

REGIONAL CUISINE

Begum *pasand*



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THE royal cuisine of the former princely state of Bhopal is as mysterious and, in a way, earthy as the four burqa-clad Begums who ruled the fiefdom at the heart of India, from 1819 to 1926. It has lurked in the shadows much like the little-known Begums themselves, who governed from behind the purdah (all but one).

The feisty women rulers, who led armies into battle, hunted, played polo and even had male dancers perform for entertainment on star-lit evenings, governed with aplomb. Yet despite their seemingly “manly” pursuits, they found time to streamline their administration, work for the

upliftment of women and even metaphorically donned aprons and ruled over their royal kitchens. “They were basically simple women; brilliant administrators who also gave Bhopal its cuisine,” said the elegant Sonia Rashid, a former royal, whose husband Nadir and his brother, the late Yawar Rashid, converted the heritage Jehan Numa Palace into a hotel and thus revived a forgotten magical world for their guests. They are the grandsons of General Obaidullah Khan (builder of the **Jehan Numa Palace** and the second son of Nawab Sultan Jehan Begum, the last queen. The General used the palace as his office.) His grandsons figured that a palace hotel would be the

best way for them to share with the world their hitherto jealously guarded culinary legacy; much of it contained in hand-written recipes which the former royals are now trying to decode.

The Begums, it seems, preferred their cuisine hearty and robust, bursting with flavour but not necessarily finely nuanced. They liked to hunt in the lush game-rich jungles of Madhya Pradesh and, post a shoot, the meat would be immediately chopped and slow-cooked on wood fires and enhanced with garlic, whole chillies and salt, revealed Nadir Rashid, who is the chairman of the group. And so was born the dish, *Jungle Maas*, redolent even today with wild jungle scents. In the velvety dark and over roaring fires, dishes with a distinct *shikari* influence were birthed — *Filfora*, coarse *keema* cooked with whole spices and similarly, *kaleji* or liver. Excess meat from the hunt would be boiled with salt and garlic and then dried and stored for future consumption.

The female rulers did not have harems like their male counterparts elsewhere; nor concubines who sought to compete with each other to win royal favour with lip-smacking fare concocted in multiple kitchens. The Begums' chefs, on the other hand, had to create palate-pleasing fare only for the Begum and her one solitary nawab, said Sikander Malik, a local historian, which perhaps contributed to the rustic simplicity of the cuisine.

While the Begums were not over-the-top, pleasure-seeking hedonists like the maharajas and nawabs elsewhere in the country, they did enjoy a few trappings of royalty — building lavish palaces, handsome mosques and were known for outré practices like leaving behind gold and silver threads for birds to build their nests. One of them even commissioned a Taj Mahal which took 13 years to build the completion of which was heralded with a three-year celebration.

However, the ancient origins of royal Bhopali food were rustic: it was rooted in the tribal fare that bubbled in the cooking pots of the region. It was only after the arrival of the founder of the dynasty, the swashbuckling Afghan soldier Dost Mohammad, who located his capital on the site of



the 11th century city of Bhojpal, that the luxury element and the spice-scented cuisine of Bhopal evolved. The infusion of Afghani and Mughal influences transformed the cuisine into what it is today, revealed Faiz Rashid, nephew of Nadir Rashid and a director of the group. The cuisine is largely meat-based though there are vegetarian options like leafy greens and other vegetables cooked in a basic spice mix of garlic, ginger, salt and broken whole chillies.

Over time, the cuisine grew more elaborate, but retained its robust gut-stuffing character. The royal kitchen shielded secrets like the *Bhopali Rizzala* which was cooked with game meat in the days of yore, but more likely chicken today, simmered with chillies, coriander and mint which give it its distinct green hue. Or exotica like the *Besani Machli* (fish fried with gram flour); grape leaf fritters, the delectable *Gosht ka Halwa*, minced



meat pie or Egg *halwa* and even *Attar Paan*, a perfumed mouth freshener.

The Begums had their feminine foibles and Nawab Sultan Jehan Begum decreed that festivities had to be colour-coded. During the *Jashn-e-Hariyali*, the colour green ruled, so food, apparel and the décor had to be mantled in the given hue. Hence larger fistfuls of coriander and mint had to be added to the *rizzalas*. During the *Jashn-e-Gulab*, pink dominated the colour scheme and a rose petal would be added to the *kheer*.

Today, the chefs of the Jehan Numa Group of Hotels visit the Kothi, the official residence of the former royals, to hone their culinary skills, conjuring delights like *Frontier Chapli Kebab*, Peshawari style ground lamb patties; *Khada Masala ka Gosht*, a mutton dish fragrant with a variety of whole spices, including star anise; *Chicken Korma*, poultry in a sizzling rich gravy and the lightly flavoured and Iran-nuanced *Bhopali biryani*, where each grain of rice is perfectly cooked; the *Nargisi Kofta*, stuffed with *kachumbar* and the delicately

flavoured *Bater (quail) Mussallam*. The chefs pore over hand-written recipes from the time of the Begums to re-create the flavours that once wafted out of the royal kitchens in clouds of fragrance while a miscellany of cooks conjured gastronomic magic for the royals for generations.

We relished some of the fare prepared faithfully according to the *kothi* recipes, steeped in the history and terroir of the land, as the French would say of their wines. We dined at the Jehan Numa Palace's iconic terrace restaurant Under the Mango Tree at candle-lit tables and under a star-veined sky. At the Jehan Numa Retreat, in the outskirts of Bhopal and a gateway to the wild, the open-sided Under the Jamun Tree restaurant, fringed by fuzzy purple fountain grass, served royal Bhopali cuisine with flair... the ambience enhanced by glowing paraffin lamps suspended from the branches of the *jamun* tree.

Enveloped in nostalgia for an innocent world, the food had a cultural resonance; it channelled 18th century royal Bhopal via our taste buds.

