



BEYOND



CURRY

*Explosively flavorful
and addictively snack-
able, Indian street food
is the West's newest
edible phenomenon.*

BY
MARGO TRUE

A spread of street
food at Vik's Chaat
Corner, Berkeley.

THE

throng of customers around the little cart drew me in. One night years ago in Delhi, near the Red Fort, I inched my way to the front of the crowd and ordered a snack from a street vendor. He handed me a steel plate—a landing pad for a series of small golden puffs. I popped one in my mouth, and it shattered in a burst of cilantro-mint water. It was called *pani puri*, and it was the most thrilling snack I'd ever eaten.

Back in the States, I kept an eye out for the street foods I'd come to love while traveling over the years in India, especially the subcategory called *chaat*, explosively flavorful snacks based on fried dough. But our Indian restaurants then—invariably named Bombay Palace or Taj Mahal—offered only standards like chicken tikka masala and naan. Instead, I found street food in Indian neighborhoods, lining up with homesick expats at counters in grocery stores or strip-mall restaurants to order what seemed, then, like a secret.

That secret is out. Especially in the West, where Asian culture runs deep and the food truck boom has primed our palates with flavors from all over the planet, Indian street snacks are moving into the mainstream. “We don’t have homogeneous tastes here,” says Amod Chopra, owner of Vik’s Chaat Corner, in Berkeley. “So I don’t have to conform to steak and potatoes.” He was the first of several Bay Area chefs to take street food as their muse, using its bright flavors and hustle-bustle to create new kinds of Indian restaurants that are pure, delicious fun.

On a typical Saturday at Vik’s, some 1,400 people, at least half of them non-Indians, pour in. You can watch your food being made, as if you were on the street in India: One guy vigorously tosses *bhel puri*—a mix of puffed rice, cilantro, potatoes, and onions—with chutneys. Another fries up lamb *samosas*. Huge balloons of dough called *bhature* swell and crisp in hot oil. The crowd seems to flow in six directions at once, collecting food here, flatware over there, tea at yet



Top: Amod Chopra at Vik's Chaat Corner in Berkeley. “There’s something very zippy, zesty, and vibrant about street food,” he says. Above: Customers at Vik’s.

another counter. That’s intentional, says Chopra delightedly: “Mayhem should be part of the experience!” The place feels, tastes, and smells like India—there’s even a heady undercurrent of incense from the market at the far end.

But it also feels like Berkeley, with its sleek signage, skylights, and compostable plates. Chopra moved Vik’s—legendary in Berkeley for two decades—into this location four years ago, and his new menu, written for a crossover crowd, turns unfamiliar dishes into adventures. “Chaat literally means ‘to lick,’” it explains, going on to say that these snacks were traditionally served on leaves and were “so tongue-tickling that one could not resist licking the last morsels from the leaf before discarding it.” Each snack is described through a memory of seeking it out, or seeing it prepared, or gobbling it up: “At 3 p.m. sharp every day, the *bhel puri wala* would pass our neighborhood ringing the bell on his pushcart...” By the time you order, you’re practically drooling.

When I heard that Vik’s had inspired a new restaurant in Portland called Bollywood Theater, I had to hop on a plane. Snow had shut down the restaurant (and pretty much all of Portland) when I arrived, but its owner and chef, Troy MacLarty, kindly unlocked the door and fired up the stove for me. During the couple of hours we were there, people kept showing up—in defiance of citywide warnings to stay inside—and hungrily peering in.

I hoped the food wasn’t visible from the door, because it was glorious. He started with one of my favorite snacks, called *papri chaat*, a complex assembly

of wheat crackers, puffed rice, vegetables, chutneys, and yogurt, all showered with spices, thread-thin fried noodle bits, and cilantro. He followed it up with a *kathi* roll (a flatbread with an egg scrambled on top of it, then rolled up with other ingredients) and *vada pav* (a deep-fried potato-patty slider known as the “poor man’s burger” in Mumbai). “My proudest moment was when some Indian customers picked out the stall that I based my vada pav on,” he says.

