

DAWOODI BOHRA CUISINE (A COMMUNITY IN GUJRAT)

INTRODUCTION

If there's a community in Gujrat which truly lives by the maxim of 'Live to eat' rather than 'Eat to live', it is the Dawoodi Bohras. The Bohras believe that any occasion is an occasion to break bread together and this in essence is both their *joie de vivre* and the *raison d'etre* of their existence. Depending on the occasion, the food can be minimalist (by Bohri standards, that is), which translates into one sweet dish, one appetizer, followed by the main course; or elaborate which could be two sweet dishes, two appetizers followed by a main course replete with salads, cold drinks and followed by paan. Contrary to popular perception, Bohri cuisine encompasses both vegetarian and non-vegetarian specialties though it is the latter which is more popular. The one enduring characteristic about any Bohra meal is the principle of **'Families that eat together stay together'**

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The first Syedna (leader) of the Dawoodi Bohra community migrated from Yemen to Ahmedabad. Thus the Dawoodi Bohra culture flourished here. The successive Syednas were from different towns of Gujarat like Jamnagar, Surat, Kathiawad, etc. The Dawoodi Bohra culture then spread to the other parts of Gujarat. Certain other Dawoodi Bohra priests carried forward the culture to other states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and so on. Thus, the Dawoodi Bohra cuisine is significantly influenced by these states and the raw materials available here. Primarily, however, the Dawoodi Bohras are sect of the Shia Muslims. Hence the cuisine has a lot of Arabic influences as well. The Dawoodi Bohra cuisine is mildly spiced.

Today, there are close to 1 million Dawoodi Bohras worldwide. Dawoodi Bohras have a unique blend of cultures, including Yemeni, Egyptian, African, and Indian.

GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

Major portion of the Dawoodi Bohra community, in India, is concentrated in Gujarat followed by Mumbai. However, the Dawoodi Bohra community is spread all over the world- from America to South Africa.

LOCAL EATING HABITS

- Every Dawoodi Bohra meal is generally eaten in a big metal plate called the Thal. It serves about 8 – 14 people depending upon the size of the thal.
- Before beginning the meal, everyone sitting to dine is made to wash hands with a special pot –and- bowl type equipment called the **chelamchi**.
- Everyone sitting to eat has to cover their heads either with a scarf in case of women or with a cap in case of men. The meal is always started by tasting a pinch of salt after saying **'bismilla-il-rakhmane-rahim'** (in the name of Allah, the beneficent and the merciful).

Breakfast:

- The Dawoodi Bohras believe in having a **heavy breakfast**.
- Dishes like paya-naan, kheema-naan, malfua or jalebi is eaten along with bread, butter and jam.
- Tea is the beverage preferred by most of the Dawoodi Bohras. Tea may be accompanied by toasts and biscuits.

Lunch/Dinner:

- At home, lunch and dinner is very simple.

- Generally chapattis are eaten during lunch and rice is eaten during dinner.
- The meal comprise of gravy served with roti/rice.
- Sometimes, certain starters like shami kebabs or **cutlace** are eaten with chapatti as a meal (usually lunch).

Community food forms a major portion of the Dawoodi Bohra cuisine. Community food is held on festivals like Eid and also to commemorate the birth or death anniversaries of the former Dawoodi Bohra priests. These meals are prepared by *Dawoodi Bohra Caterers*. These caterers have contracts with the local masjids to prepare the meals. These caterers also take orders to cook food for private family functions like weddings, birthdays, funerals, etc.

These meals are also served in **thals**. The order of the courses in the meal is completely different. The first course is always a sweet which may be in the form of an ice-cream, mithai, soufflé or a pudding. The following course is a starter. The sweet course is called the **meethas** and the starter course is called the **kharas**.

Whatever the course may be, the dish is placed in the middle and the people sitting around the thal eat it. For example: - in case of an ice-cream, a big bowl of ice –cream is placed in the centre of the thal and everybody eats from it using spoons. The same goes for the starter course. As for the main course, plate of rice with a bowl of gravy is served in the centre of the thal; the person takes how much they want near their side of the thal and then eats it. Dishes like mithai, the starter and main course are eaten with hands. Only for dishes like ice-cream, soup and salad, spoons are used.

