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Riddhi Shah, Hindustan Times
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In Washington DC, 15 diners, amongst them a World Bank professional, a Congressman and a partner at a law firm, spend an evening eating traditional Gujarati Jain food.

In Atlanta, Georgia, a group of 12 foodies gather to eat little known South Indian and Maharashtrian delicacies.

At a North London garden, diners feast on home-cooked Punjabi food, sampling generations-old recipes of murgh masala and kumbh ki sabzi.

Say hello to the phenomenon of the Indian supper club — the new deluge of under-the-radar dining events specialising in regional Indian cuisines that are spreading across the west.

With food that has been created by home cooks from the humble confines of their kitchens, these supper clubs exist in the amorphous zone between a niche restaurant and a private dinner party. The only way to gain entry into to one is by either signing up on the club's website or through an invite by the host. The number of guests rarely exceeds 20 and diners pay for their meals by way of donations.

The underground supper club is not new to the west. It began as a way for professional chefs to hone their cooking skills and try new recipes without investing in the infrastructure of a restaurant. But the movement has since grown into one that allows amateur cooks to offer guests food they'd be hard-pressed to find in the mainstream dining culture.

Take Geeta, who runs Hush supper club from her home in downtown Washington DC. An Indian American who grew up Gujarati Jain, she is a writer and a teacher. A professional chef she is not. Yet, Hush is Geeta's way of bringing the food she ate as a child into the American mainstream. "Growing up, this was my dream. I wanted to make this esoteric culture real to ordinary Americans," she says. Part of the four-hour Hush dinner experience, then, is learning about Jainism and Gujarat. "People are shocked to learn that the food they've just eaten doesn't have root vegetables," she says. Diners get to touch and smell the masala dabba — the stainless steel spice box ubiquitous in all Indian kitchens; they get to see Gujarat on a map of India; they learn that Mahatma Gandhi was Gujarati and even understand the significance of jaggery as a symbol of luck in Indian culture.

Part of the appeal at these supper clubs is the obvious exoticism — diners can experience a remote regional Indian cuisine that goes beyond calorific curries and chicken tikka masala without having to step outside a 10-mile radius. But the popularity of these secret kitchen-restaurants is also testament to something else: the growing might of India. "Ten years ago people wanted to know if we had newspapers in India. Now people want to know as much as they can about India. And food is the easiest way to access a culture," says Nandita Godbole who runs Curry Cravings in Atlanta. Like Geeta, Godbole is also not a professional chef. Her most recent dinner was a dosa party, where the menu included South Indian specialties like thair vadai, puliyodharai (tamarind rice) and lemon rice. Geeta agrees. "Even as little as a decade ago, Hush would not have been as successful as it is today. India has gone from a country that was seen only as poor and starving to a curiosity to a country that people respect. And respect brings a crowd," she says.

Others say the main draw is the home cooking and the intimate, family-style atmosphere. At North London's Joginder Supper Club, for instance, the food is cooked by Rani Ranjit while the club is hosted and managed by her daughter, Saira Baker. "People wander into the kitchen to watch us cook, they take away spices and ask for recipes," says Baker. The club's menu tends to feature recipes passed down over the ages — dishes influenced by the family's journey across Punjab, Kenya and England. Recently, they served Punjabi-style sardines, a dish created by Rani's father who, while living in Kenya, would take the family down to the beach, catch fish and cook it fresh.

Some Indian supper clubs have also become unexpected flag-bearers of vegetarianism. Padmini Gupta's underground food club in London, Chowpatty, is an all-vegetarian affair, as is Masala Loca, an Indian-Mexican fusion supper club in New York. "Initially, I was skeptical since people here really like their meat. Instead, they were amazed by the variety of food I could cook and they realised that a balanced vegetarian meal is possible," says Gupta.


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The prices paid for a single dinner at any of these clubs can range from a humble \$15 (Rs 750, reasonable by American standards) to an expensive \$75 (Rs 2,250). "The main reason for the price is that a dinner usually goes on for five hours. You're paying for the whole experience," says Geeta, whose 'donations' of \$75 are the most expensive on the list.

As long as Lakshmi Mittal and Mukesh Ambani brothers continue to make the Forbes rich list, and India continues along its quest for superpower status, it's clear that the Indian supper club trend will not abate. But a harbinger of the future is perhaps a supper club hosted out of a tiny apartment in Brooklyn, New York, called Masala Loca. A fusion of Indian and Mexican cuisines, Masala Loca's Chitra Agarwal and Sabra Saperstine create wonders like a guacamole-filled gol-gappas and a paneer-stuffed empanadas served with mint chutney.

Like India's increasingly globalised future, perhaps this is the next food frontier.



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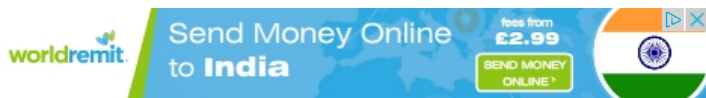
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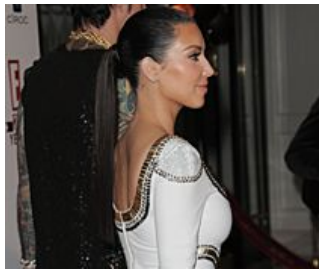
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