

MAHARASHTRA CUISINE

INTRODUCTION

The culture of Maharashtra, which reveals itself in many ways, is also reflected in its local cuisine. Though most people are not very familiar with Maharashtrian cuisine and it has yet to find its way into five-star kitchens, there does exist a large and interesting culinary repertoire.

The people of Maharashtra regard their food as 'Anna he poornabrahma' which means 'anna', or food is equal to 'Brahma', or the creator of the universe. In other words it means food is God, thus it should be worshiped. Maharashtrians also believe in offering their food first to the lord as a thanksgiving ritual for all that he has given. On festive occasions, some specific mithais (sweets) are offered such as Ukadiche Modak (Ganesh Chaturthi) and Satyanarayan Puja Sheera.

STATE

Overlooking the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea is the western state of Maharashtra, which presents a strong blend of the traditional and the contemporary each co-existing with the other with surprising ease.

THE RANGE OF CUISINE

Maharashtra is a huge state, thus a variety of delectable cuisines are found here. With distinguishing flavors and food styles eating becomes an enriching activity altogether. Maharashtrian cuisine is divided into two, Konkani, and Varadi. These cuisines are quite different from each other, but both of them use a lot of seafood and coconut.

INFLUENCES

The cuisine of Maharashtra has its own distinctive flavors and tastes. It can be divided into two major sections the coastal and the interior. A major portion of Maharashtra, which lies on the coast of the Arabian Sea, is loosely called the Konkan and boasts of its own Konkani cuisine, which is a homogeneous combination of Malvani, Gaud Saraswat Brahmin, and Goan cuisines. Besides the coastal cuisine, the interior of Maharashtra the Vidarbha area, has its own distinctive cuisine known as the Varadi cuisine.

STAPLE FOOD

As in most of the other states of India, rice is the staple food grain in Maharashtra too. Like the other coastal states, there is an enormous variety of vegetables in the regular diet and lots of fish and coconuts are used.

Grated coconuts spice many kinds of dishes, but coconut oil is not very widely used as a cooking medium. Peanuts and cashew nuts are widely used in vegetables and peanut oil is the main cooking medium. Another feature is the use of *kokum*, a deep purple berry that has a pleasing sweet and sour taste. Kokum, most commonly used in an appetizer-digestive called the *sol kadhi*, is served chilled.

METHODS

Maharashtrian meals are scientifically planned and cooked the golden rule being that the cooking medium must not be seen. The vegetables are more or less steamed and lightly seasoned so as to retain their nutritional value. There is almost no deep frying and roasting. Coconut is used in cooking and as an embellishment. Jaggery and tamarind are used in most vegetables or lentils so that the food has a sweet and sour flavor while the *kala masala* (special blend of spices) is added to make the food piquant. As opposed to the coastal cuisine, where fresh coconut is added to the dishes, in the Vidarbha region, powdered coconut is used for cooking.

SPECIALITIES

Among seafood, the most popular fish is *bombil* or the Bombay duck, which is normally served batter fried and crisp. *Bangda* or mackerel is another popular fish in coastal Maharashtra. It is curried with red chilies, ginger and triphal. Pomfret is another popular fish eaten barbecued, stuffed, fried or curried. *Pamphlet triphal ambat* is a traditional dish in which fish is cooked in creamy coconut gravy that greatly enhances its taste.

Besides fish, crabs, prawns, shellfish and lobsters are also relished by the coastal Maharashtrians. A popular prawn dish is the *sungtachi-hinga kodi*, which consists of prawns in coconut gravy, blended with spices and asafoetida.

In the vegetarian fare, the most popular vegetables are brinjals. A popular style of cooking brinjals is *bharlivangi* or baby brinjals stuffed with coconut. Another typical dish is the *Pachadi*, which is tender brinjals cooked with green mangoes and flavored with coconut and jaggery. Besides, common vegetables are greatly relished by the Maharashtrians. A typical dish is the *patal bhaji*, which is a sweet and sour dish flavored with groundnuts.

All non-vegetarian and vegetarian dishes are eaten with boiled rice or with bhakris, which are soft rotis made of rice flour. Special rice puris called *vada* and *amboli*, which is a pancake made of fermented rice, urad dal, and semolina, are also eaten as a part of the main meal.

Maharashtrian fare is incomplete without papads, which are eaten roasted or fried. A typical feature is the masala papad in which finely chopped onions, green chilies and *chat masala* are sprinkled over roasted or fried papads.

The most popular dessert of Maharashtra is the *puran poli*, which is roti stuffed with a sweet mixture of jaggery and gram flour and is made at the time of the Maharashtrian New Year. Other popular sweets are the *ukdiche modak*, the panpole ras, and the shreekhand. Distinguishing features of the Varadi cuisine are the dishes made of besan (gram flour) like *zunka bhakar* and *pathawadi* and the *vada-bhat*. Non-vegetarian food is also very popular in this region. As seafood is not easily available here, chicken and mutton are commonly cooked.