Depending upon the grandeur and the budget of the event, more number of **kharas** and **meethas** are served. For example in a wedding reception, up to three types of **kharas** and **meethas** are served before the main course. After the meal is over, everyone again tastes a pinch of salt and says ‘**Alhamdulillah**’ (thank you). The thal is picked up and everybody is made to wash their hands. It’s a rule that everybody cannot get up until the thal is picked up.

The ingredients used in the cooking this cuisine include meat, poultry, pulses, cereals and dairy products which are easily available everywhere and all year round. Only certain raw materials like chawli leaves have seasonal availability problems.

FESTIVALS OF THE COMMUNITY (Food associated with the festivals)

The various festivals are:-

- **New year-** On the first night of the year i.e. the first of **Muharam**, the thal is decorated with different types of dishes and the whole family eats together. 30-40 dishes are served. These include various fruits, starters, sweets, main courses, etc. relatives send food to each other as well.
- **Ashurah-** the first 10 days of Muharam are marked as a mourning period during which people set up small stalls, Sabils, in which food is distributed. Various types of sherbets, savory items, packaged food, etc is distributed. The 10th day of **Muharam is Ashurah**, the day on which the prophet’s grandson passed away. On this day, the Dawoodi Bohras fast and break their fast by eating bhajji (chawli leaves) and roti. For dinner, khichda is eaten.
- **Id-e-Milad un Nabi-** it is the birth anniversary of Prophet Mohammad. On this day, every household makes kalamra and on the night of the birthday there is a community dinner.
- **Shab-e-Barat-**this day is celebrated in the memory of those who are no longer with us. Dawoodi Bohra households make lachka and samosas on this day.
- **Ramadan-** Ramadan is the month during which the Quran came down to the earth. Thus, this month is celebrated by maintaining fasts for all 30 days. The Muslims wake up an hour and a half before sunrise and have their breakfast, **Sehri**. Especially during Ramadan, certain dishes like **sutarfeni**, and fibrous food is eaten as the person is

going to keep the fast till sunset. The fasts are broken at sunset by either tasting salt or by eating dates. Now the *iftar* is eaten. Fruits and various savory items are eaten. After the *iftar*, dinner is eaten.

- ***Id-ul-fitar***-After 30 days of Ramadan, id-u-fitar is celebrated. On this day, relatives go to each others' houses and ***sheer kurma*** is served. The whole family gets together and a lavish lunch is eaten.
- ***Bakra-id***- Meat preparations from the goat that is sacrificed are made in the house, along with that ***malida*** is prepared.
- ***Sitabi***-this is a meal where a certain number of women of around the thal (generally odd numbers-7, 9, 11,). It is done in the memory of the prophet's daughter, Fatema-tuz-zahra. The first course of this meal is always gol (jaggery) and roti with a savory preparation.
- ***Birthday***- as per the lunar calendar, every Dawoodi Bohra has a second birthday. On this day, ***thuli*** and ***chana-bateta*** are made along with ***dal-chawal-pallidu***.

This same meal is prepared on the day of someone's nikhah (wedding ceremony).

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT AND FUEL

There aren't many unique types of equipment used to cook the Dawoodi Bohra cuisine.

- ***Ghotvana***- this a special hand pounder, made of wood, which is used to pound the wheat and meat in the khichda.

However, there is some special equipment used to serve the Dawoodi Bohra cuisine:-

- ***Thal***-it is a big metal plate around which people sit and eat food. It is available in various sizes to accommodate more number of people.
- ***Tarakti***-it is the stand on which the thal is placed. The thal is elevated so as to make it convenient to eat.
- ***Chelamchi***- it is a special bowl with a spout and an underlining tray to make people wash their hands

Now-a-days, normal gas or charcoal fire is used to cook Dawoodi Bohra cuisine. Earlier in the villages, cow dung cakes used to be used to cook specific food items like gakhar.

