

PUNJAB CUISINE

INTRODUCTION AND CULINARY HISTORY

Punjab, the land of the five rivers-Beas, Satluj, Chenab, Ravi and Jhelum, is also called the *land of milk and honey*. Perhaps it would be appropriate to call it the land of plenty!! Punjabi cooking and eating is just like the Punjabis themselves. It is simple and forthright. Punjabis are a hardworking and fun loving community by nature with food and merriment, very much a part of their lives.

Punjabi cuisine is never complicated. *Bhunao* is one of the main techniques of Punjabi cuisine specially for non-vegetarian cooking. It brings to mind images of appetizing food. Being an agricultural state the *staple food of Punjab is wheat* and to accompany hot rotis and parathas are a variety of the most exotic vegetarian and non-vegetarian delights.

The earliest references to region's food are found in the Vedas, which document the lives of the Aryans in the Punjab. Amazingly the elements mentioned over 6,000 years ago are still extant in this cuisine. This includes dairy-*dughd (milk),ghrit (ghee) and dadhi (curd),shak (leafy green vegetables) and a variety of grain*. Even today, the staple in the Punjab is grains and vegetables in their basic form.

Ayurvedic texts refer to *Vatika* - a dumpling of sundried, spice specked delicacy made with lentil paste called *vadi*. The art of making *vadi* reached its acme in Amritsar with the arrival of the merchants of *Marwar*, who were invited by Ram Das, the fourth Guru of the Sikhs, to streamline the trade in the sacred city. There is also reference to *vataka or vadha* made of soaked coarsely ground and fermented mash (husked urad) daal.

The unhusked mash is the mother of all lentils. Rajmah derives from the word raj mash or the regal mash. Other pulses mentioned are *chanak* (channa dal) and *alisandaga* (identified as kabuli or large channa) that is stated to have reached India with Alexander the Great's troops who came to India via Afghanistan.

Punjab-this side of the border or that-is situated at the crossroads of the Silk Route. This allowed the Punjabis-Sikh, Hindu and Muslim-to imbibe diverse culinary influences. The proximity with Persia, Afghanistan and Central Asia gave them a taste for fresh and dried fruits and exotic nuts.

Punjabi cuisine has always been strongly influenced by Mughal invaders who brought with them the tradition of the great Tandoor and now Punjabi tandoori cooking is celebrated as one of the most popular cuisines throughout the world.

REGIONAL COOKERY IN PUNJAB

- **Peshawar**-The most North Western of districts in British India is a Pathan country and the fare is akin to the food eaten in Afghanistan. The market in Peshawar handled, besides large volumes of cambric, silks and indigo, spices that came from Hyderabad(Deccan),saffron from Kashmir, sugar, salt, tea and asafetida from Delhi. The exports were raisins and dry fruits.
- **Rawalpindi**-South of Hazara and east of Jhelum, separated from Kashmir with Attock to its west, the district of Rawalpindi is covered with groves of oak, olive and chestnut. The flora and fauna is the same as in the other parts of the lower Himalayas. This area has imbibed culinary influences from Kashmir, North West frontier and the plains and the plains irrigated by the Indus.
- **Baluchistan**- Bounded on South by Arabian sea and extending in the North to Afghanistan and NWFP, Baluchistan touches Persia in the west, and Sindh and Punjab in the East. Food in the region has been basic and robust. Breads are made with wheat and jowar (barley). Cheese of different kinds are an integral part of the diet, and, among the vegetables onion, garlic and fresh asafetida stalks are used. Rice and fish are the staple diet along the coast. Among the birds chakor and grouse are relished.
- **Amritsar**- Shaped like an oblong between the Ravi and Beas rivers, the districts northeast of Gurdaspur and south-west of Lahore. The forests of dhaak, mango and jamun abounded in the district until recent times urbanization decimated most of them. The chief

crops are wheat, gram, barley, maize, rice, cotton, pulses and sugarcane. The region is famous for its buffaloes and its milk product. Fish is also used very commonly here.

