigrants are now chomping their way up the American fast food chain -- the business end of it. From motel franchises, they are moving into chains such as Subways and Dunkin' Donuts, both headed to India.

Heretical as it might sound to Indian ears, pizza has some virtues. First of all, remember that pizza ho ya paratha, pita ho ya phulka, they are all fundamentally breads, consisting primarily of flour, salt and water. Most Indian breads -- chapatti, roti, naan etc, are typically dunked or dipped into sauces. Pizza, on the other hand, is topped. Heck, it's just another crusty, stuffed, overweight roti. We can take it on.

Inventive that we are, we will certainly indigenize pizza. Anachronistic and oxymoronic as it might sound, we will roll out healthy versions of it. Already there are reports that paneer has pipped pepperoni as the favored topping in India.

In time, we might even have regional variations like in the U.S and Europe, where a Chicago-style pizza (thick crust) is very different from Sicilian-style pizza (toppings baked directly into the crust). Meanwhile, take a stab at what a Patiala-style pizza might contain.

Here's a slice of my forecast: As more couples join the work force in India, the Indian kitchen will lose its salience, and pizzas, like kababs, will be on a roll.
