Archiving India's culinary wealth

When a French-Gastronomic, the mental 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, Phébus Gilbert, the 1,350-page tome became the benchmark for the world of gastronomy. Appropriately published by Edmond Larousse, a company set up by France’s leading dictionary 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 cuisine. Maybe yes, because of the virtual explosion of blogs, most of them written by oversees Indians for an NRI audience, dedicated to regional and family recipes.

The possibilities have tickled the imagination of Indian chefs, food companies and journalists from the time the celebrity chef, Sanjeev Kapoor (www.sunjeevkappoor.com), attempted to launch the process of collating long-forgotten recipes dredged out of ancient and medieval manuscripts sourced from the far ends of India, as he did closer earlier in the week to a gathering in New Delhi, the project never took off because no one was interested.

Kapoor was speaking at the National Food Policy Conference, co-organized 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 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 Agrawal, 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 kurkuri-kalela 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 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 procurer 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 Dushita 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 flood waters and also provided round-the-year employment to people with their reserves of fresh, healthy food rich in nutrients. The fresh water fish is this biodiversity that Narain asks to be preserved on the plate.

The website on the making will draw the world’s attention, to use another of Appadurai’s changes, to “the shift in the boundaries of identity” taking place in India.

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

Traditional Indian food will rule the market

NO ONE KNOWS the direction in which India’s taste buds are moving more 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 changing 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.

For Kakkar, as he shared at the National Conference on India’s Food Culture, each Paperboat drink is an act of “reclaiming 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’

neeraj kakkar, founder-ceo, hervé beverges, india, is currently famous for being the country’s largest producer of non-alcoholic, the most popular drink in the Paperboat range, but there’s one wish of his that remains unhindered. When Kakkar was growing up in the historic town of Assandh, famous for being the home to India’s largest 2,000-year-old soybean, 4.5km to the west of Karnal, he used to anxiously wait for the winter so that he could have the ‘kanji’. It was the under-proportioned drink that his landlord would make in those rains when purple carrots were available. The original colour of carrots was purple. The orange and red varieties have taken over the market, and it is these purple carrots that the fermented drink spiked with mustard seeds is made

next time and with this consegamation, and subsequent ones, he was able to organise, over the last four years. 13 sowings of the vegetable patches of land in Panipat, Ujain and Ooty. The crop from Ooty stood out to be the most ‘kanji’ friendly, and after sifting against a large number of small seed suppliers about this ‘North India fermented drink (Kakkar’s manufacturing unit being in Bengaluru, and the sequencing authority being in Karnal, he had to deal with people who had no clue about ‘kanji’, he was at last able to find the carrot-usability level required for mass-consumption. The ‘kanji’, sadly for Kakkar, bombarded in lab tests because of some microbial contamination that had afflicted the carrots. Kakkar had not been able to produce his dream ‘kanji’, but he knows he’s just a step away.

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For the national market. He started by bringing back a suitcase full of fresh purple carrots from Turkey. 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 consegamation, and subsequent ones, he was able to organise, over the last four years. 13 sowings of the vegetable patches of land in Panipat, Ujain and Ooty. The crop from Ooty stood out to be the most ‘kanji’ friendly, and after sifting against a large number of small seed suppliers about this ‘North India fermented drink (Kakkar’s manufacturing unit being in Bengaluru, and the sequencing authority being in Karnal, he had to deal with people who had no clue about ‘kanji’, he was at last able to find the carrot-usability level required for mass-consumption. The ‘kanji’, sadly for Kakkar, bombarded in lab tests because of some microbial contamination that had afflicted the carrots. Kakkar had not been able to produce his dream ‘kanji’, but he knows he’s just a step away.