

## A Fishy Story

**Do you view Seafood as a single category? Go for the largest Prawns, or the pinkest Salmon? Or are you someone who cares which Fish is in your curry? There's a catch to being a fish expert today**

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Do North Indians like the taste of fish? The smell? Can they even tell one fish from another? I'm beginning to wonder. My current theory is that they may like the idea but all fish fall into a general amorphous category for them. When they do make a choice, it is size that sometimes matters more than taste. Why else would they insist on ordering those tasteless, rubbery, very large prawns that all restaurants now feel obliged to serve? (Ask for a small prawn at most places these days and they will look at you as though you are mad. And this, though the smaller prawns are often the tastiest.)

I grew up in Bombay, where the smell of fish was never very far away. The Koli fishermen would dry their bombil on the road next to Cuffe Parade, which was a sea-front in that era, not a hideous residential colony built on reclaimed land. The idea of going to a fish market was not as repugnant to people in Bombay as it is to Dilliwallas who can't stand the smell. And chefs and cooks at good south Bombay restaurants would go to Sassoon Docks in the morning to see what the fishermen had brought for sale.

By the time I moved to Calcutta in the Eighties, I began to realise that the fish experts of Bombay were amateurs. In Bengal, buying fish was a sacred ritual for the men (it tended to be the husbands who went to the fish market; the wives stuck to cleaning and cooking the fish), each of whom claimed to know the best fishmonger and would offer advice on how to tell exactly how fresh a fish was (It helped to look into the fish's eyes, apparently.)

I wonder sometimes if the new generation of Bengali men have abandoned the habit of going to check out the fish. In Bombay, fish buying has now become a plastic-wrapped affair: even the fancy chefs don't bother to go to Sassoon Docks or any fish market.

There's always a simple way of telling how much somebody knows about fish. If he describes a dish as being made with a particular fish, then he knows what he is talking about. In Bengal, they will always know which fish they are eating and endless debates will take place over the provenance of the fish. A subject like the difference between a Bangladeshi hilsa (illish) and the West Bengal version can keep a group of Bengalis going for at least a couple of evenings. (My friend

Jeet Chowdhury says these debates are bogus—most hilsa now comes from Gujarat or even Burma.) And if you dare suggest to a Bengali that you like sea prawns, you will get contemptuous looks and a lecture on the virtues of freshwater prawns. (Look: they suck the brains out of their prawns so they must know what they are talking about!)

These days, states that really understand fish (West Bengal, Kerala and a few others) are the only ones where diners care about the difference between a pomfret ("useless, tasteless fish", I was told in Calcutta) and a bhetki or a karimeen and an aila. The others are happy to eat 'fried fish' or 'fish curry'—it really doesn't matter what the fish is.

Sadly we carry this ignorance forward even when we eat other cuisines. At few Chinese restaurants will they bother to tell you what fish they are using. At restaurants serving European food where there is a minimum of spicing and the kind of fish used does matter, they don't provide much information either. So thousands of Indians eat the Chilean sea bass (because we like the way the fish flakes when you cut into it) without realising that it is not a sea bass at all. It doesn't help that menus and chefs now routinely drop the word 'Chilean' (which is the giveaway) from its name. And many Indian chefs actually believe that this is a true sea bass, never having tasted the wonderful, meaty flavours of the real thing. (For the record, the so-called Chilean sea bass's real name is the Patagonian toothfish. Not so glamorous now, right?)

It's the same with black cod at Japanese restaurants: It is not a cod at all. It is not even a single fish. It is a term applied to several kinds of fish (including most notably the sablefish) on restaurant menus. It has flaky flesh (like the so-called Chilean sea bass) and is popular with people who think that the black cod is a kind of cod that God specially couriered to Nobu (who made Black Cod in Miso famous).

So why do Indians like these mislabelled fish? Well, basically it comes down to texture, and an absence of a very fishy taste. And there's another factor: fat. People who don't really like fish love the fatty taste of some farmed fish. (A black cod is much, much, fatter than real cod). Let's take the most notorious example: salmon. Most of us have eaten

salmon at some stage—in sushi, as sashimi, as smoked salmon or as a fillet in a fancy restaurant. The chances are a) that we've eaten farmed salmon, because wild salmon accounts for less than 10 per cent of global consumption, b) that we've eaten salmon produced by a Norwegian company—the Norwegians dominate the world market and farm salmon in other countries as well, and c) that we had no idea that the fish was artificially coloured to look like the real thing because farmed salmon has a dull and unappetising colour.

