



A typical Bhatia lunch includes chappati or puri, rice, vegetables, a kadi or dal, salad and curd —Shraddha Bhargava DNA

Chiblaro (Veg pulao)

2 cups rice 4tbsp oil 1 medium-sized brinjal 20gm cauliflower 1 medium-sized potato 2 sprigs curry leaves (leaves only) 2 chopped green chillies 1/4tsp turmeric powder 3/4tsp coriander powder 1/2tsp cumin seeds 1/4tsp raw mango powder 1/4tsp red chilli powder 1/2tsp mustard seeds salt to taste 1tbsp coriander leaves

METHOD

Cut the brinjal and the cauliflower into small pieces. Peel, cut the potato into small pieces. Boil the rice with turmeric powder. When done, drain. In a separate deep pan, heat the oil on medium flame, add curry leaves, mustard seeds and chopped green chillies. When mustard starts popping, add the chopped vegetables. (The other option is to deep fry the vegetables separately and add it to the rice). Saute the vegetables in the oil and cook till nearly tender. Add all the remaining spices and salt. Stir. Add the vegetable and spice mixture to the boiled rice. Mix thoroughly. Serve hot garnished with chopped coriander

FOOD IS THEIR HEIRLOOM

With no state to call their own, Thathai Bhatias look at their cuisine as a strong factor that holds the community together, finds Anu Prabhakar

In the late '70s, Mumbai resident Lalit Gajaria and his mother had accompanied his sister-in-law to Arya Vaidya Sala in Kottakkal, Kerala, for a lengthy Ayurvedic treatment. The family carried along their own food ingredients and a cooking stove. Once there, they cooked their own meals and when they almost ran out of something, Lalit would grab a sample and head to the nearest store. He would show this to the Malayalam-speaking storekeeper, gesture he wanted more and thus replenish their food supply.

Though carrying food and a stove to an alien land was a necessity in the '70s, the practise is not really unheard of today in the Thathai Bhatia community. Some of the community's women do not eat food served at hotels or weddings, preferring to carry their own. "I have seen groups of eight or nine women go to a corner and eat their own food from tiffin boxes at weddings," says Lalit.

Thathai Bhatias hail from Thatta, a small town near Karachi in Pakistan. The community is often inaccurately described as being a Sindhi sect. "But we are followers of Krishna and are Push-timarg Vaishnavas," explains Lalit. Also, while most Sindhis are non-vegetarians, Thathai Bhatias are strict vegetarians.

Onion and garlic are banished

from the kitchen of a Thathai Bhatia family — some even refuse to let in a loaf of bread. "Earlier, bread was made by Muslims and the kneading of the dough was done by foot," explains Lalit. But religion has very little to do with the restrictions, he adds. This is more of a cultural practice.

Eighty five-year-old Sita Bhai Haridas, a Dubai-resident for 25 years, is yet to taste chocolate, biscuit or bread. She always carries her own water and food, even while travelling. "When I grew up in my village in Karachi, we never had chocolates, cakes or biscuits. Why should I begin now?" she questions. Her son, Kishore Bhatian, 67, says that the need to follow the practice has diminished over the years, with every generation. "The children in my house like to order out, especially pizza. The main kitchen is for the entire family but when they bring the pizza home, they have to eat it in the pantry," explains Kishore.

HOME COOKED TRADITIONS

Back at the Gajarais' two-bedroom apartment in Kemp's Corner, South Mumbai, Lalit's wife Chandra Gajaria, 66, is bent over the stove making *tuk*, an authentic Thathai Bhatia dish served as a side dish or an accompaniment. She deep fries

cut potatoes and yam on a medium flame till half done, waits till they cool down, flattens them between her palms and then puts them back into the fire. "Once crispy, you can sprinkle them with salt and red chilly powder," explains Chandra.

My eyes, however, are on the dish with a deceptively simple name: *Bhatia kadi*. This *kadi* takes a whopping four hours to get cooked. It is an assortment of vegetables like drumsticks, yam, ladyfinger, bananas, potatoes and other ingredients like jeera and fenugreek seeds, *channa* and cluster beans cooked in a thick, delicious broth. Chandra insists that it is not as complex as it sounds. "You don't have to crush anything ... the vegetables are added in stages. The longer it is kept to boil, the better its taste," she explains. The vegetables are cooked to perfection and blend in seamlessly with the rich gravy.

A typical Thathai Bhatia lunch includes chappati or puri, rice or pulao (consumed before the chappati/puri), vegetables, a *kadi* or dal, salad or fruits and curd, *dahi ki kadi* or buttermilk. Rice is cooked with salt and later with ghee on dum and served with lentil toppings like crushed moong dal, moong dal cooked with ghee or crushed or whole urad dal. The authentic Bhatia puri is made from red rice, also called Patni rice. "We don't roll the dough using the rolling pin. We do it with our hands," explains Chandra.

ONE CUISINE TO BIND THEM

With only about 10,000 Bhatias remaining worldwide, Dubai-based couple Bharat and Deepa Chachara look at Thathai Bhatia food as something that has stood the test of time and united the community. In 2002, the duo launched a website *Panja Khada* (our food) which is believed to be the only website on the cuisine. The website includes recipes, explanation of various culinary terms and other useful tidbits. "Last month we created a Facebook group called Bhatia Buzz. We had a competition asking people to share tips on how to use leftover food. In five days, we got about 86 recipes from India, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and so on."

Bharat is pleased that most respondents were below 40 years of age. He agrees that most youngsters tend to lean towards fast food, but insists that they are aware of the cuisine and are using it as a base for fusion. "The cuisine is evolving," laughs Chachara. "Don't be surprised if you see Bhatia pizza in *Khana Khazana!*"

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Batatay ja Tuk

3 to 4 large potatoes ● Oil, 1/2tsp salt, 1/2tsp red chilli powder, 1/4tsp black pepper powder (optional)

● Peel the potatoes and cut them lengthwise into two. If the potatoes are very large cut them into four. Potatoes can be replaced with yam

(suran ja tuk), raw banana (*kache kela ja tuk*), sweet potato (*taraylo mitho gajar*) or colocasia (*arwi ja tuk*). ● Heat the oil for frying on a medium flame. When hot, deep-fry the potatoes. When they are half done, remove and allow them to cool for five minutes. The potatoes can also be par-boiled. ● Flat-

ten each half-fried potato with the palm of your hand. They will become round and cracks will appear on the potatoes' surface. ● Fry the potatoes again in the oil on a medium flame till crisp and golden brown. Sprinkle with salt, red chilli powder and black pepper powder. Serve hot.