

## Bringing Dogri to Delhi

The curator of a food festival that introduced the low-key cuisine to the Capital shares secrets of 'kalari', 'dhungar' and 'madira'

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Neha Prasada



A worker prepares 'kalari' at a factory in Jammu. Photo: Mukesh Gupta/Reuters

"We must introduce Delhi to *kalari*. It is an absolute favourite of mine," said restaurateur Rohit Khattar.

*Kalari* is the traditional cheese of the nomadic Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes of Jammu and Kashmir. Come November, when the Kashmir Valley begins to brace itself for the unforgiving winter ahead, herdsmen descend to the warmer climes of Jammu. In their wake, the markets of Udhampur heave under snowy mounds of *kalari*, handcrafted from the rich milk of the tribes' herds of cows and goats.

This ephemeral and limited-quantity treat forms a very special cultural and socio-economic link between the two parts of the state. Cooked in its own fat till it forms a golden-brown crust, the mozzarella-like, stringy, slightly sour cheese is packed between soft buns with lashings of sweet and spicy chutneys and served on the streets of Jammu as the popular *kalari kulcha*.

Would we be able to procure enough to feed Delhi?

A Kashmiri who knows his food intimately, Khattar was dismissive of such concerns as I curated a menu of Dogri heirloom recipes for Chor Bizarre, his restaurant in Delhi, in February. Our food trials began with a raid on Khattar's personal stock of *kalari*. Once the chefs had mastered the art of frying this very temperamental cheese, the restaurant's procurement team tracked down a supplier in Jammu, who agreed to send us fresh batches of *kalari*.

The team also sourced for us *rajma* (red kidney beans), small but full of flavour and colour, vibrant *anardana* (pomegranate seeds), long-grained *basmati*—all elements integral to Dogri food—in sync with the recipes I had retrieved from Jammu and Kashmir homes known to keep a good table. It is my firm belief that old families, with their collection of time-tested dishes, are the greatest repositories of a region's food heritage. Tap into their food legacy and you have a memorable meal on your hands.

With Jammu as their cradle, the predominantly Hindu Dogra community traces its roots back to the Aryans and is best known for its valour and warmth, as also the lilting Dogri language. Lost amidst the clamour around Kashmiri food, Dogri fare is often dismissed as simplistic and homely cuisine. It is unpretentious food, I'll give you that, but heartwarming in its depth of flavour and taste. My enthusiasm for this cuisine also stems from my Dogri mother, who made sure that her family recipe for *raiwala kaddu* (pumpkin with mustard) always found a place for itself on a largely Awadhi menu at my parents' dinner parties. The sharp mustard and the smoked curd in this dish define Jammu's food for me.

It is the flavour of smoke, in fact, that distinguishes many a Dogri dish: *Dhungar*, or smoking, is an intrinsic technique of their kitchens. Whether it's the *ambal*, a sweet and sour mix of the humble pumpkin, or *khatta* (sour) meat—the most popular non-vegetarian preparation from the region, the unforgettable result of the alchemy between *anardana* and mutton—the infusion of smoke with hot charcoal gives these recipes that final umami lift of flavour.

When it comes to street food, the *kalari kulcha* finds stiff competition in the very sassy *kachalu ki chaat*, found in most of Jammu's markets. The *kachalu*, a tuber very close in texture to a yam, with a hint of sweetness, is macerated in a sharp and tangy dressing of tamarind, rock salt, carom seeds, green chillies and mint. Bowls full of this tart treat are mixed with boiled *rongi* (black-eyed peas) and served as a filling snack. For ladies who lunch, the *kachalu ki chaat* was the favoured starter during the week-long festival.

The black-eyed peas in the *chaat* are an indicator of the large role played by rich, warming lentils like *rajma* and *sabut urad* (black gram) on the Dogri plate. In Jammu, the black grains of the hardy *urad* are slow-cooked with dollops of desi *ghee* till they break down, and then mixed with cooling yogurt and fistfuls of dry fruits to transform into the luscious *maa ki dal ka madira*. Interestingly, the dish also crops up in the Kangra belt of Himachal Pradesh—close to the Jammu region geographically—where, besides *urad*, *madira* is also made out of chickpeas.

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"It is essential to recognize the subtleties that set apart Dogri cuisine from the food of other (north Indian) states. One must maintain the integrity of regional cuisine to preserve it," says Jyotsna Singh, director of the Dara Shikoh Centre for the Arts in Kashmir and a member of the erstwhile Dogra dynasty of Jammu and Kashmir.

I couldn't agree more. Initially, while planning the menu, I was nervous about how the *madira* would go down with the calorie-conscious diner. Later, assessing the number of bowls of this sinful *dal* ordered during the festival served to reaffirm my belief that taste buds always triumph over reason. Given the chance, it could very well give the ever popular *dal makhani* a run for its money.

