

May 28, 2008

Smita and Sanjeev Chandra

Not all dosas are created equal.

Even in southern India, where they are traditionally breakfast fare, there are local variations.

In the Greater Toronto Area, the gigantic, lacy crepes have become a main attraction as immigrants started opening southern Indian-style restaurants. Among the best are Udipi Palace, Saravanaa Bhavan and Madras Dosa Hut.

At Saravanaa Bhavan, dosas are typical of those found in the state of Tamil Nadu: paper thin, light and crisp. Manager Ranga Iyer says they use only the freshest ingredients, and none of their restaurants has a freezer in the kitchen.

Indian immigrants who opened restaurants in Toronto were predominantly from the state of Punjab, and the menus they offered reflected their origins: Tandoori chicken, naan, lamb curry and samosas are all Punjabi staples.

While northern Indian dishes have become favourites the world over, south Indian cuisine is little known in the West.

It is largely vegetarian: pulaos, or rice cooked with vegetables and spices; idlis, which are light, fluffy, steamed rice cakes; and payasam, a dessert of rice cooked with thickened, sweetened milk.

Even a decade ago it was difficult to find a well-made dosa in restaurants in Canada, but now chefs are experimenting with an astounding variety of fillings. You can find dosas served with cheddar cheese, scrambled eggs, butter chicken, chicken curry, baby greens and grilled vegetables, to name a few Canadian variations.

At Udipi Palace on Gerrard St. E., owner Hubert D'Mello is renowned for his twist on the traditional dosa, customarily served plain with no filling (paper dosa) or with a simple filling of potatoes (masala) or cottage cheese (paneer).

D'Mello has experimented with Thai vegetable curry filling, a Mexican dosa filled with spicy hot kidney beans, a wilted spinach dosa, a pizza dosa and even a Sichuan dosa. For kids, he sometimes makes one filled with jam.

"We have to live up to the pace of the world because of the competition," he says. "People always crave something different all the time. I try to provide it for them in my restaurant."

On weekends, especially in the summer, Udipi Palace customers come from as far away as the United States to sample his novel vegetarian fare.

Dosas are made from fermented rice and lentil batter, spread onto huge griddles to make thin, savoury crepes that have a mild, slightly sour flavour.

To spice them up for the Indian palate they are filled with potatoes cooked with sautéed onions, ginger and garlic, and flavoured with mustard seeds, curry leaves and fresh coriander.

A dosa is traditionally served on a fresh green banana leaf, the only "plate" large enough to hold it without the edges trailing on the table. Accompanying it is chutney made with coconut, herbs and green chilies and a bowl of sambhar, which is a spicy stew of lentils, vegetables and tamarind. You eat a dosa by breaking off a piece with your fingers, wrapping it around some potato filling, scooping up a dab of chutney, dipping it in sambhar and putting the whole thing in your mouth. The burst of flavour explodes on your tongue.

Dosa batter was conventionally prepared with a large stone mortar and pestle, a process that required considerable muscle. The larger versions used for large feasts were truly gigantic: simply moving them from one location to the next was a major undertaking. Most people use an electric blender instead, but traditionalists swear that the flavour is not the same.

Dosas are no more difficult to make than crepes, and if you have ever made those you are well on your way to turning out good dosas in your own kitchen.

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Udipi Palace, 1460 Gerrard St. E., 416-405-8189, Saravanaa Bhavan (saravanaabhavan.ca), and Madras Dosa Hut (madrasdosahut.com).



Freelance writer Smita Chandra prepares a south Indian crepe, or dosa, filled with spicy potato stuffing at her home in Mississauga.

ANDREW WALLACE/TORONTO STAR