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The saga of disappearing Goan cuisine

■ DANUSKA DA GAMA | NT BUZZ

Goa has attracted people for its beaches and authentic sumptuous local cuisine over the years. But off late, things have changed drastically - certain beaches now intimidate high end tourists and local Goan cuisine has slowly been disappearing from menus. Even if there is a mention of a Goan section, there are high chances, that the food is not 'authentic' Goan but a standardised, Indianised or a westernised version of the dish.

A ride from Sinquerim to Baga will offer you more choices in Indian, pseudo continental and oriental food rather than Goan. Moreover, the few restaurants which were once famous for chicken xacuti, recheado fish fry, sorpotel, today prefer to serve 'what people want'.

WHY GOAN CULINARY TOURISM HAS FAILED

Non-Goans cooking Goan food

President of Travel and Tourism Association of Goa, Francisco de Braganca has time and again asserted that local Goan food needs to be promoted and should be a part of the tourism master-plan, adding that the Government alone cannot shoulder the blame. He says: "The trade itself has also to share the blame. We Goans, especially the shack owners, bring full teams of non-Goan chefs and waiters from far off places when the off-season sets in there and our season starts here. One cannot expect non-Goans to cook Goan food."

On the other hand he says Goan chefs find employment beyond the Goan shores, further adding to the decline of authentic restaurants. "Goan cuisine has disappeared from our plates and our memories too. Many of the younger generation of Goans don't have any idea of some of the traditional Goan dishes. They are now extinct and part of history", says Braganca.

Restaurant owner Leo D'Souza says in absence of grading and regulations, customers are taken for a ride in the name of various cuisines. "One can find an abundance of Indian curries, kormas and masalas which differ in taste and colour at every restaurant. The Chinese is not authentic and there is a broad based continental menu. How can one expect authentic food anywhere?"

Entrepreneur, Frazier Martins says: "A lot of tourists who come to Goa and stay alongside the coast want to step out and savour Goan cuisine when they visit an eatery. Unfortunately, they end up having food that they get back home or have to travel a distance to locate a restaurant that serves authentic Goan meals."

Tourist's sceptical of Goan food

"While there are successful restaurants in Goa serving good Goan food that is clearly cherished and appreciated by the tourist, the other restaurants fail to follow the lead," says Braganca. This he says is heightened by the fact that tourists lack awareness of local Goan food. Many destinations worldwide take great pride in showcasing their local foods, thus increasing the tourists' knowledge about the local preparations, ingredients, etc.

Since the number of high-spending tourists visiting the state has dropped, restaurants along the coastline cater to large numbers of low spending domestic tourists. "It is easier to prepare and serve non-Goan food. Of course there are very few genuine high end specialty restaurants serving authentic western, Indian and Chinese food," says Braganca.

Writer, Maria Lourdes de Bravo Da Costa Rodrigues tells us how once when she visited a famous beach side restaurant in South Goa, the Goan curry she asked for had no coconut base but was a tomato base. Upon enquiring she was told that coconuts are expensive and hence the alternate use of tomatoes.

"If we Goans can be taken for a ride, you can imagine what happens with tourists. Probably it is because of being cheated and word of mouth that they prefer to eat food that they are familiar with," she says.

Price, quality and quantity

Entrepreneur and food enthusiast Ashton Dias believes that Goan food is not considered cool and convenient anymore. "Today, kids prefer burgers, burritos, pizza, etc. We need to have an entity which can glamourise Goan food and scientifically document processes which enable long term storage of food that can be served in minutes."

A tourist from Delhi Saurabh Sharma tells us about being cheated at a shack. "I asked for a plate of kingfish rawa fish fry and prawn chilly fry. To my dismay the prawns were the tiniest size. It cost Rs 550 and wasn't even sufficient for two. The chilly fry had an overdose of onions and capsicums. The single fish slice in the plate was as thin as paper and was coated heavily with rawa on either sides that cost us Rs 500. Even in Delhi I have eaten bigger prawns at a lesser rate," he says.

