

Bindu Gopal Rao

In the 1980s when I was growing up in Hyderabad, there were not too many options to eat out, especially for snacks. Any eating out was anyway mostly restricted to special occasions. So, when a small eatery called Sheetal Chaat Bhandar opened relatively close to where I lived, it was the start of a new gastronomic chapter in my life.

The first time I visited the place, I was quite taken in by the sight of the large iron pan that had a fiery red curry simmering on the edge in a neat circle and a blob of yellow butter sizzling in the centre. Using an iron ladle, the chef then pulled a small portion of the curry into the middle and blended it with the butter. The mélange of curry and butter and the aroma of the masala wafting through the small eatery had me salivating.

NOSHTALGIA

The fiery taste of childhood

I would hop on a cycle rickshaw to go to Sheetal Chaat Bhandar and get some pav bhaji packed to enjoy at home

Focal point

The chef then sliced a pav in two and dunked it into some butter in another

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pan and in a minute, a crispy brown edge had formed on the bread. Plating the pav and bhaji with a dash of finely chopped onion and a wedge of lime, he handed it to me. One bite, and I was transported to culinary heaven. The punch of spices from the bhaji was balanced by the buttered pav and the crunch of the onion and slight tartness from the lime meant a perfect burst of flavours in my mouth.

I was in school then and soon it became a ritual to celebrate food and I looked forward to visiting the eatery. On several occasions, I would hop on a cycle rickshaw and get the dish packed to enjoy at home. This was the time before mobile phones and the Internet and the plate of food was always the focal point of our attention. That is perhaps why the flavour profile of this dish is so ingrained in my mind.

I visited Shee-



tal Chaat Bhandar many times, and it was amazing how the chef always managed to keep the taste intact. Little wonder then that pav bhaji became my favourite snack. A few years later, my family shifted to Secunderabad and I never visited the eatery again.

Nailed it

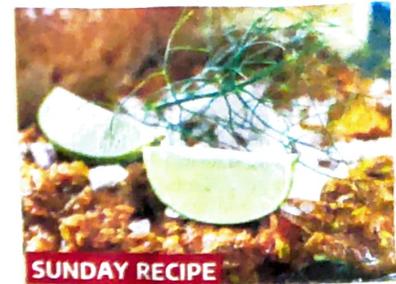
Later, in the mid-90s, after moving to Bengaluru, eating out became more commonplace and pav bhaji was the dish I invariably ordered. However, it was never like the one I had eaten in Hyderabad.

Despite trying it in several restaurants, the taste never matched the memory of it in my head. I then started experimenting with pav bhaji in my own kitchen, using the typical vegetables – beans, peas, carrots and potatoes – and adding readymade pav bhaji masala. Though the taste was okay, somehow the fiery colour of the bhaji was missing.

Many experiments later, I worked on a healthy version of the bhaji using traditionally 'boring' vegetables like radish, ridge gourd, beetroot, knol khol and chayote. And after some trial and error, I managed to hit the sweet spot in my head. I know that I probably will not be able to replicate the taste of Sheetal Chaat Bhandar's pav bhaji, but when my nephews tell me they love my version, I know that my inspiration has served me well.

The freelance writer and photographer from Bengaluru seeks offbeat experiences through travel.

• KR. DEEPAK & GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK



SUNDAY RECIPE

Pav Bhaji (with a healthy twist)

Ingredients

- 1 medium beetroot
- 2 carrots
- 1 ridge gourd
- 2 medium chayote or chow chow
- 2 medium knol khol
- 2 medium potatoes
- 2 medium tomatoes
- 2 medium onions
- 2 tbsp pav bhaji masala
- 1 tsp turmeric powder
- 2-3 tbsp butter (can use more)
- 3 tbsp chopped coriander leaves
- Salt to taste

Method

1. Finely chop beetroot, carrots, ridge gourd, chow chow, knol khol and potatoes and pressure cook until soft.
2. Melt butter in a pan on medium flame, taking care it does not burn. Then add finely chopped onions and sauté.
3. Add finely chopped tomatoes and sauté till the onions and tomatoes make a homogenous mix.
4. Now add the cooked vegetables and stir. Mash the mix using a masher. Add salt, turmeric powder and pav bhaji masala powder.
5. Cover and allow to cook on low flame for 20 minutes.
6. Garnish with a dash of butter and finely chopped coriander leaves.
7. Heat butter in a pan. Slice the pav in half and toast till light brown.
8. Serve with chopped onions and sliced lemon wedges.