EQUIPMENTS USED IN PUNJAB CUISINE

- **Madhani:** It is a wooden churner fixed to a brass pot. It is used for churning out butter from cream.
- **Chakla belan:** Chakla is a small marble or wooden platform and belan is the rolling pin. These are usually made up of wood. They are used for rolling the dough to make various Indian breads such as chapattis and puris.
- **Kadhahi:** it is a deep, concave utensil made up of brass, iron or aluminium and is used for deep fat frying and also general cooking.
- **Kadoo kas (grater):** This equipment has sharp grooves of different sizes meant for grating.
- **Channani (sieve):** It is used to sieve or sift flour and commodities of similar nature. The channani can have removable inserts that have varied sizes of holes for coarse or fine sieving.
- **Masala dani:** It literally translates to 'spice box'. It contains the commonly used dry spices, both whole and powdered.
- **Pauni:** A perforated spoon used for frying food commodities.
- **Karchi (ladle):** It is actually a big round spoon for stirring dal or mixing food or even serving it.
- **Tawa:** This flat base equipment is usually made of cast iron is used for making Indian breads such as roti and parathas. They are available in various sizes, depending upon the uses.
- **Patiala:** It is generally made up of brass and comes with a lid. It is used when something has to be sauted, boiled or simmered. It is also used for making gravies and cooking in bulk. These are also available in various sizes.
- **Tandoor:** It is a clay oven chamber, which is lit with live charcoal. It is used for baking various Indian breads, kebabs (boti, white meat, fish, prawn etc) and other items.
- **Bhatti:** It is used for grilling kebabs. It is an open fire grill, where coal is the only medium of fire.
- **Khoncha:** It is a flat metal spoon used for stir frying or sautéing the ingredients.
- **Chimta:** These are meant for holding the hot objects e.g. the roti on the open fire or the griddle, turning items in hot oil while deep fat frying.
- **Hamam dista (mortar and pestle):** It is a pair of tools used to crush, grind, and mix solid substances or masalas. It is usually made of iron but can also be made of marble stone, wood, bamboo, iron, steel, brass and basalt.
- **Dori danda:** It is a stoneware pot with a log of wood, used for pounding chutneys and dry spices. The pestle could be either of wood or stone.

Miscellaneous equipments include: **Chajji** is a kind of winnowing instrument. **Ukhli** is a mortar used. **Charkha** is a spinning wheel. **Dauri and kundi** are kinds of stone mortars. **Gothna and danda** are wooden pestles. **Chaati** is a large earthen vessel. **Takri** is a scale. **Loh** is a large pan used for cooking breads.

CUISINE CHARACTERISTICS

- Most Punjabi menus are made according to the season. The universal favourite is *chole-bathure* which is a round-the-year item and is available at every wayside dhaba anywhere in Northern India.
- *Wholewheat in different forms* is the staple of this area. Rice is rarely cooked plain or steamed and is always made with a flavoring of cumin or fried onions, which is served with rajma (kidney beans) or kadhi (curd curry). In winter, rice is cooked with jaggery - *gurwala chawal* or with green peas - *matarwale chawal* or as a delicacy called *Rao ki kheer*, which is rice cooked on a slow fire for hours together with sugar cane juice. Even *bajra* is predominantly used in some parts of the state.
- Use of *dollops of ghee* and/or *refined oil* is commonly used as a cooking media.