MacLarty learned about Indian food while working at Chez Panisse, in Berkeley. A few times a month, he’d head over to Vik’s,



Like India itself, Portland's Bollywood Theater floods the senses. Clockwise from above, at the S.E. Division St. location: Crisp chile-lime okra and cucumber *raita* (spiced yogurt); customers order at the counter under antique chandeliers and lamps; Troy MacLarty brings a top chef's talent to Indian snacks. Right and left: Around the room, visual vignettes—including a toy auto-rickshaw, Bollywood movie posters, and vintage photos from Kerala—layer on the charm.





Above: Tasty fun at Juhu Beach Club, here in the form of the *vada pav* (mashed potato-patty slider), with pickled onions and cilantro chutney. Top right: Chef Preeti Mistry in Juhu's open kitchen. Opposite, top: Juhu, with jarred spices and tiffins (Indian lunch boxes). Center: Juhu's Bombay sandwich, served grilled cheese-style, with spicy tomato soup. Right: Sleek and colorful Badmaash. "We wanted to do cool, casual, funky, fresh Indian," says co-owner Nakul Mahendro. Left: Chai (spiced tea) at Badmaash.



“I’m making something that’s very California... beautiful foods from the market with an Indian street-food template.”

—PREETI MISTRY, JUHU BEACH CLUB, OAKLAND

loving the spicy, comforting flavors there. “It replaced Mexican food for me,” he says. After moving to Portland, he taught himself to cook Indian food from books and took a three-week trip to India. Then, in 2012, he opened Bollywood. “We got crushed immediately.” With just 56 seats, he was serving 450 people a day. Barely two years later, he’s opened a second, larger location.

As you might expect, Bollywood Theater does show Hindi movies, but that’s just part of its evocation of India, so personal and complete that the place seems more like an art installation than a restaurant. Surfaces look weathered, as though worn down by heat and time. Old movie posters and nostalgic photos of Indian families plaster the walls. Walk in the bathroom, and you’ll be watching a raucous video of Indian street life (“I wanted to put it in the most claustrophobic part of the restaurant,” MacLarty says). Every detail is meant to transport whoever comes in.

FOR OTHER CHEFS who are taking their lead from Indian street food, authenticity isn’t exactly the point. “My idea was never to replicate what I’ve had in India, but to take inspiration from what I’ve experienced,” says Preeti Mistry, a former Google chef who opened

Juhu Beach Club in Oakland last year (it’s named after a Mumbai beach famous for chaat sellers). Mistry’s parents are from India, but she was raised in the States. “I’m making something that’s very California, very Oakland, that is what I want to eat—the beautiful foods from the market with a street-food template.” This means, for instance, replacing the usual potatoes and chickpeas in a snack known as *sev puri* with yams and green apples in winter, green chickpeas and nectarines in summer. She’s best known for her pav, slider-size sandwiches. At the restaurant—an irrepressibly happy place done in salmon pink and orange—I watch a nose-ringed cook plate up a Holy Cow pav (short ribs braised with cardamom) for me at the counter, then sink my teeth in. Like many other things on the menu, it’s not much like what I’ve eaten in India, but it’s done so well that it doesn’t matter.

Across the bay, Curry Up Now interprets Indian street food even more loosely, with a Mexican fusion spin. The chain’s storefronts have a frat-house feel, with a game often playing on a big screen and people lining up for *paratha* flatbread quesadillas, or hangover food like the UnBurger, a smashed samosa on a bun slathered with curry. I’m a sucker, though, for the Sexy Fries—sweet-potato fries covered with cheese and chicken

tikka masala. “We wanted to make it more approachable to order Indian food,” owner Akash Kapoor says. “No 20-page menu where you’re wondering what’s the difference between the tomato-onion sauce and the onion-tomato sauce.”

And then there’s the new wave’s resident badass—almost literally. Badmaash (“rascal” in Hindi)—opened last summer in Los Angeles by Nakul Mahendro; his father, Pawan (who is also the chef); and his brother, Arjun—blends the family’s great sense of humor with their sheer love of street food. “We’re all a little chubby, and whenever we go to Bombay, as soon as we land, we’ll run out and get papri chaat,” says Nakul. He describes chaat, with its lively dance of flavors and textures, as “an Indian 5-Hour Energy shot.” Badmaash’s menu plays around with the standards—with dishes like Badass Chicken Tikka—and serves it up with style, a terrific list of local beers, and a dash of kitsch (one wall doubles as a movie screen for old Bollywood films).

