

Paean to Punjab: Beyond the Dhaba*

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There's a myth that needs to be smashed. What we know as Punjabi cuisine is not Punjabi; it's a mishmash of food that was evolved by intrepid refugees once they settled down in alien cities such as Delhi after India's partition. For true Punjabi food, you need to make a trip to Amritsar. Once you have had Amritsar's famous *saag* and fish, you'll know what I am talking about.

I got addicted to Amritsari food at an old Punjabi friend's house. I have since then traveled across Punjab and eaten all kinds of delightful food in the state. But I think nowhere is food more celebrated than in Amritsar. If Ludhiana is the hosiery capital and Patiala all about king-sized pegs, Amritsar is undoubtedly the food hub of the state. The city's *dhabas* are so well-known outside Punjab that there are people who travel all the way to Amritsar just for a meal. And, certainly, the *lassis* of Giani are the best in the world.

This is a *dhaba* that has devoted its life to *lassi*-making. For this, Giani's men take layers of fresh *malai* and place them on a huge slab of ice. Once the layers are thick enough, they get into action. They grind a *barfi* or a *peda* in the utensil in which the *lassi* is going to be readied. Once this is done, they add a huge dollop of yoghurt and whisk it with water and sugar. Then they pour this divine beverage into a glass, and top it with a thick wedge of *malai*. There are several other *dhabas* that gourmets swear by. The best *dal* you can ever get is to found at Kesar Ka Dhaba, near the Golden Temple. Then there is the Bhrawna (brothers in pure Punjabi) *dhaba*, famous for its *parathas*.

Amritsar is known for its *dhabas* because of the special dishes they offer. After Bengal, this is the first stop for fish lovers. The Amritsari fish is a wonderful dish that's as tasty as it is easy to make. All you have to do is marinate some fish fillets cut into small pieces in yoghurt, malt vinegar, ginger-garlic paste, some lemon juice, a pinch of *ajwain*, red chillies and salt. Then you take the fish, dip it in a beaten egg, roll it in a *besan* batter and fry it.

My faith in Punjab got an enthusiastic boost when I had some delicious Amritsari fish at the Jaypee Vasant Continental in Delhi the other day. Four master chefs had come from Amritsar to prepare some of the region's food, and the Amritsari fish was truly good – juicy and crisp, with the flavour of *ajwain* giving its own piquant taste to the fish.

I also had something called the *machchi pudina tikka*, which was an awesome dish. It consisted of cubes of sole, marinated in turmeric, lemon juice and pomegranate seeds, then doused in a *chutney* made out of mint, coriander leaves and green chillies, and grilled.

The various ways of cooking fish in Punjab come as a bit of a surprise, for Punjab is mostly known for its meaningful relationship with the *kukkar*, or the chicken. I have had a few interesting chicken dishes from Punjab, and the Amritsari chefs didn't disappoint me either. The *tandoori* chicken was there, as was chicken in a gravy.

But what gets my goat is the fact that we seldom associate Punjabi cuisine with lamb or mutton. Amritsar, actually, boasts of a whole host of mutton dishes that would make meat lovers drool. I had some *rahra* meat – which is a dish that you don't find too easily these days because it's a time-consuming affair. This is mutton-on-the-bone cooked in a gravy of minced meat, onions and tomatoes. And then there is the delicious *chhap* – which is like a huge mutton cutlet coated with minced meat and swallow fried.

What I loved the most at Jaypee was the Amritsari brain *masala*. It was, if you would pardon the poor pun, mindboggling. Simply prepared – cooked on a *tawa* with onions, tomatoes, ginger and green chillies – it was one of the best brain curries I've had in a long, long time.

I was reminded of an Amritsari *jeera gosht* that I once cooked: meat marinated in

ginger-garlic, cumin and black pepper – and cooked over a slow heat. It was one of the simplest recipes that I have ever followed, but the outcome surpassed my expectations.

That is what's wonderful about Amritsari food. Most dishes, I find, are simply cooked. Like the no-nonsense people of the region, the food is basic – but great. A few ingredients – tomatoes, onions and ginger or garlic – and a few spices can liven up any dish.

And then, of course, there are some dishes that are peculiar to the region. Even the *Kulchas* of Amritsar are special. There is something called the *bheega kulcha* which is a *kulcha* that has been soaked in the thick gravy of *chholey*, and then fished out, cut into pieces and served. You can always have this with *chholey*, which is usually nicely-spiced and somewhat red in colour. Or you can have it with *sarson ka saag*, so fresh that it seems the leaves have just been plucked from the fields outside Amritsar, with a dollop of white butter, made from fresh milk.

The ingredients are fresh, the milk is frothy, the yoghurt is creamy – no wonder Amritsari food is special. As Amritsar M.P. Navjot Singh Siddhu would say (though I wish he wouldn't), it's all *balley balley*.