- The pride of the Punjabi winter cuisine is *sarson-ka-saag* (mustard leaves) served with blobs of white butter accompanied by *makke-di-roti* and *lassi* (churned yogurt).
- All lentils, especially black gram and yellow gram, are a part of Punjabi cuisine. Rajma or Chana are also very popularly used.
- The main masala in a Punjabi dish consists of onion, garlic, ginger and a lot of tomatoes fried in pure ghee.
- Some typical ingredients used in the cuisine include black carrot (*kanji*), mango powder (*Aamchoor powder*), dried fenugreek leaves (*Kasoori methi*) and Pomegranate seeds (*Anardana*).
- Punjabi cuisine is characterized by a profusion of dairy products in the form of *malai* (cream), *paneer* (cottage cheese), *curd*, *buttermilk* and *butter*.
- Though *chicken* is a favorite with non-vegetarians, *fish* is also considered a delicacy, especially in the Amritsar region.
- One thing that makes Punjabi cuisine so special is the *tandoor*. In rural Punjab, the community tandoor, dug in the ground, is a meeting place, just like the village well, for the women folk, who bring the kneaded atta (dough) and sometimes marinated meats to have them cooked.
- Tall glasses of lassi, made of yogurt, tempered with either salt or sugar, are a popular cooling drink of Punjabi origin but it is quite popular all over the country.
- Then there is also *paneer* - a must in the vegetarian Punjabi menu. Several delectable items are made out of this rather bland derivative of milk. Creations like the Kadai Paneer and Makhani Paneer are basically Punjabi but are well loved all over the country.
- *Phirni*, a sweet dish made of milk, rice flour and sugar and chilled in earthenware bowls is a typical Punjabi dessert. Punjabi sweet dishes like gulab jamuns and burfi have a strong percentage of khoya again made from milk.
- Punjab's other grand contribution is the *dhaba* - the roadside eatery that has become a prominent feature on the national and state highways. Earlier frequented only by truck drivers, today it is in vogue to eat at a dhaba- urban or roadside.
- One of the salient features of Punjabi food is the diverse range of dishes that can suit any palate. The food could range from spicy to sour, and sweet to tangy.

FESTIVAL FOODS OF PUNJAB

LOHRI

In Punjab, *wheat* is the *main winter crop*, which is sown in October and harvested in March or April. In January, the fields come up with the promise of a *golden harvest*, and farmers celebrate Lohri during this rest period before the cutting and gathering of crops. For Punjabis, this is more than just a festival, it is also an example of a way of life. Lohri is a festival of *zeal and verve and marks the culmination* of the chilly winter. In true spirit of the Punjabi culture, men and women perform Bhangra and Giddha, popular Punjabi folk dances, around a *bonfire*. Enthusiastic children go from house to house singing songs and people oblige them generously by giving them money and eatables as offering for the festival.

Logs of wood are piled together for a bonfire, and friends and relatives gather around it. They go around the fire three times, giving offerings of *popcorns*, *peanuts*, *rayveri* and *sweets*. Then, to the beat of the dhol (traditional Indian drum), people dance around the fire. Prasad of til, peanuts, rayveri, puffed rice, popcorn, *gajak* and sweets are distributed. This symbolizes a prayer to Agni for abundant crops and prosperity.

Lohri is also an auspicious occasion to celebrate a newly born baby's or a new bride's arrival in the family. The day ends with a traditional feast of sarson da saag and makki di roti and a dessert of rau di kheer (a dessert made of sugarcane juice and rice). The purpose of the Lohri harvest ceremony is to thank the God for his care and protection. During this festival the people prepare large quantities of food and drink, and make merry throughout the day and night. Therefore everyone looked forward to this day.

BAISAKHI

Baisakhi, celebrated with joyous music and dancing, is New Year's Day in Punjab. It falls on April 13, though once in 36 years it occurs on 14th April. It was on this day that the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, founded the *Khalsa* (the Sikh brotherhood) in 1699. The Sikhs, therefore, celebrate this festival as a collective birthday. A sweet dish called *Anaarse* is prepared made using fermented batter (rice or wheat) and shaped into a cup-shape.

BASANT PANCHAMI

It is a festival that marks the onset of spring. It is a brightly colored festival, with yellow as a symbolic color of harvest. This festival has a range of Punjabi foods like the main course ones such as biryani, but the lighter and excitable ones like *jalaibeas* and *pakorras* are also common. A number of sweet drinks are quite common as well at this time of the year. These are refreshing and symbolize the joy during the season.

