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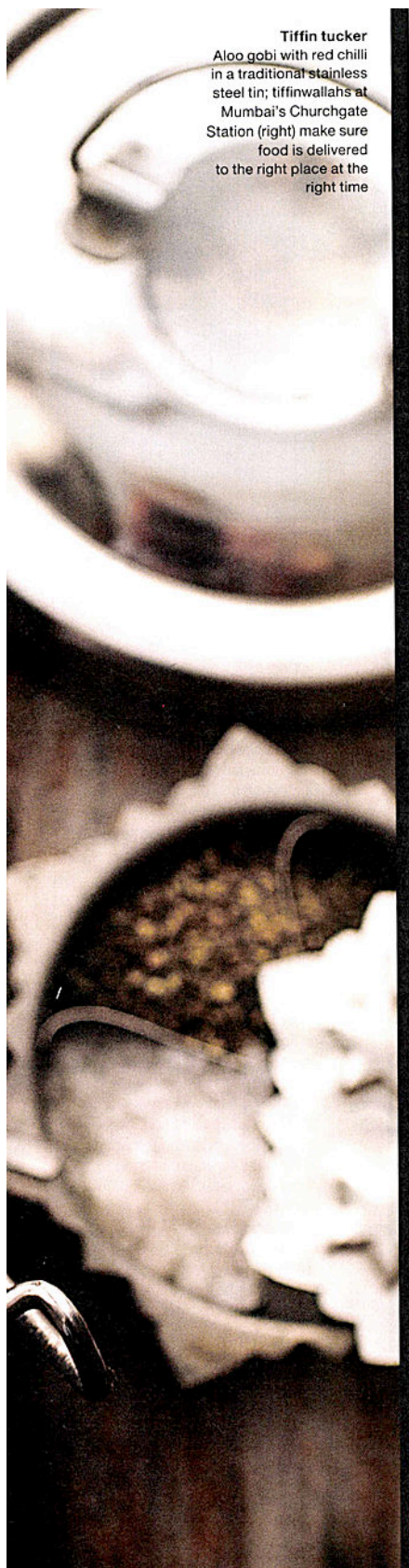


Explorations / Mumbai



THE CITY THAT ALWAYS EATS

Indians love to eat. And Mumbai is their food capital: whether it's tiffinwallahs delivering workers lunch just the way they like it or street stalls and cafés serving taste sensations from every corner of the subcontinent. **Chris Caldicott** grazes his way around town



Tiffin tucker
Aloo gobi with red chilli
in a traditional stainless
steel tin; tiffinwallahs at
Mumbai's Churchgate
Station (right) make sure
food is delivered
to the right place at the
right time



The stallholder fills a wafer-thin puri ball of crispy fried wheat with a mixture of diced boiled potato, chickpeas, tamarind and date chutneys, followed by a liquid laced with chilli, cumin, coriander, mint, palm sugar and black salt. I pop it my mouth. One crunch sets off a taste explosion of sweet, sour and spicy flavours so wonderful I can't resist having five more on the spot.

This introduction to one of Mumbai's most popular treats came when I joined the crowds of families, young lovers, tourists and homeward-bound workers at Chowpatty Beach. They come here in the late afternoon to watch the sun set and to feast on the spicy snacks known as chaats, served from dozens of colourful makeshift stalls. There are plenty of chaats on offer, like dhai puri made with yoghurt and bean sprouts and bhel puri with puffed rice and roasted peanuts. One thing they all have in common is that you have to eat them quickly before they go soggy.

Indians love to snack. When hunger pangs hit, handy stalls selling all manner of delights will never be far away, making it possible to graze day and night on an almost endless choice of bite-sized morsels bursting with flavour. Mumbai is the snack capital of India and, as I was about to find out, Chowpatty Beach is just one of many spots in the city for food on the hoof.

My culinary tour continues at Yazdani, an antique bakery and restaurant in the back streets of the city's colonial fort area. Yazdani is one of the remnants of the once many Parsi cafés established by Zoroastrian settlers from Iran. Alongside cooking Bombay Parsi classics such as dhansak curries, during the Raj these Iranian bakeries pandered to the British love of fresh bread and biscuits, churning out old favourites like buttery Shrewsburies and bread pudding.

Displaying a seemingly terminal state of elegant decay, this part of Mumbai – with its tree-lined avenues and winding lanes between monumental Indo-Saracenic and extravagantly neogothic buildings – is still dripping with the nostalgic atmosphere of its grand imperial past. But any illusion of this being a calm gentrified city was shattered immediately on arrival at Churchgate station.

Every weekday around noon something rather extraordinary happens at Churchgate. Long after peak rush hour, when even a sardine would find it beyond the pale, the commuter trains are still arriving every few minutes crammed with passengers. Among them is a small army of wire thin but deceptively muscular and agile men sporting white Nehru caps. They emerge from the carriages bearing long wooden racks on their heads, all piled high with the familiar cylindrical, multi-tiered, stainless-steel tiffin boxes. Each tiffin box is filled with a home-cooked lunch on a miraculous daily journey from a domestic kitchen of the city's northern residential suburbs to a worker's desk in the downtown business district.

