

MUGHLAI CUISINE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

During the sixteenth and seventeenth century the splendor and opulence of the Mughal courts were at the zenith-the like of which had not been seen in over a thousand years. Between 1626 and 1712 the Mughal emperors, Turks by origin but with Mongol, Persian and Hindu blood in their veins, ruled the greater parts of the Indian subcontinent. The Mughals came from Central Asia, which was the cultural cauldron of three classical civilizations of the world, India, China and Greece. Cities like Bukhara, Samarqand and Herat were great centres of wealth and sophistication.

The Mughals, who had an overwhelming impact on literature, music, painting and architecture, also revolutionized the culinary arts. It is a well- established fact that the Mughal emperors influenced both style and substance of Indian food. They turned simple Indian cooking into an art and patronized the art with passion. Their hospitality remains legendary. Among the Mughal emperors after Babur his grandson, ***Akbar, took a personal interest in the royal kitchen. He devised rules for the conduct of the kitchen staff and appointed high-ranking officers to administer the territory.***

Cooking opens doors to many cultures and creeds. Geography also plays an important role. Central Asia, from where the Mughals came and from where the famous silk route started, has a rich tradition and an instinct culture with a history of many centuries. Their respectful relations with their neighbors like Tajiks, Kirghis, and Tatars, Turkemans, Ukrainians, Russians, Armenians and Azerbaijanians have greatly influenced the Uzbek region. ***The Mughals brought all these influences with them and gave Hindustan a rich and varied cuisine.***

The advent of the Muslim rule between the tenth and eleventh centuries resulted in a great fusion of culinary traditions. ***With Indian, Persian and Middle Eastern cuisine, culinary art reached the peak of sophistication.*** Mughals have left behind a legacy of food, which alive even now after centuries.

As mentioned earlier, the Mughals were gourmets and food was important to them, so when the Emperor moved, ***the first to move was their kitchen.*** 'It is the custom of the court', says Manucci, an Italian traveler, 'to move the royal kitchen ten o'clock at night prior to emperor's departure to ensure that royal breakfast is prepared by the time the emperor arrives next morning. It consist of 50 camels, who carried the supplies, 50 well-fed cows to provide milk, 200 coolies to carry China and other serving dishes, a number of mules to carry cookwares, also there are dainties in charge of cooks (from each only one dish is expected) sealed in Malacca velvet. A military contingent escorted the royal kitchen with water-bearers, sweepers, leather workers, and torchbearers.'

*The Ain-i-Akbari, a gazetteer of the Mughal Empire, detailing every aspect of Akbar's government written by his courtier Abul Fazl has a vivid and fascinating chapter devoted to the imperial kitchen. Abul Fazl provides a list of recipes of some of the dishes which reflect that Mughal diet heavily relied on rice, wheat, gram, barley, and some other lentils. Bernier describes how the shops were stacked with pots of ghee, rice, wheat and endless variety of other grains. The Central Asian and Persian influence is evident in the recipes listed in the Ain-i-Akbari. Abul Fazl writes that the kitchen department was headed by **Mir Baqawal (master of the kitchen),** an officer of the rank of 600 horses (in Akbar's reign). **Hakim Humam** held the post under the direct control of the vizier (prime minister). **Mir Baqawal** had under him an army of cooks, tasters, attendants, bearers, and a special*

officer for betel. The cooks came from Persia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and from different regions of India. Hakim (physician) of repute assisted in the preparation of the daily menu keeping in mind the temperament of the emperor and the nutritive value of the food served to him. Many recipes were given by the royal hakim as a remedy for indigestion, stomachache, to produce lustful feelings and increase vitality of the emperor. These recipes made with medicinal properties sharpened the intellect, made the eyes shine, gave a glow to the skin, and improved hearing.

The royal kitchen had its own budget and a separate account department. In the beginning of the year, the sub-treasurer made out an annual estimate and received the amount. Every month a statement of the expenditure was drawn and submitted to the vizier. Every day 1000 rupees was disbursed for the expense of the king's table.

Provisions for the royal kitchen were collected from various parts of the empire without regards to cost. Fruits from Kabul, ducks, water fowls and certain vegetables were obtained from Kashmir, and water from River Ganges. Sheep, goats and fowls were maintained by the kitchen and were given special diet mixed with aromatic herbs, silver, gold, pearls, saffron marbles mixed with sugar, perfumed grass to get pleasant-smelling flesh from the animals to suit the royal palate. Cows were fed with cotton seeds, sugarcane, nutmeg, coconut, cinnamon, pulses, partridge eggs and bamboo leaves besides perfumed green grass. They were never kept for less than a month. Rice came from Bharaij, Gwalior, Rajori and Nimlah, and ghee from Hissar. Food was flavored by using aromatic herbs. Perfumes were made and developed by hakim by mixing fragrant flowers and leaves, like of sweet orange, bitter orange, mango, lime, sweet basil, and many more.

