

The Delicate Flavors of Awadhi Cuisine

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Abstract

Awadhi cuisine indigenous to the city of Nawabs – Lucknow conjures the images of kebabs, korma, and biryanis. Famous for its rich spices, indulgent flavors, and iconic dishes Awadhi cuisine has survived the winds of change and received a large measure of love and loyalty from the people of Lucknow. Royal cuisine has a distinctive characteristic that constitutes the soul and essence of the cuisine and reflects the refinement, finesse, and sophistication of the royal way of life. Dry fruits used in the cuisine were a sign of royalty and symbolized prosperity. Awadhi cuisine consists of both non-vegetarian and vegetarian dishes. The breads eaten as an accompaniment to the main dishes are also unique to this cuisine.

Keywords

Awadhi cuisine, kebabs, biryani, korma, nihari, spices, dastarkhwan, Dum

History

Awadh Kingdom - the Central region of Uttar Pradesh with Lucknow as its capital was ruled by different dynasties over the years. The dynamics of power and patronage in the region influenced and shaped the Awadhi cuisine.

The Awadhi cuisine was influenced and shaped under the patronage of Nawabs of Awadh. The Nawabs of Awadh were a clan of rulers that came from Persia in early 18th century. They were known for their love for art, poetry, music, food, and creative things. The Nawabs rose to power when the power of the Mughal dynasty started declining.

The Persian cultural practices became an inseparable part of the courtly culture under the Nawabs. The culinary culture was no exception and the chefs of the royal kitchens of Nawabs with their innovations the Awadhi cuisine attained its distinctive flavor.

The Awadhi cuisine is a harmonious blend of Mughal, Persian and local influences. Flavors of Awadhi cuisine were inspired by the Mughal Cooking techniques.

Introduction

A visit to Lucknow is no less than a pilgrimage for food lovers. The city drools with the aromatic fragrance of Awadhi cuisine and offers you to indulge in royal delicacies and enjoy like a Nawab. The sheer mention of Awadhi Cuisine conjures the images of kebabs, korma and biryanis.

Awadhi cuisine is an innovation of Persian and Mughlai style of cooking. It reflects the royal way of living and is an exotic experience of dining, manners, sophistication, and luxury.

Dastarkhwan is something that gives a royal touch to the style of eating Awadhi food. Dastarkhwan means an elaborate ceremonial dining layout serving delicacies of Awadh that includes as Biryani, Korma, Kebabs, Salan (a thin gravy), Keema (minced meat dishes), Pulao, Roomali roti, Sheermaal, Nihari Kulcha, desserts such as Kheer, Firni, Shahi Tukda etc. It is customary to sit around and share the Dastarkhwan. Presentation of the food equally important Leaves of silver and gold foil called Chandi warq and sona warq were used for decorating the dishes before being served. During the times of Nawabs Nazakat and Tehzeeb formed an integral part of dining process, and the dishes were eaten in a particular order.

People often confuse Awadhi cuisine with Mughlai cuisine but there is significant difference between the two cuisines. Awadhi cuisine is influenced by the Mughlai cuisine their style of cooking and use of spices. Some of the spices used in Awadhi cuisine are cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, peppercorn, nutmeg, cumin, mace, and bay leaves. The careful blend of spices, subtle and delicate flavors is the most distinctive feature of the Awadhi cuisine whereas the Mughlai cuisine is characterized by zealous use of spices, dry fruits, cream, and milk.

The mere thought of Awadhi Cuisine surrounds you with a delectable aroma of spices and saffron. The use of fresh and dry fruits and saffron in Awadhi cuisine is a gift from Persia. The Mughlai style of cooking was refined by the Nawabs by generous use of saffron. The Awadhi food exuding rich aroma of saffron is used to flavor rice preparations and desserts. Use of perfumes – Ittr in enhancing the aroma of some dishes is the key factor in Awadhi cuisine.

Cooking Styles

Awadhi cuisine is an innovation of Persian and Mughlai style of cooking. The secret of Awadhi cuisine lies in the way it is cooked. Marinating the meats is an important step in preparing Awadhi foods. Marination helps in giving a delightful taste to the food besides making it soft.

Dumpukht style of cooking is what gives a sumptuous taste to the Awadhi food. Dumpukht style of cooking has been adapted from cooking styles of Persia and Central Asia. The food is cooked in a heavy bottomed vessel on slow fire and the lid is sealed with the flour dough. Sealing with the dough and cooking food on slow fire allows juices to be absorbed well into the food and helps in retaining the rich aroma of the handful of uncommon spices used in the Awadhi food. This style of cooking is healthy way of retaining the nutrients.

Gile Hikmat is a unique technique used in preparing Awadhi food. The meat or vegetable is stuffed with nuts and spices, wrapped in a banana leaf covered in a layer of clay or Multani mitti and buried in the earth. A low simmering fire is placed on the surface above and the food is cooked for several hours before it is served.

Dhungar is another technique followed in cooking Awadhi food. This involves infusing the dish with the aroma of charcoal. The technique of Char-grilling is also used in preparing food. Tawa cooking gives a unique taste to Awadhi cuisine.

Ghee Durust karna is a process of tempering pure ghee with kewra water and cardamoms for using aromatic ghee in cooking the Awadhi cuisine.

