

Spotlight

BY MEHER MARFATIA



BACK from a family weekend in beautiful, rain-swept Goa has got me thinking of the relationship between Goan cooks and Parsi homes.

They've been a fine tradition – some of us blessed with them, those without getting a taste elsewhere. A fistful of families yet enjoy a few of these good men in their employ. Close your eyes at such a table, tucking into tart vinegar-seeped vindaloo blended perfectly, by a Jacob or Joachim, you'd swear you were at Britto's on Baga beach.

Why did these sons of Goan soil leave their native Varca and Vagator to stir up a culinary storm in our kitchens? Avi Dastoor, still privileged with loyal Goan household help, offers a cultural insight. First working as cooks on ships, their native Portuguese stock readily soaked in exposure to European food. After whipping up banquets aboard liners, they docked in Bombay at Parsi residences.

Cementing the bond are common factors like language and palate preferences. The two communities speak English easily, are partial to spicy curries, Continental soups and

GOAN GOAN GONE...

Though getting to be an extinct bunch of grand old men, Goan cooks jell well in Parsi homes

choux pastry alike, and are both meat-mad.

Parsis brazenly dismiss the tastiest vegetarian fare as "pelu ghaas-phus" (that grassy nonsense). Hardcore prawn and pork lovers themselves, the Mistris know this well.

Take my own kitchen. Aghast at his bastion being assailed by a dreaded guest he could serve neither fish nor fowl to, our unnerved Michael would break into beads of sweat and mutter to my mother-in-law: "Just order from Cream Centre, I'll heat it up nicely for them."

But they were family. At 72, Pesi Wadia recollects generations of Goan chefs, butlers and nannies. Those venerable men prepared Parsi



favourites better than the most culinary-savvy lady of the house. "No one makes as superb a dhansakh daal. Cooks like Francis simmered their meals on a coal sigdi. That curry chaaval had far more aroma and flavour than any gas-cooked version. As children we ended up eating their food and ours."

As children we also absorbed their faith. It was routine to see them march to Mahim for mid-week Novenas. We watched them kneel nightly before the holy Cross in their room to

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pray. Sundays saw them dressed best to attend mass at the corner church.

Singer Gary Lawyer has warm memories of the Bandra

Fair each September where his portly, gentle cook Salu manned a wax candles stall. "It was never only about food. He turned home into a comfort zone like no other. After school, we'd be regaled by wonderful stories about Goa. It was a lovely, secure feeling to grow up with him around."

That this is a tribute to a dedicated but dying breed is unpleasant reality. Their children come, bearing Easter baskets and Christmas sweets, though they are all professionally way beyond kitchen clatter now. Some work as teachers, others priests or nuns. Wadia's cook's son became the Kuwait sheikh's bodyguard.

With them, their social clubs, called coors, are doing the disappearing act too. Clustered around Dhobi Talao, these boarding-houses for newcomers to the city or retirees, are homes away from homes. Those without nearest and dearest to reunite with in Goa stayed on. Welcome with the adopted families they lovingly fed for years.

There is a part of some Parsi homes that is forever Goa.