The Mughal emperors were by nature meat & grain-eaters; perhaps, the climate of Central Asia and the hunting habit needed them to be strong. **Lamb was the most flavored meat, besides games and birds, under the guidance of shahi hakim (the royal physician), the expert cooks of the imperial kitchen prepared meat dishes which were light and digestible. The use of gold and silver as well as pearls and other precious stones were used in cooking, as per their medicinal values. An area was demarked close to the royal kitchen where vegetables, enjoyed by the emperor, were grown with special care. The vegetable beds were watered with rose water and musk to get a special aroma.**

The Ain-i-Akbari describes three classes of cooked dishes.

- 1) **Sufiyana:** consumed on Akbar's days of abstinence, no meat was used and the dishes were those made of rice (sheer biranj, zard biranj, khushka, and khichda), wheat (chichi, essentially the gluten of wheat isolated by washing and then seasoned), dals, spinach and a few other leafy vegetables, as well as halwas, sherbats etc.
- 2) **The second class** comprised those in which both rice and meat or wheat and meat were combined;
- 3) **The third class** was that in which meat was cooked in ghee, spices, yoghurt, and eggs to create dishes like yakhni, kebabs, dum pukht, and malghuba.

This system of food continued throughout the Mughal domain but with the passage of time, many more classes were added to them.

The Mughals did not pay much attention to the adornment of dining place; their food itself was always rich, colourful and decorated with gold and silver leaves. Some items of food

were made to look like gems and jewels, fruits were cut in the shape of flowers and leaves fruits were cut in the shape of flowers and leaves, dried fruits was glazed with Babool gum and added to pulaos, and ghee for cooking was colored and flavored. Yoghurt was set in seven colors but in one bowl, and cottage cheese was set in bamboo baskets.

Rice ground to flour then boiled and sweetened with candy sugar and rose water was eaten cold-perhaps, this is where the present-day kheer has come from. The flour of rice mingled with almonds made as small as they could and with some fleshy parts of chicken stewed with it, and then beaten into pieces, mixed with sugar and rose water, scented with amber was a popular dessert of the royal table. ***Various kinds of pickles, chutneys, fresh ginger, lemons and various greens in bags bearing a seal of Mir Baqawal, saucers of yoghurt piled up were also included in the royal menu.*** Pickles had medicinal value; it is learnt that the pickles made with fruit sharpened the appetite and hunger, ward off illness, and also helped in digestion.

Except in banquets, which were regular features of the court, the emperors ate alone in the privacy of their harem. No outsider has ever seen any emperor while dining, except once when Friar Sebastien Manriquea, a Portuguese priest, was smuggled by a eunuch inside the harem to watch Shah Jahan eating his food with Asaf Khan, Nur Jahan's brother. Food was eaten on the floor. Sheets made of leather and covered with white calico protected the expensive Persian carpets. This was called ***dastarkhwan***. It was customary for the king to set aside a portion of food for the poor before eating. The emperor began and ended his meals with prayers.

Chewing of betel (paan) finds numerous references in the Mughal culture. It was important ingredient to end the meal. The emperor was given the ***bira of betel*** after he had washed his hands. The betel leaves were rubbed with camphor and rose water. ***Eleven leaves made one bira.*** The betel nut (supari) was boiled in sandalwood juice. Lime was mixed with saffron and rose water. Chewing of betel leaf (tambul) had many qualities. It made the tongue soft, the mouth sweet-smelling and was good for the stomach.

Tobacco and huqqa, the ubiquitous symbols of princely India in later times, was known in the Mughal courts in the seventeenth century.

One of Babur's main disappointments with India was that there were no good fruits. He made efforts to cultivate sweet grapes, melons, and pineapples in Hindustan. Akbar set up a royal orchard and employed horticulturists from Central Asia and Persia. Their fondness for fruits made them take steps to grow fruits in the soil of Hindustan. To encourage farmers, horticulture was exempted from tax. They enjoyed mangoes.

Babur was not particularly fond of them but Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb found the fruit best in flavor and taste. The shops in Delhi were well stocked with nuts and dried fruits such as almonds, pistachios, walnut, raisins, prunes and apricots from Persia, Balkh, Bukhara and Samarqand. In winter, fresh grapes, black and white, brought from the same countries wrapped in cotton, pears and apples of three to four kinds, and melons were eaten, stewed or raw, and preserved in sugar and nuts. They were called ***murrabas*** and their use was advised by the shahi hakim. In summer, mangoes were plentiful and cheap. Best mangoes came from Golconda, Bengal, and Goa. Bernier also saw many mithai (sweetmeat) shops, but was not impressed with them, firstly they were not well made, and secondly they were exposed to dust and files.

Drinking water was a major item of expense in the royal household, for the Mughal emperors were fastidious about water and normally drank only from River Ganges,

which had to be brought from considerable distance. Akbar called it water of immortality. The water was brought in sealed jars. ***A special department called Aabdar-Khana was in charge of water supply to the royal household***, experienced water tasters were a regular unit of royal entourage and also accompanied emperors on hunting. For cooking, water from River Yamuna and Chenab was mixed with little water from the River Ganges or even rain water was collected and stored in the kitchen. In early part of Akbar's reign, water was cooled with saltpeter.