Signature Dishes of Awadhi Cuisine

Awadhi cuisine has a wide range of sumptuous dishes – both vegetarian and non-vegetarian. Some of the celebrated dishes include a variety of kebabs, korma, nihari, biryani, and a wide array of breads from Roomali roti to Sheermaal and a wide range of desserts.

Kebabs - The kebabs undoubtedly rank first among all other Awadhi dishes. Some of the popular non-veg kebabs are Galawat Kebab, Seekh kabab Shami kebab, Kakori Kebab, Pasanda kebab, Boti kebab and Patili ke kebab.

Mouth-melting Galawat Kebab is prepared by marinating mutton mince and spices in raw papaya for several hours before cooking. Shami kebab is prepared from minced mutton or lamb, spices, and Bengal gram lentil.

Kakori Kebab - meat used is from the tendon of the leg of mutton combined with khoya and spices. The kebab is roasted on iron rods and is coated with rose petals and aromatic sweet spices. Boti kebab is lamb marinated in yogurt and cooked on skewers in a tandoor. Pasanda kebab – a succulent delicious mutton kebab mixed with spices.



Image 1: Kebab

Vegetarian kebabs include kathal, arbi, matar, zimikand and rajma galawati kebabs.

Signature Main Course Awadhi dishes include Razala, nihari, kundan Kaliya, Shahi korma, and Murgh Mussalam. The royal touch of Nawabs can be seen in Kundan Kaliya – mutton cooked with spices and Kashipura chilies and garnished with gold leaf. Nihari – a lamb stew is enjoyed with Kulcha.

The Awadhi cuisine offers many traditional yummy dishes for the vegetarian palette also e.g., Khatti Arbi ka Salan, Awadhi style Sultani Dal, Gobhi Musallam and vegetarian koftas.

Biryani – The Awadhi dun biryani is a rice dish prepared in which rice and meat are cooked separately. Alternate layers of cooked mutton and rice are laid in a heavy bottom vessel and the vessel is sealed with dough. It is then cooked on a slow fire for several hours. Awadhi Yakhni pulao is cooked by making a Yakini stock from meat cooked on a slow fire along with aromatic spices. The rice is cooked in this stock. Pure ghee adds a distinctive flavor to the pulao. Awadhi style of teheri and Motiya Chilman Pulao is something vegetarians love to have. Noor Mahal Pulao an aromatic rice preparation made with nuts, saffron, Yakhni, and cream is another Awadhi delight.



Image 2: Biryani

Desserts

Nothing can be more tempting and blissful than savoring a bowlful of rich and aromatic Awadhi dessert garnished with dried fruits-symbolic of royal cuisine.

Some of the delectable desserts are Zarda, Kheer, Kali gajar ka halwa, Malida, Firni, Falooda Kulfi, Malai ki Gilori, Malai Makhan and Shahi Tukda. Zarda is one dessert that you will crave for more once you taste it. It is a sweetened rice preparation infused with spices like saffron and cardamom. A generous amount of garnishing with silvered cashews and almonds enhances the richness of the dessert and gives a royal touch to the delight. Malai Makhan – the delectable foamy delight topped with saffron, and dry fruits and melts in mouth within seconds.

Malai ki Gilori is a delicacy prepared with khoya, mishri, and dry fruits mixed and encrusted with a thin layer of malai and served with a coating of silver warq. The addition of rose and kewra water is sprinkled before serving the dessert.



Image 3: Shahi Tukda

Breads

Awadhi food is incomplete without breads. A wide range of breads made in different ways are served with Awadhi food. This includes Roomali roti, tandoori roti, naan, kulcha, laccha paratha, Sheermaal and Bakarkhani. The ingredients used in preparing these breads play an important role in giving shape, rise, color, and taste.

Sheermaal is a crispy roti prepared from a dough made with flour, milk, sugar, ghee and saffron. Sometimes these are stuffed with nuts and raisins. It is baked in a tandoor. Sheermaal makes a perfect accompaniment with the kebabs. Ulte Tawa ka Paratha prepared on an inverted griddle are a perfect accompaniment to sumptuous Awadhi korma and curries. Warqi Paratha goes very well with kebabs, curries, and korma.

Conclusion

Awadhi cuisine famous for its rich and fragrant dishes is synonymous with kebabs, kormas and biryani. From succulent meat preparations to delectable vegetarian delights, Awadhi cuisine offers a diverse range of kebabs to satisfy your taste buds. A visit to Lucknow is incomplete unless you immerse yourself in the Awadhi delicacies. Do not leave the city without indulging in Tunde ke Galawati kebabs which has been serving mouth-melting kebabs for years. The city of Lucknow drools with the aromatic fragrance of Awadhi cuisine and offers you to indulge in royal delicacies and enjoy like a Nawab in the ceremonial tradition of Dastarkhwan.

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About the Author

Dr. Aparna Pradhan, a doctorate in Zoology is an artist, bilingual writer, author, poetess, and moderator. She has authored three books and has contributed in more than 45 National and International anthologies. She has published articles in leading newspapers and magazines. She is a recipient of Savitribai Dada Saheb Phalke Women Achievers Award (2023), Asia's prestigious Golden Book Award(2023), Indian Women Achievers Award in Literature (2022), Indian Women Achievers Award in Arts (2020) and Annual Wordsmith Award of Excellence (2019, 2021, 2022).