A thrusting modern city, Mumbai is a beacon of the new India's thriving economy and contemporary cool. However most of its food culture comes from an earlier era long before the city's name was changed from Bombay in 1995. ☐



Explorations / Mumbai

When the Portuguese landed here nearly 500 years ago, they named it Bom Bahia, or good harbour, then in 1661 gave it to the British. The East India Company moved its headquarters here and Bombay became the busiest and richest port on India's Arabian Sea coast, luring migrants from all over the subcontinent.

These new residents preferred to eat their own cuisine and often had diets dictated by their caste or religion. For those with jobs in the city far from their homes, finding a suitable lunch was often impossible. So, in 1890, local entrepreneur Mahadeo Havaji Bachche, spotting a business opportunity, came up with the idea of delivering to their workplace a lunch freshly cooked each morning, exactly the way they liked it, by their own cooks at home.

As the city grew and the suburbs became ever more distant, the tiffin service expanded. And as the tiffinwallahs, also known as dabbawallahs – meaning 'one who carries a box' – grew in number, they formalised their trade by forming their union, Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association.

Today each tiffinwallah is effectively self-employed and obliged to make a donation to the union in return for a job for life, earning £80 a month. Their customers pay £3 a month for their service. And each

day these men successfully deliver around 200,000 tiffins on time to the right desk in the city and then return the empty boxes to the home they came from.

Despite the huge wealth of snacking opportunities and a recent proliferation of Western style fast-food joints in downtown Mumbai, there are plenty of commuters who still choose a healthy square meal for lunch. Under a belting midday sun, a constant stream of crates packed with tiffin boxes are delivered from train to pavement to be quickly sorted by another regiment of tiffinwallahs loaded on to hand carts and old sit-up-and-beg-style bicycles, then despatched in every direction into the frenetic Mumbai traffic.

No culinary tour of Mumbai would be complete without the tiffinwallahs spectacle, but what is inside these inscrutable boxes? It depends on the origins of the recipient. Native Maharashtrians like channa

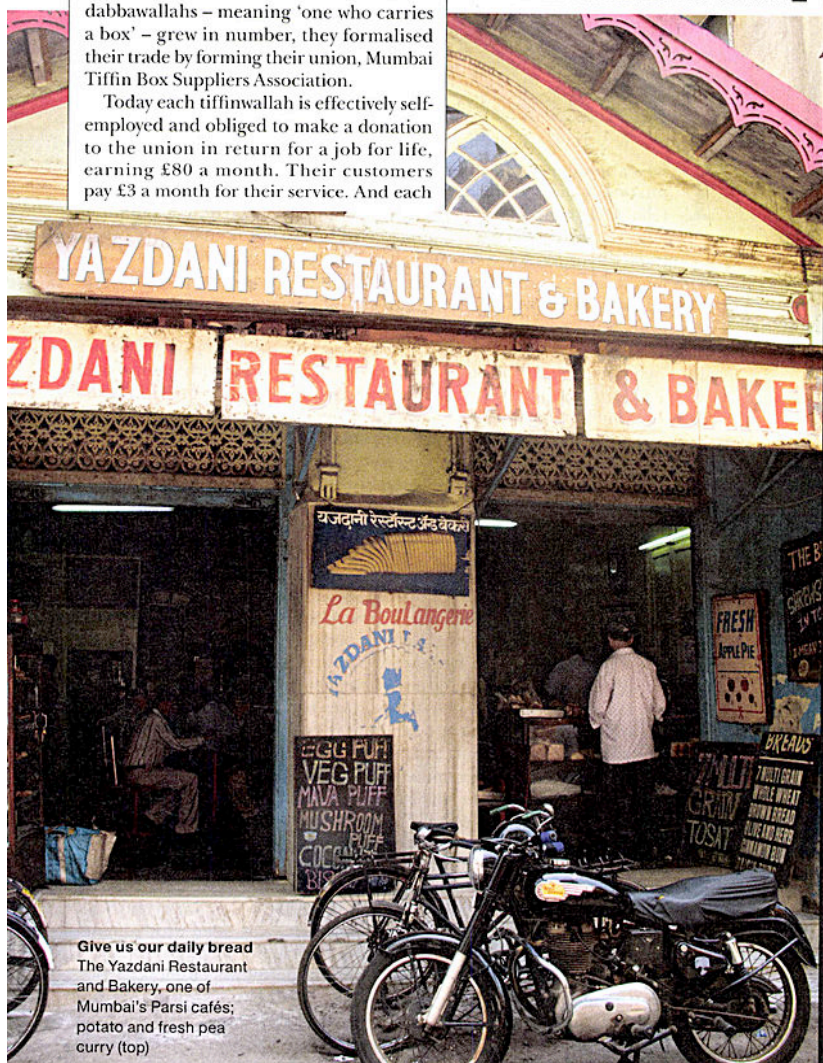


POTATO AND FRESH PEA CURRY

New potatoes and fresh peas in an easy-to-prepare tiffin curry.
Serves 4-6

- 600g diced baby new potatoes
- ½ tsp ground turmeric
- 4 tbsp sunflower oil
- 2 tsp black mustard seeds
- 14 curry leaves
- 1 large onion, diced
- 4cm piece ginger root, peeled and finely chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, crushed
- 3 green chillies, finely chopped
- 2 tsp ground coriander
- 400g tin chopped tomatoes
- 225g shelled fresh peas
- 2 tsp garam masala