I could never have imagined, all those years ago in Delhi, that someday I’d be eating “chickpeas & chips” (papri chaat), with a craft beer in my hand and the Beastie Boys playing in the background. Indian street food as a bona fide cool scene: That’s a thrill.

YOUR GUIDE TO CHAAT

These snacks typically rely on several standard ingredients but in varying combinations and amounts, making each dish a different experience.

ALOO TIKKI
Fried spiced potato patties; often served with *chole* (chickpea curry).



Cooked chickpeas

Papri
Fried wheat crackers

Murmura
Puffed rice

Hot cilantro-mint chutney

Chaat masala
Tangy, earthy blend of ground dried green mangoes, black salt, cumin, coriander, red chile, ginger, and other spices

BHEL PURI
A puffed-rice concoction featuring diced potatoes, tomatoes, crisp raw onions, and chickpeas; dressed with cilantro-mint chutney.

SAMOSA CHOLE
Fried pastries usually filled with either spicy peas and potatoes, or ground lamb; served with cilantro-mint chutney and/or chickpea curry.



DAHI PAPRI CHAAT

Arguably the most complex chaat, it's a layering of wheat crackers with the same vegetables as *bhel puri* (and/or sprouted lentils and beans), copiously drizzled with cilantro-mint chutney, tamarind chutney, yogurt, and (phew!) a snappy sour *chaat masala* and *sev* on top. Plus cilantro!



Dahi
Yogurt

Diced tomatoes

Sprouted dal
Legumes like
lentils, peas,
and beans

Diced
boiled
potatoes

Cilantro

Spicy-
sweet
tamarind
chutney

Sev
Threadlike
chickpea-
flour noodles,
fried and
broken into
bits

VADA PAV

As popular in Mumbai as hot dogs in New York, this is a fried patty of mashed potato spiced with green chile, ginger, and cumin, served with chutneys on a buttered bun.

KATHI ROLL

Similar to a burrito: flaky wheat-flour *paratha* (flatbread) with an egg cooked into a creamy scramble right on top, then rolled up with any of several fillings. A specialty of Kolkata.

SEV PURI

Little stacks of mashed potato on *papri* crackers, showered with chutneys and lots of crisp sev.

DAHI BATATA PURI

Like *dahi papri chaat*, except the crackers are puffed into crunchy balloons that hold the vegetables and chutneys. Eat immediately, before they wilt.

PANI PURI

The same fried puffs as for *dahi batata puri*, filled with bits of potato and chickpeas, a dab of tamarind chutney, and lots of spiced water; very refreshing when they burst in your mouth.

WHERE TO GO

Our favorite Indian street-food restaurants in the West:

LOS ANGELES

BADMAASH

\$\$; 108 W. Second St.; badmaashla.com.

PORTLAND

BOLLYWOOD THEATER

\$\$; 2039 N.E. Alberta St. and 3010 S.E. Division St.; bollywoodtheaterpdx.com.

S.F. BAY AREA

CURRY UP NOW

\$; curryupnow.com for locations.

JUHU BEACH CLUB

\$\$; 5179 Telegraph Ave., Oakland; jububeachclub.com.

VIK'S CHAAT CORNER

\$; 2390 Fourth St., Berkeley; vikschaatcorner.com.

DIGITAL BONUS

Get street-snack recipes from this story, plus an expanded list of restaurants, at sunset.com/indianfood.

HOW TO EAT PANI PURI

Beloved in North India, this snack is called *gol gappa* in and around Delhi and *puchka* in Kolkata. A good *puri* (puff) will be shatter-crisp, with spicy *pani* (water).



STEP 1 Make a small hole in the top of the *pani puri* with your thumb.



STEP 2 Drop in a few bits of potato and chickpeas.



STEP 3 Drizzle in some sweet-sour tamarind chutney.



STEP 4 Dunk into water spiked with spices (or pour it in). Pop into your mouth. 🍴