

STUDENT PROJECT

Kruti Parekh, "India: A Culinary Experience"

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India: A Culinary Perspective

It is often said that food has the ability to transport the soul to any location at any time. A trip to Italy can come in the form of chicken marsala and tiramisu, a vacation to Tokyo by way of miso soup and sashimi. Similarly, many a diner makes a short visit to Bombay over tandoori chicken and biryani. But restaurateurs know that the experience of cuisine comes from much more than the food. For many, the Indian restaurant in America (see fig. 1) portrays a romanticized version of India, a country renowned for its complex culture. Rather than represent the modern intricacies of the Asian subcontinent, Indian restaurants in



Fig. 1. Indian Restaurant, New York City.

America use spices as a foundation for an atmosphere of ancient exotic luxury. The created ambience is a diluted portrait of the Indian landscape which, surprisingly, is to the taste of Indian and non-Indian diners alike.

Many restaurants start with a majestic color palate consisting of jewel tones and antique gold, a sharp contrast from the modern minimalist steel hues of office life. Immediately, the restaurant creates a sense of escape with the shades and textures of palatial India. Bronze religious statues of many armed gods and goddesses serve as elegant showpieces atop dark cherrywood bars heavily stocked with Bombay Sapphire. Wooden or antique metal elephants stand tall throughout the dining area to heighten the sense of an exotic, mystic India. Walls display folk art tapestries featuring the gaiety of Indian villagers, heavily gilded mirrors, or paintings of ancient figures from cultural or religious texts. All elements are highly nostalgic of a time far before the American ethnic restaurant. In a sense, the colors and shapes inside the Indian restaurant are the colors and shapes of what the American diner wants to think India looks like: colorful saris, intriguing mysticism, beautiful temples, the Taj Mahal.

The cuisine in an American Indian restaurant also complements the Western ideal of India. Serving traditional curries with a much higher ratio of meat, turning tropical native fruits into cocktails, and using an object of millions' worship as a centerpiece are just a few ways that Indian food becomes an Indian-American restaurant. Ironically, many will choose to eat at an Indian restaurant thinking themselves cultured, while the essence of India fades away around them. Behind the American notion of trendy Eastern themes, authentic Indian food, in fact, reflects the values of the culture. The cuisine demonstrates modesty by using meat sparingly, decency by abstaining from alcohol, and piety by respecting religion. All of this is dissolved to create the experience of the restaurant pleasurable for the American diner. In a way, the adaptations made for American tastes are colonialism all over again—a complex history and culture reduced to cocktails and statues. And yet, even the most culturally sensitive must applaud Indian restaurants for going beyond food and creating an ambience that generates awareness and interest in the Indian culture, albeit a distilled one.

Curiously, Indian patrons make up a significant number of satisfied diners at Indian restaurants. The forged exotic is the same but the effect is different on these diners. For Indian parents there is a sense of nostalgia mingled with pride because this is also the India they desire to remember. For them, this is a representation of their beloved culture, where the last remnants of glorious royalty stand tall, where a whole city woke to the fragrance of incense from morning worship, where the monsoon rain brought luscious mangos. The décor of the restaurant embodies the culture that first generation immigrants cling to. Dinner menus alone demonstrate this with their heavy emphasis on vegetarianism, regionalism and history. Dishes such as lamb curry are described according to spices, but also with a note of 16th century Mogul influence. Under the "South Indian" portion of the menu, there is a deliberate shift from Arabic-named entrées to more Sanskritic sounding ones, for example the word "korma" instead of "kabob." To the Indian diner, the vegetarian sections of the menu are a reminder of Gandhi's political stance and Vedic teachings of "ahimsa" (nonviolence). The Mogul empire, Sanskrit tradition, Gandhi's ethics, and Vedic knowledge are roots that run deep in the Indian cultural landscape, all modestly illustrated on a dinner menu. There on the glossy laminated pages laden with dinner selections exists a microcosm of language, culture, and history.

The dynamics of the restaurant's diners and employees in restaurants add an entirely new dimension to the material. The owner, as well as the chefs and the head of the wait staff, will almost always be Indian. For Indian diners the restaurant's employees are a reflection of the work ethic in modern times, and for non-Indian diners they are a reassurance of authenticity. The Indian diners in the restaurant also validate the authenticity of the restaurant, a notion spawned from "you know a Chinese restaurant is good when you see Chinese people there." An Indian restaurant's patrons range from parents providing a cultural experience for their American born children to trendy young professionals claiming their own cultural sophistication. Conversely, for the Indian customer the non-Indians enjoying the food and atmosphere of the restaurant reassure them of cultural acceptance of their proud heritage.

Indian restaurants in America are ultimately a blend of polar opposites. The food and décor of the restaurant portray a blend of Eastern and Western cultures, business and art, the old and new, progressive and nostalgic. Any element of design, food, or atmosphere can elicit a different reaction from any given diner. People come to Indian restaurants with intentions as varied as the cuisine, whether it be for a comforting piece of home, a new experience, an attempt at vegetarianism, an escape from the cubicle, or just good food.