

Eat like a king

A festival of royal cuisine draws from an archive of recipes that belongs to the erstwhile princely province of Sailana

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Dilip Singh, the erstwhile ruler of Sailana, a province in Madhya Pradesh's Malwa plateau, was a collector of recipes. One of his legacies is a repertoire of nearly 5,000 hand-written recipes dating from the beginning of the twentieth century from the kitchens of princely states such as Vadodara, Lucknow, Rajasthan, Bhopal and Kashmir. He even translated Sanskrit, Persian and Urdu recipes, so that these weren't lost for future generations. An unfortunate incident spurred the maharaja to document these treasures. Stranded with his guests upon losing their way on a *shikaar* expedition in 1890 and without a cook, Dilip Singh realised the importance of knowing how to cook — even a basic roti and *daal*.

Some of these recipes are being showcased at The Park in Hyderabad as part of a culinary tour. "Music and food were his passions, besides some exotic royal pastimes, like greyhound racing," recalls his grandson, Maharaja Vikram Singh, the third-generation custodian of the Sailana legacy. Singh's father, Digvijay Singh, published some of the recipes (until then zealously guarded in a locked trunk by the Maharaja) in 1982 in the book *Cooking Delights of the Maharajas*. Now running into its fifteenth

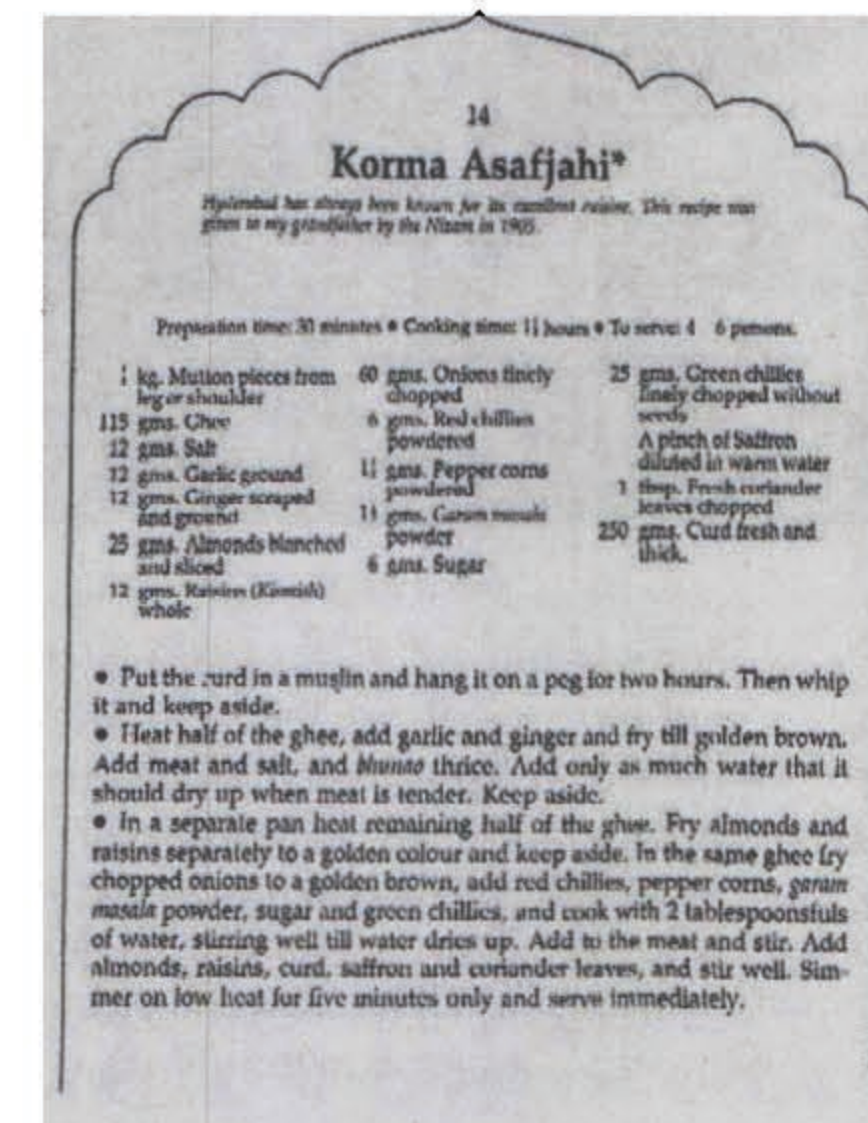


reprint, the book is a veritable Bible for Indian chefs interested in royal cuisine. It's where you will find information on such decadent items as Asafjahi, a recipe for mutton *korma* that was gifted by the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1905.

"The recipes are simple and truthful, that's the secret behind the book's success," asserts Priya Paul, chairperson of Apeejay Surrendra Park Hotels. She says that she is in talks with the Sailana family to collaborate on a second book that has more of



MOVEABLE FEAST: A touring festival of food made following the recipes of the Sailana archive features items such as Korma Asafjahi (below); Vikram Singh with the Murgh Irani biryani (left)



Dilip Singh's recipes.

To be truly successful, the foods that are part of the tour must be cooked over coal or firewood. "Therefore, replicating them over gas stoves in modern kitchens, in hotels or homes is a challenge, which we try to overcome by trying to use at least tandoor ovens in the hotel kitchens," says Vikram Singh. An unusual feature is that almost none of them use the tomato as an ingredient, as they were not widely prevalent during the late eighteenth century, when Dilip Singh lived.

The Sailana cuisine that's being offered at Aish, the Hyderabad restaurant of The Park in Hyderabad, is an amalgamation of influences of different regional cuisines. For starters, we sampled Jungli Maas, a simple barbecued lamb that has the delicate

aroma of ghee and a smattering of red chilli powder, ("It was improvised by my grandfather for cooking on *shikaar* expeditions, with the least of fuss on a barbecue," says Vikram Singh). The crisp, pan-fried Prawn Kebab Sailana, from the Royal Sailana archives, has the fresh flavours of ginger, coriander and onion. For the main course, we had the melt-in-the-mouth Kofta Sudarshan, the Tabak Murgh which comes in a red gravy redolent with the aromas of

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garam masala, Daal Sailana, and Aloo ka Rajai Salan. There is also Macchi Dum Pukht, which is somewhat like the Bengali *shorshe maachh*, as it comes in a mustard and masala marinade and is made with mustard oil. While both the Persian-inspired Murgh Irani Biryani and Kathal Biryani were good, I was too liver-hearted to try the accompanying Kaleji ka Raita. Especially, after I discover that the thin slivers of what I thought were curry leaves were actually slices of liver.

The best part of the meal came at the end. The dessert was the heavenly Desi Gulab ki Kheer, which has the delicate aroma of rose petals ("Only the desi rose, will do; not hybrids," insists Vikram Singh) and Harey Chaney Ki Halwa, a warm pudding made of young green gram. ■