



FORTUNE COOKIE

SOURISH BHATTACHARYYA

Archiving India's culinary wealth

WHEN Larousse *Gastronomique*, the monumental compilation of French recipes by Prosper Montagné, first appeared in 1938, with prefaces by one of France's pre-eminent chefs of all times, Georges Auguste Escoffier, and his collaborator, Phileas Gilbert, the 1,350-page tome became the benchmark for the world of gastronomy.

Appropriately published by Editions Larousse, a company set up by France's leading grammarian, lexicographer and encyclopaedist of his time, Pierre Larousse, the Bible of French cooking was essentially an individual effort supported by contributions from other chefs. Is an equivalent of it possible in India? Maybe not, because of the vast regional and local differences in our repertoire of cuisines. Maybe yes, because of the virtual explosion of blogs, most of them written by overseas Indians for an NRI audience, dedicated to regional and family recipes.

The possibility has tickled the imagination of Indian chefs, food companies and journalists from the time the celebrity chef, Sanjeev Kapoor (www.sanjeevkapoor.com), attempted to launch the process of collating long-forgotten recipes dredged out of ancient and medieval manuscripts sourced from all across India. As he disclosed earlier in the week to a gathering in New Delhi, the project never took off because no one was interested in funding it.

Kapoor was speaking at the National Conclave on India's Food Culture, co-presented by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and the Yes Bank's think tank, Yes Global Institute. The idea driving the day-long event was to announce to the world the ambitious FSSAI initiative to create the largest online repository of traditional recipes from across India, both from experts and home-makers, to promote a culture of safe and nutritious eating. The online repository is most likely to be formally launched during World Food India, being organised by the Ministry of Food Processing Industries in New Delhi on November 3-5.

The foundational principles of India's food culture, says Pawan



The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is developing a national online repository of traditional recipes.

Aggarwal, FSSAI's CEO and driver of the project, is to eat local and seasonal, so this smartphone-friendly website will have recipes organised according to the regions and the seasons. If it's summer in Delhi, you'll be greeted with *karela-lauki-tinda* recipes, but if you happen to be in Kochi at that point of time, you'll be told how to cook *puttu* with *kadala* (black chickpea) curry or *erissery* (pumpkin and lentil curry). The recipes will come with ayurvedic wisdom and nutritional information.

No one has attempted something similar on this large a scale. Montagné, in his time, couldn't

have even imagined a project of such dimensions. What I find promising about this project is that it may finally be the precursor not to the birth of a "national cuisine" (to use a phrase popularised by the renowned sociologist Arjun Appadurai), but to a freedom from what FSSAI Chairman Ashish Bahuguna described as the "faster forward march of a monoculture of eating habits" and the popularisation of the common-sense notion, being promoted by Sunita Narain, Director-General, Centre for Science and Environment, of promoting "biodiversity on the plate" to protect the biodiversity of the country.

Narain explained how the complex web of life works by drawing our attention to the Bihar floods, which have grabbed newspaper headlines because of their tragic toll. The floods, Narain said, could have been mitigated, had the "network of wetlands" that existed in Bihar not been dredged for construction. The same wetlands could have accommodated the flood waters and also provided round-the-year employment to people with their reserves of *makhana* and edible greens and freshwater fish. It is this biodiversity that Narain asks to be preserved on the plate.

The website-in-the-making will draw the world's attention, to use another of Appadurai's coinages, to "the shift in the boundaries of edibility" taking place in India.

— *The writer is a noted food critic*

The smartphone-friendly website will have recipes organised according to the regions and the seasons. It will come with ayurvedic and nutritional wisdom

Traditional Indian food will rule the market

NO ONE KNOWS the direction in which India's taste buds are moving better than Deepinder Goyal, Founder-CEO, Zomato. What, then, is his prognosis for India? He surprised us all with his declaration that 10-15 years on, "Indian food will no longer be cooked at home". It doesn't seem unlikely in the light of the changes in the social composition of the urban middle class. Couples are getting younger; husband and wife being both earning members is the accepted norm, and the pressure of work is keeping more couples glued to their laptops than close to their cooking ranges.



Deepinder Goyal, founder-CEO, Zomato.

Indian food, as a result, will dominate the market across formats — dine-in restaurants, takeaways, and home deliveries. Goyal had a telling statistic to share: of the 33 lakh home delivery orders processed nationally by Zomato last month, 74 per cent could be categorised as traditional Indian. Pizzas were the most ordered home-delivery items about ten years ago. Today, a mere 8 per cent of the orders placed with Zomato are for pizzas. But we have miles to go in the restaurant business. Zomato lists 75,000 restaurants across categories in the country's top ten cities. Shanghai alone has 2,50,000.

HITTING A PURPLE PATCH WITH DESI FLAVOUR



Paperboat's founder-CEO Neeraj Kakkar.

NEERAJ KAKKAR, Founder-CEO, Hector Beverages, is currently famous for being the country's largest producer of *aam panna*, the most popular drink in the Paperboat range, but there's one wish of his that remains unfulfilled. When Kakkar was growing up in the historic town of Assandh, famous for being the home to India's largest 2,000-year-old stupa, 45km to the west of Karnal, he used to anxiously wait for the winter so that he could have the *kanji* (our own under-rated probiotic drink) that their landlady would make in those rare days when purple carrots were available. The original colour of carrots was purple, though the orange and red varieties have taken over the market, and it is these rare carrots that the fermented drink spiked with mustard seeds is made.

For Kakkar, as he shared at the National Conclave on India's Food Culture, each Paperboat drink is an act of reliving a childhood memory. For the past four years, he has been single-mindedly pursuing his dream of producing *kanji*, which is bit of an acquired taste,

Kakkar used carrot seeds from Turkey for the 'kanji'

for the national market. He started by bringing back a suitcase full of fresh purple carrots from southern Turkey, but he was asked to junk them at the airport because of the ban on flying in with fresh agricultural produce. Frustrated, he brought back purple carrot seeds the

next time and with this consignment, and subsequent ones, he was able to organise, over the last four years, 13 sowings of the vegetable in selected patches of land in Panipat, Ujjain and Ooty.

The crop from Ooty turned out to be the most *kanji*-friendly, and after quelling suspicions among food safety inspectors about this 'North Indian' fermented drink (Kakkar's manufacturing unit being in Bengaluru, and the licensing authority being in Chennai, he had to deal with people who had no clue about *kanji*), he was at last able to produce a batch of *kanji* for mass consumption. The *kanji*, sadly for Kakkar, bombed in lab tests because of some microbial contamination that had afflicted the carrots. Kakkar still hasn't been able to produce his dream *kanji*, but he knows he's just a step away.