Ashton says, "Goan food consists of wholesome meat and fish which shoots the cost of a dish. This makes Goan food costlier compared to Chinese food. Hence, only if we manage to do to the fish industry what we did to the chicken industry, rates will always fluctuate and remain on the higher side."

A fish vendor tells NT BUZZ, that there are several malpractices followed in the name of tourism. He says, restaurant owners and hoteliers who come to buy fish from him ask him to slice the fish thin (less than ¼ inch sometimes). Some restaurants even serve fish like mahi instead of kingfish and sea perch (chonak), a difference that can be only made out by people who really know about fish.

Tourism department not doing enough

Calangute MLA, Michael Lobo says that the Tourism department of Goa has done nothing to promote Goan food. "If they can't keep the coast clean, what food will they promote?" he asks. At the property of Goa Tourism in Calangute, there are several vendors selling bhel puri alongside Chinese fast food stalls, which are minting money. He says, Goa Tourism should use staff that has expertise to promote Goan food: "knowledgeable officers are not made use of. Goan food is

Measures to promote Goan food as suggested

- Have a system of recognising authentic Goan restaurants and give them a graded certification and exemption from certain taxes.
- Goans need to patronise and promote these restaurants.
- With support from the government, The Goan Hotel and Restaurants Association needs to guide members and encourage them to showcase local food. At all trade fairs and cultural shows Goan food should be promoted.
- Goan food needs to be taken to another level by adding delight value to a dish. E.g. serving Bebinca with almond cream or roasted cashew nuts thus increasing the plating quotient as well.

Exploring Goa through local Goan cuisine has been a delectable journey for many tourists. But, in the last few years the coastal belt has seen a number of Goan-cuisine restaurants being replaced with eateries offering fast food, Indian food and pseudo-continental and indo-Chinese food. While Goa Tourism has been channelising efforts to create a 'brand Goa' and increase tourist footfalls, NT BUZZ examines why local Goan cuisine is slowly going off the table

our identity which should be made known to tourists visiting the state."

THE OTHER SIDE

On the other side is Goa - which has so much to offer in terms of food. Without travelling to destinations like France, Italy or South East Asia, you can have an array to suit your palate. From steaks, sizzlers and pastas to salads, sushi and Greek food, you can find it all in Goa. These restaurants are in a league of their own and are happy with the business they get, but prove to be a threat to restaurants offering Goan food.

Food enthusiast and publisher, Sapna Sardesai believes that tourists have to be given what they want. "We cannot force feed them Goan food if they don't like it. I have interacted with lot of North Indians who find Goan food distasteful. So we just have to keep Goan cuisine as an option but not as the only thing on the menu. There are other ways to promote the ethos of Goa. Let us adopt those," she says.

Agreeing with Sapna is Jonathan Sequeira, training manager in the hospitality sector. He says the multi cuisine style of restaurants is successful in Goa more than just Goan specialty restaurants. "As we do have tourists coming in from different parts of the world, this works like a charm. It's always nice to go someplace and find that it has cuisine from your hometown or something new. You do find Goan dishes on several menus, although far from authentic," he says. He thinks people from everywhere love Goan food, but because the cuisine is mainly non-vegetarian, they prefer staying away from it.

Sheena Barnes, resident of Calangute has seen change over the years with more people opting for non-Goan cuisine. She says many today don't like experimenting or trying new cuisines. Besides, allergies, diets and other issues are factors too.

Chef, Marlon Lobo of the Goan Foodies thinks that people with good culinary exposure and sensibility have an extraordinary choice here in Goa. "Only in our little state do the Italians serve Italian cuisine, the French serve the best croissants, the Germans make the best sour dough bread, and the Israelis serve the best Jerusalem mix."

He is aware that there has been an influx of certain kind of tourist whose palates are used to Indo-Chinese and North Indian cuisine. This is the reason why so many multi-cuisines have sprouted on the Calangute-Baga belt. He says, "But if one is looking for delicacies made by extraordinary chefs, Goa has abundance. In fact these fine chefs and restaurateurs have made Goa their home and shop. The top 50 restaurants handpicked by The Goan Foodie is a classic example of what Goa has to offer on a plate," he says.



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