Some Dawoodi Bohra Dishes.....

- ***Kalumra***- it is a sweet preparation made with overcooked and mashed rice mixed with sweetened curd, garnished with charoli, pomegranate and pistachios.
- ***Dudhi no halwo***- it is a mithai made with bottle gourd and mava. It is very unique and tasty as well.
- ***Kicahda***- it is a savory preparation made with wheat, pulses and meat. It is cooked on slow for a long time and then it is pounded to make it into one blended mass. It has a semi liquid consistency. It is a wholesome meal and requires no accompaniments. It is served garnished with fried onions, mint leaves, hot ghee and lime juice.
- ***Dal-chawal-pallidu***- This is a very unique Dawoodi Bohra dish made on happy occasions. A layer of rice and tur dal is served along with gravy made of besan with drumsticks and bottlegourd. The tur dal is flavored with a tempering made of curry leaves, fried onions and cumin seeds.
- ***Patvelia (non-veg)***- colocassia leaves are coated with a spicy besan batter, the leaves are then rolled and steamed. Roundels of these steamed rolls are cut and are cooked along with meat and spices.

- Dudhi nu doodh- grated bottlegourd is cooked along with sugar and milk. This is then chilled and served as a dessert.
- Malida- it is a sweet preparation. *Muthias*, made of whole wheat flour, are fried and crushed and then cooked with ghee and *jaggery*. It is served garnished with almonds, pistachios and *charoli*.
- Lagan ni seekh- well marinated meat is set in casserole, on which beaten eggs are poured. This casserole is cooked on a slow flame or in the oven. Generally, it is eaten with chapattis.
- Cutlace-this is also a deep fried meat preparation. The minced meat is marinated with ginger-green chilly paste. Portions of the meat are taken and flattened out into palm size discs. They are coated with rava and beaten eggs and deep fried.
- Kheem-naan- Minced meat is cooked with whole spices and minimal amount of water, garnished with lots of coriander. It is eaten with naan.
- Maas pulao- a dal preparation is made with masoor dal and served with boiled rice. This food is generally served when somebody passes away.
- Sarki- it is cold soup made with the water of boiled tur dal, Dalia powder and chopped spring onions. It is served with dal-chawal-pallidu.
- Kheema na samosa- samosas are made with a filling of cooked spicy kheema, spring onions, coriander leaves and mint leaves.
- Khajla-barfi- puff pastry is mixed with barfi (flavored mava) and eaten. This readily available at mithai shops.
- Dal gosht- tur dal is cooked with mutton and served either with boiled rice or gakhar.
- Gakhar- it is bread made with stiff dough of atta. Portions of the dough are rounded up and steamed and then finished off on a tava. It is similar to the batis made in Rajasthan.
- Gol roti- thick chapattis are made from a semolina & whole wheat flour dough. The chapattis are baked on a tava and then reheated in a pool of pre ghee and served with gol (jaggery).
- Bhajji- chawli ka Bhajji is cooked with garlic, onions and green chilies. It is served with chapattis. This preparation is mainly eaten during the month of Muharam.
- Chana bateta-boiled whole Bengal gram and boiled potatoes are mixed with gravy made of onions, cumin seeds, tamarind pulp, jaggery, mint leaves and coriander leaves.
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- Kari-it is a curry made with a special Kari masala, coconut milk and chicken or mutton. Kari is eaten either with boiled rice or with thin tandoori rotis.
- Sheer khuma- it is sweet kheer type preparation made with dry fruits and sweetened milk. It is prepared on eid-ul-fitar and served to the guests who come to your house on the day of eid.
- Sodarnu- it is dish made of boiled rice sugar and ghee. It is served in the beginning of the meal and in very small quantities.
- Kheema kofta ni tarkari- koftas are made by mixing minced meat peanut powder and roasted chana powder. These koftas are cooked in a gravy made with onions and peanut and chana powder.
- Thuli- it is a sweet preparation made with broken wheat and jaggery. It is usually made on birthdays.
- Lachka- it is sweet version of the kichada. Instead of meat and spices, jaggery and ghee is added.