

India's Diverse Culinary Heritage A Museum of Indian Food Heritage and Rare Recipes

RHYTHMA KAUL and ANESHA GEORGE

E-mail : rhythm.kaul@hindustantimes.com

Why is tadka added to dal? It's not just for flavour.

"The oil helps the body assimilate fat-soluble nutrients—which is very important in a predominantly plant-based diet," says food consultant Rushina Munshaw-Ghildiyal.

Across India's regional cuisines, there is a precise, almost mathematical, logic to traditional foods, combinations and meals. And much of it being lost to fast food, packaged snacks and foreign fads posing as superfoods.

The mismatch is partly why rates of obesity and metabolic disorders are up.

"The nutritional value of the food we ingest has dropped drastically," says Mumbai nutritionist Shikha Gupta. "Whole cereals, for instance, are all but missing from the urban Indian diet."

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has decided to act as the country faces the loss of its diverse culinary heritage and micro-cuisines and is now planning a museum of Indian food heritage and what they're calling 'bhoole-bisre', 'rare' 'heritage' recipes.

"There is currently no one place where information on India's rich food traditions, heritage and customs can be sought. We are having discussion to come up with a concrete plan for such a space," says FSSAI CEO Pawan Kumar Agarwal. "We want to create a repository that will offer cultural context, nutritional and even pharmaceutical values of Indian cuisines. It won't be about dishes and taste alone but the science of food."

The plan is to rope in food scientists and historians, chefs, food revivalists and other national and multinational experts in the field. Also in the works are traditional food festivals, talks, seminars, and food trails.

"Currently, restaurants and hotels are promoting certain cuisines individually, but through this initiative we plan to go beyond the niche and reach out to the masses," Agarwal says.

First Foods

The independent efforts are coming from various sources.

The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), a Delhi-based thinktank, recently released a book titled *First Food: Culture of Taste*, a collection of 50 recipes that used traditional, seasonal produce.

"We have a living tradition of healthy food still eaten in our homes. We still cherish diverse cuisines and we will crave for our unique smells and tastes. But knowledge of this diversity is disappearing...our food is getting multinationalised,

industrialised and chemicalised," reads the foreword.

"We decided to put together the book because we were getting exceedingly concerned about how Indians were consuming processed food and how there was a lack of diversity on their plates," says CSE director-general Sunita Narain.

The globalisation that caused us to lose touch with our culinary traditions, ironically, is bringing some of them back. As Indian 'superfoods' draw attention globally, ironically, they are becoming more easily available locally again.

"Millets like *jowar*, *bajra* and *ragi* are now being called superfoods and are a perfect balance of minerals, fats and carbohydrates. They can be used in everyday cooking, be it porridges, pancakes, *halwas*, or *upmas*. They are available all year round, and as demand rises once more, are making a comeback in supermarkets and e-groceries," says Mumbai nutritionist Dhvani Shah.

Ghildiyal has one such superfood family recipe that she has both adopted and adapted for meals today.

"My husband's great-grandmother made a delicious *saag* with the husk of sesame seeds that would be eaten with rice," she says. "It was a traditional Garhwali dish usually had in winter. This husk is extremely rich in Vitamin B1, iron and calcium."

She now makes a light soup version, so that it can be had in summer as well.

Peepal Patte ki Bhaji

Towards the end of the March, tender pink leaves appear on the peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*). These heart-shaped leaves are a favourite of the Baiga tribe of Madhya Pradesh. They're known to help the body deal with very hot summers by aiding digestion and thus keeping the body from overheating as it tries to digest each meal. The bitter leaves make for an interesting vegetables. Boil until soft, strain, add tamarind for a kick of sourness. Cook with a little water until melded. Add salt. Serve with rice.

Flaxseed Chutney

Oil seeds such as flaxseed are rich in Omega-3 fatty acids, fibre, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals such as calcium, iron, magnesium and zinc. They boost immunity and stamina.

For the chutney, take 100gm flaxseeds; 6-8 dry red chillies; 2-3 tsp cumin seeds (optional); salt to taste. Roast flaxseeds lightly in a pan until they stop crackling. Roast chillies and cumin seeds separately. Let all ingredients cool and grind them into a coarse powder. Add salt. Store the dry chutney in an air-tight container.