

THIRD EYE EDITION

Food for thought



Let me come clean on this – I have written more about food than I have ever cooked it. It seems so much easier to toss the right words into a bowl, add a dash of sentiment, and serve without too much of sizzling and bubbling over the stove. Writing about food does not involve shopping lists, cleaning, slicing, mashing, dicing, mincing, pureeing and all those messy, tedious activities that lead to a dish which is consumed in two minutes flat by family members who are watching television. Where women and food are concerned, the connection has always been uneasy. Eve tempted Adam to take a bite of the apple, and he did, opening the floodgates of trouble. One would think a grown-up man could exercise his own choice, but no, it is always the woman's fault.

Today, food has escaped the confines of the kitchen and has become all-pervasive. You see food on television commercials, giant burgers and fries on billboards, names of restaurants flashing by as you drive. At supermarkets, you have kiwis from New Zealand, dates from Abu Dhabi and olive oil from Italy. Every channel worth its salt has a celebrity chef show and you have to know what Kylie Kwong, Nigella and Gordon Ramsay are cooking up, to keep up with the times. But even more than before, food remains a guilty pleasure. My lissome niece, invited for dinner, apologetically explained she was on a no carbs diet and proceeded to have her fish curry without rice, even as I gaped at her iron-clad self-control. People are swearing off eggs, red meat, dairy products, butter, sugar, refined flour, salt, polished rice to the extent that when you invite people for dinner, you might just as well serve only a couple of vitamin pills with water. As if this collective renouncing of food is not enough, you have salmonella scares, bird flu scares, mad cow disease scares, which tend to send you to the panicked conclusion that the best way to stay safe is to stay hungry.

For me, as for so many of you, food is so much more than a means of sustenance. Food is an inextricable part of who you are. You can even tell how a person is by the way he eats. The one who picks his food, taking small, finicky mouthfuls – he is the one who does not trust life, who is afraid to open up. And the other... see how he eats with gusto, not fighting shy of burping or licking his fingers or making noises of satisfaction. He appreciates life's bounty, is at ease with himself, and has no idea you are summing him up. Not that he would care.

THIRD EYE EDITION

Food is more than nutrition. Food is memory. Let's try this small example. Suppose I use the word *jalebi*. Yes, that crisp, golden Indian sweet, that whorled delight that crunches between your teeth and bubbles with hot syrup. We all know what it tastes like. But the word *jalebi* is like a bell whose peal resounds in the dim inner vaults of our separate memories. You will, along with it, remember your grandfather who took you on some cold day to the sweetmeat shop. I will remember my brother's face – all sticky and blissful as the sweet manna travelled inward. So the word *jalebi* is a Rorschach blot that has different interpretations of the same thing. Long after colours, sounds, faces have faded from memory, the tongue awakes to certain tastes that go back across time, and through that certain sourness, sweetness or fieriness, an entire world is resurrected.

The great Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti wrote in his memoirs that one of the nicest things in the world was to stop whatever one was doing and devote attention to eating. But those days seem to be long over. They have come up with food you can have when on the move – you are sipping coffee from spill-free cups as you drive, your burger disappears into your mouth as you frown into the laptop screen. I have seen restaurant guests holler details of deals on the phone while waving a half-chewed chicken leg. Gross.

It has become a fad these days to drag in a feminist perspective on every topic under the sun. Without alluding to any of the obvious aspects, I would say that today's woman faces a culinary adversary much more formidable than her mother-in-law. She is expected to conjure up not just *dal-chawal* or its Assamese version, the *pitika – masor tenga*, but the spread at the table must look as good as it tastes, that too without cheating with Photoshop. If she were to sulk and give up her kitchen duties on one of her bad days, her offspring would just speed dial the nearest takeaway. Nobody has really looked into these displacement issues.

I have with me a special issue of the *Granta* magazine, devoted to the theme of family. The cover encapsulates a world that has slipped into oblivion. An American family sits eating at a table. On a crisp, snow-white table cloth are laid out platters of meat, bread and a covered casserole of perhaps what is a stew. The man is dressed in a formal suit, complete with a white shirt and knotted tie. His hair is neatly combed sideways. He is frowning into his plate, and his unsmiling face seems to petrify his two young children, whose bent heads look as if they are trying very hard not to attract his attention. His wife is intent on the food on her plate. She does not expect any compliments. Maybe she's thinking of the washing up to do. They are the solid all-American family of the 1950s, hardworking, church-going, still sticking to the civilising conventions of formal dinners, well-laid out tables, sparkling cutlery, bone china plates. But there is something tense and disturbing beneath the apparent quietness and order of a family meal. The scene reminds me of Tolstoy's truism of all families being unhappy in their own way.

By now, it must be quite clear to the reader that these ruminations on food were set off by the forthcoming Magh Bihu celebrations. Celebrating Magh Bihu in the city has always

THIRD EYE EDITION

seemed a bit incongruous, like Santa Claus partying with Zulu tribesmen. Simply put, Magh Bihu and the city do not gel. The urbanite can never figure out how wonderful a farmer feels when he is able to stock his granary with a bountiful harvest. He has pitted himself against the elements – the pitiless sun and the lashing rains, to coax saplings into crops. He has driven his cattle on squelchy mud, scared away raiding elephants at times, and looked into the empty sky for the life-giving rains. We city-slickers just stroll to the grocers to lug home pre-packed stuff, and complain about the delay at the cash counter. So, when talking heads gravely concur on TV that we must preserve our age-old rituals and customs, it makes me laugh out loud. What customs are we talking about? Have we ever suggested to our children to go out there and live in a farmer's house during Magh Bihu, to get a first hand feel of what it's all about? Oh no, the papas and mamas would be horrified. Was the water drinkable? Were there proper toilets? What about mosquitos?

But in this season of bounty and feasting, let me not end on this sour note. Magh Bihu will always mean to me a year when I was still little enough to run wild. Along with my boisterous male cousins, I trapped fireflies in improvised Horlicks bottles, startled sleeping dogs till they were nervous wrecks, engaged in ferocious stone flinging matches. We were sun-burnt, wild-haired, restless creatures. Even our mothers gave up on us. Then Magh Bihu came along. With supreme self-confidence, we declared we would cook our own Magh Bihu feast in an open field between two houses. A boy smuggled out two bedsheets from his home. Others brought utensils, vegetables, oil, spices in very much the same manner. A hardy Boy-Scout got a fire going, but we still were divided on the menu. Worse, nobody knew any recipes. Being the sole female, I attracted their accusatory stares. I just shrugged. You can't expect someone to throw stones and cook at the same time. We looked a pretty foolish bunch, hunched around a fire, staring up at the stars and shivering in the cold. From the homes all around us wafted delicious aromas of fish frying, *dal* being seasoned, curries rich with bay leaf and clove, round brinjal slices fried in batter. We sat in a pool of misery, knowing we were too unpopular to be invited in, and that our sins had come home to roost.

But wait, this story has a happy ending. Suddenly, there emerged from the darkness the figure of my oldest aunt. My *Borma* had a slight smile on her kind face. In a trice we understood that she knew exactly the thoughts going on in our minds. Without much ado, she ordered each of us to her home to carry back plates and bowls of food. Soon, we were having a picnic out there on the grass, licking the food off our plates and laughing in sheer relief. In all her wisdom and experience, she did not invite us to eat at her table. That would mean we were conceding defeat. She let us be on our own turf, under the jewelled stars and on the dew-tipped grass; as if we were a band of heroic wanderers. In this Magh Bihu piece, I raise a toast to this wise and gracious lady. Better still, I will call her.