But there's more protein goodness in Jammu than the *madira*. The *rajma* from the Poonch or Baderwah region in the state is coveted for the richness in colour and taste. It's stewed into a thick curry, redolent with spices, and spiked with tamarind paste to befit its name, *khatte rajma*. Finally, the cooked beans are smoked, to transform into a *rajma* unlike one ever tasted before. Diners expecting just another plate of *rajma chawal* were more than pleasantly surprised at the play of flavours in this dish at Chor Bizarre.

Interestingly, while Kashmiri cuisine is dominated by an immense variety of red meat preparations, Jammu's menu is largely vegetarian. A staple amongst Dogri households is the leafy green *kadam ka saag* (kohlrabi), which is made into a fragrant broth with dry ginger and powdered fennel and eaten with boiled rice. Even though this is not a typical restaurant dish, I was keen to feature an everyday staple from a Dogri table on the list of 10 curated dishes (though, perhaps not surprisingly, it didn't top the popularity charts!).

In Jammu, mustard greens are eaten with *makki ka thodas*, thick rough, *ghee*-smothered *rotis* made out of coarsely ground maize, which grows abundantly in the region. This simplicity of flavours marks the cuisine of the region, which relies heavily on indigenous wholegrains and seasonal vegetables.



'Meetha chawal'

Tartness, too, is a recurring note in Dogri food. Singh, who grew up in a Dogri household, explains: "We have a penchant for using souring agents like tamarind and *anardana*" The dual notes of sweet and sour, too, are a common refrain, peaking in a variety of pickles and chutneys like *galgal ka achaar*, made with fragrant mountain lemons, *kutra*, where raw mangoes are desiccated and mixed with spices, a punchy *anardana* chutney and even the *kadam*, which is pickled with mustard and chillies into a delicious condiment.

While the world may be waking up to fermentation in food, the Dogras are ancient experts at this technique, using it to make spongy *khameera* and *thothrus*, breads to soak up all the sweet and sour goodness of their curries. The *khatta* meat with the *khameera* was a winning partnership during the week-long festival at Bikaner House, where Khattar has located the second outpost of his Indian restaurant (the first one is on Asaf Ali Road, also in New Delhi).

Celebrations in Dogri households are incomplete without the fragrant *meetha chawal*, sweetened with jaggery and accentuated by saffron. Deep-fried *gheur*, made out of a batter of fermented refined flour, is served on ceremonial occasions with curd and a sprinkling of sugar. *Malpuyas* drunk on sugar syrup, flaky *patisas* and *chaklate*, dense *burfis* that look like blocks of rich chocolate...the cup runneth over. The *meetha chawal*, which featured on my menu, was based on a family recipe shared by Singh.

Much of the food trial and tasting, in fact, was guided by tips from home cooks with an eye for detail. For instance, we learnt to lightly roast the *anardana* to introduce the right colour and tartness in the *khatta* meat, hunted down the right buns to accompany the *kalari*, and practised with the *dhungar* till the dishes acquired just the perfect smokiness.

For all the low-key nature of the cuisine, the festival was completely sold out. Proving yet again that with thoughtfully sourced local produce, time-tested recipes and cooking techniques, flavour trumps all.



Pomegranate seeds are used liberally in Dogri cuisine. Photo: iStockphoto

## Khatte Rajma

Serves 4-6

### Ingredients

- 1kg 'rajma'
- 100g tamarind
- 4tbsp plus 1tbsp 'ghee'
- 1 tsp carom seeds
- 2 bay leaves
- 200g onion
- 25g ginger
- 25g garlic
- 2 tomatoes, made into a paste
- Salt, to taste
- Red chilli powder, to taste
- 5 cloves
- 2 black cardamom
- 1 inch cinnamon
- 1 tsp white cumin
- Medium piece of charcoal
- 1 tsp mustard oil

### Method

Soak the 'rajma' for 7-8 hours.

Take the tamarind and soak in a glass of hot water for an hour. Strain out the seeds and reserve the pulp. Make a paste of the onion, ginger and garlic.

Cook the 'rajma' in a pressure cooker until soft.

In a pan, heat 3-4 tbsp 'ghee' and add carom seeds, bay leaves and the onion paste. When this mixture starts browning, add the tomato paste, salt and red chilli powder.

When the tomato is well cooked and begins to leave oil on the sides of the mixture, add the tamarind.

Now add the boiled 'rajma' to this mixture and cook till the gravy thickens.

Temper the 'rajma' with cloves, black cardamom, cinnamon and cumin sautéed in the rest of the 'ghee'.

The final step is the 'dhungar'. Take a piece of charcoal and heat it till it turns red. Put it on a piece of onion skin right on top of the 'rajma'. Add mustard oil and trap the smoke in the dish by tightly covering with a lid for 10 minutes.

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