The chances are, also, that we are largely unaware of the global controversies about farmed (and especially Norwegian) salmon. Nor have we worked out why we like the fish. But I'll tell you why we like it. It is because it is full of fat. A real salmon swims so much in the wild that it develops muscle. A farmed salmon doesn't get to swim, develops hardly any muscle and is essentially an artificially coloured lump of fish fat. The cheaper the salmon, the more likely it is that it has been farmed in overcrowded pens or cages (to increase production) and therefore has swum very little.

Many years ago when I wrote that I try and avoid Norwegian salmon, the Norwegian fish industry, which spends vast sums of money trying to promote its fish in India, got very agitated. So I will say nothing this time. But you should know that there are global concerns about Norwegian salmon (Google it and you'll see) and that Norway's own media have been full of articles about these concerns especially when, in 2013, a Norwegian paediatrician called Anne-Lise Bjorke Monsen went public about the toxins she claimed the fish contained.

Lest you think I'm targeting the Norwegians, let me also point out that analysis by British scientists found that while a pizza from Pizza Express contained 6.4g of fat per 100g, some Scottish smoked salmon contained more than double that quantity: 14g of fat per 100g. On the other hand, wild salmon usually contains something like 3g of fat per 100g.

So don't let anyone tell you that fish is necessarily the healthy option! Far better and cheaper to eat a pizza rather than some of this mass-produced rubbish.

But these days, not only do chefs not bother with locally sourced fish, they don't even bother to find fish that anyone has heard of. Instead they rely on a frozen fish that comes from Vietnamese fish farms. It is called basa and I've yet to meet a fish lover who can discern any flavour at all in it. But that may actually be the reason chefs like it. The absence of flavour makes it perfect for chefs who know nothing about fish because they introduce any flavour they like into the dish. Plus it comes ready filleted and frozen in packets. And most important: it's CHEAP! (It can be half the price of better known fish).

So why bother going to the market and looking for

fresh fish when your supplier sends you cheap farmed fish in nice frozen packets, hand-delivered to your kitchen?

In my view, basa has more in common with paneer than with any fish and the only chef who has ever made a basa dish I liked was Manish Mehrotra and he used it for something that was basically a paneer dish, substituting the paneer with basa.

All of which leads me back to where we started. Let's be honest. North Indians don't really like the taste of real fish. And except for a few states, most Indians don't understand fish at all.

Perhaps a generation from now we will be known as the land of the frozen, flavourless fish!

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### World Happiness Index 2017

U. N. O.'s Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) issued the fresh 'World Happiness Report 2017'. Altogether 155 countries are covered in it, in which India, incidentally, stands at a lower 122nd place.

First 10 placed countries are—

1. Norway, 2. Denmark, 3. Iceland, 4. Switzerland, 5. Finland, 6. Netherlands, 7. Canada, 8. New Zealand, 9. Australia, and 10. Sweden.

The parameters to survey happiness index were the same as earlier—GDP per person, life span, social cooperation (how many people will help you in difficulties), belief in the Govt. (corruption free regime and trade), freedom to take own decisions, etc.

In this report, African countries are again at the bottom. Ten worst placed countries in this list are—South Sudan, Liberia, Guinea, Togo, Rwanda, Tanzania, Burundi and Central African Republic. Other two lowest places are for Yemen and Syria.

Among neighbouring countries of India, best placed is Bhutan. Even Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are above India in the Happiness Index 2017.

America is slipping down one place than last year. UAE has appointed a Minister to take care of the happiness of its nationals.

The Sl. no. of the place of some other countries in this list are as follows:

14. USA, 16. Germany, 19. Great Britain, 26. Singapore, 31. France, 49. Russia, 51. Japan, 79. China, 80. Pakistan, 97. Bhutan, 99. Nepal, 100. Bangladesh and 123. Sri Lanka. And as informed above—122. India.

[See *Bionotes*, vol. 17, No. 2, p. 35 for World Happiness Index 2015.]