Aside from the festivals like *basant*, Punjabi food traditions include the all-important heavy main courses at weddings. These might include heavy rice dishes and curries as well. These are accompanied with salads and other side dishes as well.

GURU PURAB

The Sikh festivals are celebrated as *Guru purabs*. They either mark the birth anniversary or the martyrdom of any Sikh guru. The devotees attend *langar* or the common meals where everyone eats the same food irrespective of caste, class, or creed. Devotees offer their services for cooking food, cleaning the *Gurdwara* or carrying out other chores. This is called the *Kar Seva*. The food is served with the spirit of *seva* (service) and *bhakti* (devotion). On *Guru Arjan Dev's* martyrdom day, sweetened milk is offered to passers-by.

PUNJABI EATING STYLE:

Winter, in Punjab, brings in the season of the famous *makki ki roti* (maize flour bread) and *sarson ka saag* (mustard leaf gravy). No meal is complete without a serving of *lassi* (sweet or salted drink made with curd) or fresh curd and white butter which is consumed in large quantities.

Connoisseurs of the cuisine say that the gravy component of Punjabi cuisine came from the *Mughals*. The most popular example is the *murg makhani*. It served the state well to combine this influence in its cooking since it had a lot of pure ghee and butter. *Murg makhani* also provided a balance to *tandoori chicken*, which was dry because it was charcoal cooked. *Nans* and *parathas*, rotis made of maize flour are typical Punjabi breads. Of course, over the years the *roti* has been modified to add more variety, so there is the *rumali roti*, the *naan* and the *laccha parathas*, all cooked in the *tandoor*.

LANGAR – A SPECIAL NOTE

History

The institution of the Sikh *Langar* or free kitchen was started by the first Sikh Guru, *Guru Nanak*. It was designed to uphold the principle of equality between all people regardless of religion, caste, colour, creed, age, gender or social status, a revolutionary concept in the caste-ordered society of 16th century India where Sikhism began. In addition to the ideals of equality, the tradition of *Langar* expresses the ethics of sharing, community, inclusiveness and oneness of all humankind.

Origin Of Word 'Langar'

Guru ka Langar (lit. 'Gurus' communal dining-hall) is a community kitchen run in the name of the *Guru*. Often referred to as the *Guru's Kitchen*, it is usually a small room attached to a *gurdwara*, but at larger *gurdwaras*, such as the *Harmandir Sahib*, it takes on the look of a military kitchen with tasks arranged so that teams of *sewadars* prepare tons of food (all meals are vegetarian) for thousands of the *Gurus'* guests daily. *Langar*, is said to be a Persian word that translates as 'an almshouse', 'an asylum for the poor and the destitute', 'a public kitchen once kept by a great man for his followers and dependants, holy persons and the needy.' Some scholars

trace the word langar to Sanskrit *analarh* (cooking room). In Persian, the specific term langar has been in use in an identical sense. In addition to the word itself, the institution of langar is also traceable in the Persian tradition. Langars were a common feature of the Sufi centres in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Even today some dargahs, or shrines commemorating Sufi saints, run langars, like Khwaja Mu'in ud-Din Chishti's at Ajmer.

Rules concerning the tradition of Langar

1. Simple vegetarian meals
2. It is prepared by devotees who recite Gurbani while preparing the langar
3. It is served after performing Ardas
4. The food distributed in Pangat without any prejudice or discrimination
5. All food must be fresh, clean and hygienically prepared

Amar Das the third guru formalized the institution of langar, the guru's free kitchen, uniting the Sikhs by establishing two key concepts:

- *Pangat* – One family compiled of all of humanity, regardless of caste, color, or creed, sitting together cross legged in lines, forming rows without discrimination or consideration of rank or position.
- *Sangat* – The ennobling influence of people, who aspire to truthful living, and congregate with like-minded company for the purpose of uttering the name of one God in the presence of the Guru Granth.