NON-VEGETARIAN & VEGETARIAN SPECIALITIES

The most popular seafood of Maharashtra is the *bombil* or the Bombay duck, which is normally served batter fried and crisp. Almost all non-vegetarian and vegetarian dishes are served with boiled rice or with bhakris, soft rotis (bread) made of rice flour. A pancake made of rice, urad dal and semolina is called *vada* or *amboli*. This a special rice puri, eaten as a part of the main meal.

Brijals are the most popular vegetable of this region. A popular preparation of brinjals is *bharlivangi* or baby brinjals stuffed with coconut. Maharashtrian fare is incomplete without papads, which are eaten roasted or fried. *Puran poli* is the most popular dessert of Maharashtra. It is roti (bread) stuffed with a sweet mixture of jaggery and gram flour, and shreekhand. Shreekhand is sweetened curd containing flavors of cardamom and saffron.

FESTIVE CUISINE

Some of the festivals celebrated in Maharashtra are Gudi Padwa, Holi, Haritalika, Ganesh Chaturthi, Diwali and Makara Sankranti. There are many special dishes, mostly sweets are prepared exclusively during these festivals. On the occasion of Gudi Padwa Soonth Panak and sprouted Chana Usal are prepared. *Puran Poli* is prepared on the festival of colors Holi. Similarly, on Haritalika Coconut Potali is prepared, on Ganesh Chaturthi *Karanji* and *Chakli*, on Diwali *Shankarpali*, *Badam Halwa*, *Chakli* and *Karanji* are prepared and *Shengdana Chikki* is prepared on the occasion of Makar Sankranti.

HOW TO EAT WHEAT

In Maharashtra, even an everyday meal consists of several accompaniments that are set out in a particular manner in the *taat* (platter). The *taat vadhany* (method of setting food on the platter) is an art. It starts with a bit of salt at the top center of the *taat*. On its left is set a small piece of lemon. Then follows the *chatni* (spicy accompaniment made of ground coconut and green chilies), *koshimbir* (salad), *bharit* (lightly cooked or raw

vegetable in yogurt) in that order. The vegetable with gravy never precedes the dry vegetable because the gravy will run into it. Once everyone is seated the woman of the house will serve the rice, pour a little toop (clarified butter) and varan (lentil) on it and then the meal begins after a short thanksgiving.

SPECIAL OCCASIONS

In Maharashtra, festivals and food go together. During *Ganesh Utsav*, every Maharashtrian welcomes Lord Ganesh into his home and offers *Modaka* favorite sweetmeat of Lord Ganesh that is made only during this festival. It has a rice flour casting that is fashioned like a large flower bud and stuffed with freshly granted coconut cooked with jaggery. The *modak* is placed on lightly greased banana leaves and steamed.

Shreekhand, a sort of thick yogurt sweet dish, is a great favorite at weddings and the Dussehra festival. Flavored with cardamom powder and saffron, this aromatic dish is served with piping hot puris. Traditionally, a wedding feast has to have five sweet delicacies of which a motichur laddu (sweetmeat balls made of gram flour) is a must.

CUISINES FOR WEDDING

In India, marriages are a special occasion, held lavishly. Similarly, in Maharashtra it is held extravagantly, which includes inviting guests for an elaborate meal. Meal is served on a banana leaf and is entirely vegetarian in nature, cooked without onion and garlic.

EATING OUT

Snacking is a favorite pastime of this city of Mumbai, the capital of Maharashtra. *Chaat* is probably the most widely eaten food in the city, followed by *bhelpuri*, *pani puri*, *pav bhaji*, and *dosai*. For those looking for non-vegetarian snacks, there are the Muslim kebabs, baida roti (an egg roti stuffed with minced meat), *tandoori chicken*, *seekh kebabs*, and *fish koliwada*.

In Mumbai, the *paan* culture has been raised to an art form. An example of this is the *Cold* and *Sweet paan* in which the sweet filling is chilled.

MAHARASHTRIAN SPECIALITIES

The cuisine of Maharashtra completes itself with mouthwatering food. Mumbai, the capital of Maharashtra is the also the food capital of the state. Some of the popular snacks that can be enjoyed here are Chaat, pani puri, bhelpuri, pav bhaji, and dosai, etc. These are mostly sold on the streets and on the beaches, where people gather in the evenings to unwind themselves.

Apart from vegetarian snacks, non-vegetarian snacks are also available like Muslim kebabs, baida roti (an egg roti stuffed with minced meat), tandoori chicken, seekh kebabs, and fish koliwada. In Mumbai, 'paan', a mouth freshener can also be enjoyed in a very artistic form. One of the popular variety of paan is the Cold and Sweet paan in which the sweet filling is chilled.