In the later part of the Mughal era, with the arrival of Portuguese, potatoes and chillies were added to the food list. Excellently well-dressed potatoes, or potatoes cooked in several ways were added to the royal meals in the post-Jahangir period. *Shah Jahan's table had rich spicy food besides different kinds of qormas, qaliyas, breads, kebabs, and pulaos, a lot of Indian and some European delights also made their appearance on the royal dastarkhwan.* With the passage of time, dishes like poori, Parantha, khandvi, kachori and many more savouries and sweets became part of the emperor's ***khasa***.

The most lavish table was that of Bahadur Shah Zafar. His table had every cuisine - Turkish, Persian, Afghani, and Indian – Kebabs of venison, partridge and fish, booranis, samosas, khandvi, dals, salans, and a variety of pulaos and sweetmeats. He enjoyed eating besan ki roti with rahat jani chutney, lamb qorma and dal padshah pasand.

All these details show how far the Mughal emperors had developed the art of cooking clearly to satisfy refined and gastronomical concerns. They have left behind not only the accounts of their rule in India, but also the exotic dishes and their style of cooking like dum pukht (which is now being popularized by ITC Hotels, who are also pioneer in their efforts to revive the old dishes).

The style set the standard for others to follow, so that even with the decline of the empire after 1707, rich cuisine continued to evolve at the courts of the Nizams of Hyderabad, the Nawabs of Lucknow, Murshidabad, Rampur, and among the rulers of Rajasthan and Kashmir. Today in Pakistan and India, the legacy of Mughals is reflected in the grand and luxurious food served at formal banquets.

The names of the emperors and their queens linked with dishes make an interesting part of the menu in many five-star hotels and even wayside restaurants. Poor Mughals little did they not know that they would be remembered with qormas and pulaos besides the Red Fort and Taj Mahal.

(N.B: A VERY BRIEF ACCOUNT OF HISTORICAL ASPECT OF MUGHLAI CUISINE IS REQUIRED FOR SHORT NOTES ETC. ONLY SOME SALIENT FEATURES ARE TO BE HIGHLIGHTED)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CUISINE

1. Saffron is used in generous quantities in this cuisine.
2. Rice is more commonly used staple.
3. Slow cooking process was used to ensure proper infusion of the flavours.
4. Tandoori products are a prominent feature of the cuisine.
5. The handwritten account of the royal kitchens of the Mughal emperors reveal that very few spices like cumin, coriander, ginger, pepper, cinnamon, cloves, and fennel were used in cooking. So, continuing the tradition, these are the very common ingredients used in the Mughlai cuisine even today.

6. Almonds, pistachios, walnut, dried apricots and plums, and raisins are used in plenty in the stuffings, gravies, desserts etc. These make the dishes more exotic as compared to other cuisines.
7. Herbs like mint, coriander and dill etc also find common use in this cuisine.
8. The use of sugar and saffron with lemon juice was common almost for every dish, perhaps, to create the sweet and sour effect. These also reduce the heat of the saffron which was used in large quantity. Curd is also widely used.
9. Food is traditionally cooked in almond oil, lard obtained from the melted down fatty tail of sheep, apricot oil, and oil from the seeds of grapes. It is common to colour ghee differently with saffron, spinach, and turmeric and is flavoured with rose water musk and other perfumes.
10. Water for use in the cuisine was traditionally perfumed with camphor, rose petals, sour orange leaves, sweet orange leaves and fennel leaves. Now such practices are rarely found.
11. Fish is widely used and is made odour-free by applying the paste of fresh lime leaves, cardamom, cloves, lemon juice, and salt, and was kept overnight and then cooked with great skill so as not to leave any bone behind. Similarly, games were slaughtered and treated for cooking. Traditionally, sandalwood paste was applied on them to remove unpleasant odour. The games are commonly smoked and grilled and barbecued meat adorn the table. Birds and animal of prey are commonly stuffed with rice, dried fruit and eggs to make a wholesome food. This style of cooking is given a more sophisticated touch now.

Utensils : The cooking utensils were same as that used in traditional North Indian cuisine i.e, deg, handi, pateela etc.

Some Documented Mughal Preparations

Manty	Steamed Lamb Stuffed Pastry
Karam Dulma	Lamb Mince Stuffed in cabbage and stewed
Mastava	Lamb & Vegetable Stew
Palov (Various)	Rice Preparations with meat, vegetables or nuts quite like a pulao .
Kulcha	Leavened Bread (flavored /unflavored)
Riza Kufta	Mince koftas cooked in a nut based gravy
Khoresh Fesenjan	Braised Duck with Pomegranate Glaze
Halvaye Zardak	Carrot Pudding very similar to Gajjer Halwa
Haleem Khasa	Lamb & Grain stew/porridge
Khasa Tilaai (Paheet)	Lentil Cooked with Yoghurt
Yakhni Kebab	Lamb Kebab
Maleedah	Crushed and Sweetened Griddle baked bread ,very similar to Rajasthani or Gujarati Churma
Murg-e-taaus	Chicken cooked in a yoghurt gravy with nuts
Lauzeena	Bread Pudding (similar to shahi tukra)
Boorani Badanjaan	Stuffed Aubergin In Yoghurt Gravy