When preparing food for the Langar, the mouth and nose will be covered by a piece of cloth known as a "*parna*". Also during the preparation due regard is made to purity, hygiene and cleanliness, the *sevadars* (*selfless workers*) will normally utter Gurbani and refrain from speaking if possible.

When the Langar is ready, a small portion of each of the dishes is placed in a plate or bowls and placed in front of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and a prayer called the Ardas is performed. The *Ardas* is a *petition to God*; a prayer to thank the Creators for all His gifts and blessings. A steel kirpan is passed through each item of food, after the "*Guru-prashad*" has been blessed. When serving the Langar, the servers must observe strict rules of cleanliness and hygiene. Servers should not touch the serving utensils to the plates of those they serve. When serving foods by hand, such as chapatis or fruit, the servers' hands should not touch the hand or plate of those they are serving. Those serving should wait until all others have been completely served before they sit down to eat themselves. It is advisable not to leave any leftovers.

POPULAR ITEMS IN PUNJAB

- **RAJMA:** These are red kidney beans cooked with ginger, garlic, and tomatoes and flavoured with turmeric powder and red chilli powder. They are normally paired with the jeera pulow and commonly eaten with desi ghee poured on top.
- **SARSON KI DAAG:** Fresh mustard leaves are combined with amaranth leaves and braised along with ginger, garlic, onions and tomatoes until they become creamy. This dish is garnished with white butter and eaten with *makki ki roti*.
- **PUNJ RATANI DAL:** It is prepared by cooking five dals with onion and tomatoes, symbolic to the five rivers of Punjab. The most commonly used lentils are chana, split urad, green moong, kidney beans and masoor dal.
- **MAA KI DAL:** Broken black lentils are combined with Bengal gram and simmered with onions and tomatoes on a low flame, until it is creamy. It is relished with the wholewheat chapattis.
- **DAL MAKHANI:** Black lentils are simmered overnight with tomatoes (finely chopped or puree) and butter on slow simmering charcoals. It is finished with cream and kasoori methi and served with a dollop of butter.
- **AMRITSARI KULCHA:** Wholewheat doughs stuffed with fillings ranging from paneer to cauliflower, potatoes, or a mixture of all of the above. It is cooked in the tandoor and served with dollops of butter.
- **PINDI CHOLEY:** This dish comes from Rawalpindi, where the chickpeas are boiled with black tea to give it its traditional black colour. These cooked chick peas are then cooked with onions, tomatoes and spices. These are commonly served with bhatura for breakfast or even as snacks.
- **BAIGAN DA BHARTA:** Large egg plants are char grilled in tandoor until soft and are then peeled. This soft flesh is mixed with little tomato and onion gravy flavoured with spices and chopped coriander leaves.
- **TANDOORI CHICKEN:** Whole chicken is de – skinned and marinated overnight with curd, red chilli powder and spices. Normally the bird weighs around 800gm to 900gm after dressing. It is then skewered and cooked in the tandoor. Its reddish colour with typical flavour of the charcoal roast makes it a gourmet’s delight.
- **MURGH BUTTER MASALA:** Tandoor cooked chicken is cooked in creamy tomato gravy (in base of butter) along with ginger garlic paste, red chilli powder and flavoured with kasoori methi. The gravy of tomatoes is also known as makhni gravy. This gravy add moisture to the tandoori chicken which is otherwise eaten dry.
- **FISH AMRITSARI:** The cubes of fish are first marinated in salt, red chilli powder and lemon juice. A thick batter is prepared with besan, ajwain, red chilli powder and salt. The fish is coated in this batter and the deep fat fried. It is served with aamchoor powder sprinkled on top and with lemon wedges.
- **PHIRNEE:** It is a traditional dessert served normally during the summer months. Soaked rice is ground into a paste and then added to boiling sweet milk. This is cooked until thickened and poured into terracotta pots. The extra moisture from the pudding is soaked by the earthenware pot and thus the pudding sets soft yet firm. It is then garnished with slivers of pistachio and strands of saffron.