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FLOYD CARDOZ PONDERES THE MANY FLAVOURS OF HOME

The Mumbai-born and New York-based multi-award-winning chef writes about comfort food, which is all about roots and nostalgia



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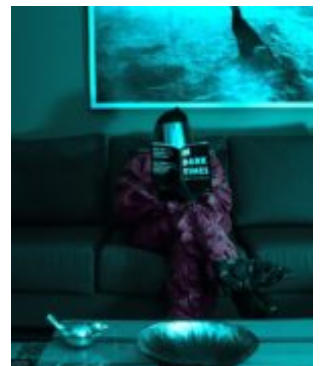
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Food, all over the world, has the power to take you back to certain places and times in life. No matter what nationality you are, you will always have a unique connection with what you eat. My mother used to say that while everybody else was eating to live, I lived to eat. As a child, I was constantly thinking about what my next meal would be. Even though I could never have imagined that I was going to be a chef, there was a massive connection with food right from the start...particularly Indian food. The term 'Indian food' is hard to define because, as we know, the cuisine doesn't just comprise chicken tikka masala; it's so much more than that. Every region has its particular preparations and, even within that spectrum, every family has its own recipes. So when I came to the United States, I realised that Indian food here wasn't what I knew it to be. There were a couple of good eateries but the understanding of our cuisine in general was very sparse, so the desire to bring the focus to it is what has driven me to do what I do. Throughout my career, I've come across misconceptions about our food like: 'It's too greasy', 'It's always extremely spicy' and 'It's heavy'. What I consciously did when I opened Tabla in New York was bring refinement to the cuisine. I didn't use butter or cream at all in anything, and I changed the menu frequently — something that most restaurants didn't do. We had sophisticated tasting menus and plating...Tabla was way ahead of its time.



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With The Bombay Canteen in Mumbai, the focus was on showing people that local and authentic regional ingredients could be used to create refined, top-notch dishes. We decided not to use anything that was imported; nothing that didn't come from India. Now, with Paowalla at Soho, also in New York, what I'm doing is introducing the signature bold flavours that The Bombay Canteen has come to be known for, using only American seasonal ingredients. So instead of *lauki*, we're using squash or zucchini and for the pork vindaloo, we're using pork ribs. I found it funny that many people here haven't seen calamari in Indian cooking...I ate it all the time when I was growing up in Goa! So that's another thing that I want people to taste.



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I love the way the food industry is evolving now. People are travelling so much more, which means that our customers now realise that there is a difference between the Indian meals they've eaten before and the authentic ones. I make sure that everyone in my staff knows that behind every single item on the menu there is a story; they know what the food is, where it is from, how it originated and how different or alike it is to what you would get back home. Of course, we still do get people coming in for the occasional chicken tikka masala, but it's wonderful to see guests truly enjoying what we're doing in terms of introducing tastes that are new to people from other countries. Pav is a hit here...I've even had Indians taste our vada pav and say it's the best they've ever had outside India. That's what it's all about; it's comfort food. For me, it's the same. It's about being in America and still going home to rotis made by my wife, or Goan rice with fish curry...things that evoke certain memories, like me helping my mother and grandmother to make sorpotel when I was young. We cooked it for Christmas and Easter, and I'd help to cut and fry the pork. Or going out with my father when I was barely 13 years old to a restaurant near Churchgate station where we ate a five-course meal — it was one of the best meals of my life till date. I reminisce about evening snacks comprising mackerel, shrimp and calamari at beach shacks in Goa, travelling throughout the country by train and eating the Indian Railways' bony chicken curry, masala omelette and shrikhand, and indulging in freshly fried banana chips in Kerala. These experiences are still so vivid both in my mind and on my taste buds.





The fact that I'm working with similar aromas and flavours now also means that I'm surrounded by triggers for flashbacks. Currently I'm using salted cod in a dish, so each time I toast it over the fire, it again takes me back to my grandmother's kitchen where we'd make salads with dried and toasted fish, onions, tomato, cucumber and chilli.



I believe there is always some element of wistfulness in good food. It tugs at your heartstrings in a way that nothing else can. It's one of the reasons why we created The Bombay Canteen and why it was accepted so warmly. It came at a time when the Indian food industry was looking outwards for inspiration, which is not a bad thing, but we were beginning to forget a culture that was so good to us.



We're all moving in so many different directions these days that I think everyone is constantly looking for a connection with something that feels like home... something that you can't usually touch. It's the reason why nostalgia in even fashion and advertising today is so successful. It's what motivates me — I'm tired of people forgetting. I have a dish on the Paowalla menu, the choris biryani (made from Goan sausage), which my father's mother first made for me; I haven't seen it in any other restaurant.

I remember whenever we made Goan sausage, the next morning we would take whatever sauce was remaining and fry an egg in it — that was breakfast. So with the choris biryani I make now, instead of putting a boiled egg on top I put a fried one. The bebinca I make is also my great-grandmother's recipe that has been followed for ages, and my wife comes in to make it. It's important to be authentic. It makes me really happy that we have kokum saar on the menu, because the first time I ate it, I thought, "Wow, I can make a ceviche with this!" We even make dal fry, which almost every restaurant in Mumbai has, and I tell my staff to serve it with pav because I remember wandering out after late-night parties and heading to Lucky or Yacht restaurant in Bandra to eat the very same thing in the wee hours of the morning. It isn't just dal and bread, it's soul food...it's home.



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