

Indian TRUCK STOP Eats

By Bill Addison

Archna Becker takes a swipe through the rich, dark emerald puree in front of us and sighs. “Oh, this tastes so good,” she says. “I can’t eat too much. I’m trying to diet.” She pauses, and then cries, “Wait! We forgot one of the most important parts.”

She rushes back into the kitchen of Bhojanic, the Indian restaurant she owns with her family in Decatur, Georgia, and returns with a thick pat of butter. “Here, dollop this on top. In India, we’d use freshly churned butter.”

It’s an addition Southerners will recognize and appreciate: The puree is made from mustard greens, and the butter mellows the greens’ harsher qualities while sweet-talking the other flavors to come forward.

No fatback glosses these mustard greens. The dish, called *sarson ka saag*, is a wintertime specialty of the Punjab region of Northern India. The greens (including a couple handfuls of spinach to temper the mustards’ pungency) cook slowly with onion, garlic, ginger, tomato, and spices like cumin and coriander. Every family varies the recipe; Becker’s grandmother chops the ginger a little coarsely. It zigzags through the greens’ intensity.

Some ingredients have soul mates, no matter the hemisphere in which they’re prepared. Indian has become one of the world’s top producers of corn, and just as it would be hard for Southerners to face a pot of greens without a slice of cornbread, *sarson ka saag*



has its essential maize counterpart: *makki ki roti*, a thin flatbread fashioned much like hoecakes. Cornmeal, salt, and water form the dough. Crushed ajwan seed (which tastes similar to dried thyme) and fenugreek leaves add subtle flavor, but the bread’s crusty fringes and yielding interior convey a familiar, nutty earthiness.

Sarson ka saag and *makki ki roti* are staples of home cooking, but the duo also frequently appears at dhabas, or all-night truck stops, in Northern India. In the U.S., the dishes are novelties. During a recent tour of nearly forty Indian restaurants in the Atlanta metro area, Bhojanic is the only place I found them offered. “Most restaurants don’t want to deal with it,” said Becker. “The *roti*, especially, is time consuming and requires skill.”

To demonstrate, she takes me into Bhojanic’s kitchen and introduces me to Santosh Sharma, a slight but sturdy woman from a tiny village in Punjab who has worked so long for Becker’s family that they all call her “Aunty.” Sharma is in charge of the *rotis*. I watch her take hunks of dough and pat them into circles, dabbing the surface

with a bit of butter as she works. Then she puts them on a round board and pounds the dough even flatter with rhythmic thumps from her palm: *bam-bam-bam-bam*. Rotate. *Bam-bam-bam-bam*.

Becker reaches underneath the table and pulls out a wooden rolling pin, asking Sharma in Hindi if she's ever tried using one. Sharma waves her away and replies (via Becker's translation), "A long time ago—it doesn't come out right."

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She tosses these rounds on the griddle, par-cooks them, lets them cool, and wraps them tightly in plastic. During meal service, she'll finish cooking the flatbreads in butter. I ate both a freshly made *roti* and a reheated one and could barely discern the difference.

Mustard greens may be a seasonal dish at Bhojanic, but the restaurant serves the *rotis* year-round, typically alongside a roasted eggplant relish. A fine hoecake—in any cultural translation—is an increasing rarity in Atlanta restaurants. (I'm thinking particularly of the recent closing of Son's Place, a venerable Atlanta soul food joint that could work a hoecake.)

The universal appeal of cornbread makes *makki ki roti* one of the most requested dishes on Bhojanic's menu. No surprise, then, that Bhojanic has such a diverse customer mix. Folks from all backgrounds munch on flatbread, listen to live jazz at night or recorded blues during lunch, sip a sweet lassi (a yogurt drink comparable to buttermilk), and savor the intertwining of worlds, culinary and otherwise.

Bill Addison is the food editor of Atlanta magazine. Indian roti photo also by Bill Addison.

WEDNESDAY GREENS AND SUNDAY GREENS

By Eugene Walter

Greens! A humble and constant presence. Not many collect "fence corner greens" any more, save in truly rural Alabama: dandelions, wild sorrel, pokeweed, all that. But in the everlasting returning cycles of life, dandelion greens have begun to turn up in the snobbiest salads at yuppie, with-it, and trendsetting tables. But turnip, collard, and mustard, along with cabbage, go on forever.

Nothing irritates me more than the phrase "soul food," a catchall label for simpler and more traditional Southern dishes. In the late '40s and '50s, the big record companies began to divide black music into two categories: dance bands and show music on the one hand, and blues, gospel, and ballads on the other. Pop music and soul music. Nightclub music and revival tent music. Later, some smart aleck or other, with imprecise reasoning, decided to split Southern food into rural, po' folks (mostly black) cooking and fancy, citified (mostly white) cooking. All wrong!

There are as many social classes and degrees of culinary sophistication among blacks as among whites in the Deep South, and what I was served in a soul food restaurant in New York makes me gag even in recollection. I mean soggy, thick cornbread, probably made with Wesson Oil, and dreary long-dead greens so swimming in pork fat that the teeth and tongue were wearing thick silk pajamas after one spoonful. No flushes of beer made it possible to taste the other dishes that followed.

I remember two delightful messes of greens. Once I went with a hunting party to Mt. Vernon, Alabama. I was after wild flowers; they were out to shoot Bambi. The midday meal was prepared by a black