Place the potatoes in a medium-sized pan with the ground turmeric and add enough water to cover. Bring the pan to the boil, then reduce the heat and simmer until the potatoes are just soft. Drain the potatoes, retaining 2 teacups of the cooking water, and set to one side for later. Heat the oil in a large wok. When it's really hot, add the mustard seeds. As the seeds start to pop, stir in the curry leaves, onion, ginger, garlic and chilli and stir-fry until the onion is soft but not brown. Stir in the coriander and cooked diced potatoes. When the potatoes are coated with spice, stir in the tomatoes, the peas and the retained cooking water. Season with salt to taste and gently simmer until the peas are cooked and the sauce has thickened. Finally, stir in the garam masala and simmer for a further couple of minutes before serving. Find more tantalising recipes, visit highlife.ba.com/mumbai.



Give us our daily bread
The Yazdani Restaurant and Bakery, one of Mumbai's Parsi cafés; potato and fresh pea curry (top)



EAT LIKE A MUMBAIKAR BY CAROLYN CALDICOTT

The first port of call has to be the many stalls at **Chowpatty Beach**. After a juice at **Bachelorr's**, join the carnival atmosphere at **Bademiya** (Tulloch Road) and savour the best chicken tikka roll in town.

Immerse yourself in the new wave of fusion food hangouts at **The Table** (thetable.in) or go for the shabby chic of **Pali Village Cafe** (602 Ambedkar Road).

For old-school elegance, the Irani cafés never disappoint: **Yazdani Bakery & Restaurant** (Fountain Akbar Ally) serves impeccable biscuits – and don't miss the barberry pilaus at **Britannia & Co** (Sprott Road).

Mumbai has some fantastic Mangalorean seafood spots – **Trishna** (Ropewalk Lane) has unforgettable fresh butter and black pepper crab.

Never leave Mumbai without overindulging at least once at **Rajdhani** (rajdhani.co.in), the fun-filled frenetic 'fill up' thali joint.



Curry favour
A tiffinwallah's bike at Mumbai's Churchgate Station; know your onions at Crawford Market

masala with fried puris. For vegetarian Gujaratis it will be dishes like dhal, rice and pickles. The Punjabis prefer robust curries cooked with ghee such as aloo gobi, and for Bengalis it's fish flavoured with mustard. Most Muslims will have a mutton curry, while southerners such as Goans and Keralans choose chilli prawns and coconut curries.

As a tourist you can't have a tiffin delivery – but you can taste these diverse homely flavours by heading to one of Mumbai's many *khau gallis*, or food streets, where stalls churn out a staggering variety of sizzling dishes to cater for every taste. These places are real melting pots where, in typical Mumbai style, people – regardless of their religion, economic status, ethnicity or gender – gather to enjoy food.

Mumbai is free of supermarkets so every neighbourhood has a fruit and vegetable market piled high with fresh produce. The largest and most atmospheric is Crawford Market, where shafts of sunlight pierce the hole-filled roof of the vast halls, illuminating rows of stalls bending under the weight of ripe juicy mangos, delicate chichus, shiny red chillies and giant heads of garlic.

My tour of the Mumbai food scene also included a cookery workshop and lunch with Neela Gulati, who has given lessons in how to cook almost every style of Indian food in her smart downtown apartment for 25 years. I chose the chaat option so I could learn the secrets of pani puri.

Before I left the streetfood stalls, cafés and markets of south Mumbai to explore the hip new café society scene of Bandra, the city's trendiest suburb, I treated my tastebuds to the subtle flavours of Ziya, the restaurant under the direction of Michelin-starred Vineet Bhatia. The fusion of Indian spicing and the finest ingredients, such as Malabar lobster and Scottish salmon, here is a world away from the traditional tiffin style and street dishes I had been eating so far.

I left Mumbai wishing there were some way I could have a tiffin full of any of the amazing food I had tasted during my stay, delivered to me on a daily basis. Alas, this is a service unique to Mumbai, but I did find plenty of shops around Crawford Market like Aladdin's caves of tiffin boxes – and couldn't resist bringing some home, just in case.

🐦 @photogloblo

Bombay Lunchbox by Carolyn and Chris Caldicott is out now (£9.99, Frances Lincoln). Greaves (+44 (0)20 7487 9111, greavesindia.co.uk) offers a five-night culinary tour of Mumbai from £1,550pp (based on two sharing) including return flights from London with British Airways, three nights at the Oberoi, Mumbai, and two nights at Trident, Bandra Kurla, Mumbai, private transfers, sightseeing, culinary excursions and a cookery workshop with lunch.

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Watch *The Lunchbox* on board today (selected flights).