



Eating India: An Odyssey into the Food and Culture of the Land of Spices

Chitrita Banerji

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Though it's primarily Punjabi food that's become known as Indian food in the United States, India is as much an immigrant nation as America, and it has the vast range of cuisines to prove it. In *Eating India*, award-winning food writer and Bengali food expert Chitrita Banerji takes readers on a marvelous odyssey through a national cuisine formed by generations of arrivals, assimilations, and conquests. With each wave of newcomers-ancient Aryan tribes, Persians, Middle Eastern Jews, Mongols, Arabs, Europeans-have come new innovations in cooking, and new ways to apply India's rich native spices, poppy seeds, saffron, and mustard to the vegetables, milks, grains, legumes, and fishes that are staples of the Indian kitchen. In this book, Calcutta native and longtime U.S. resident Banerji describes, in lush and mouthwatering prose, her travels through a land blessed with marvelous culinary variety and particularity.

REVIEWS:

"Skillfully moving backward and forward in time, Banerji, a culinary historian based in the U.S. whose previous books have explored the cookery of her native Bengal (*Life and Food in Bengal*), regards India with the intimacy of a native, the curiosity of an outsider and the broad vantage of an expatriate. In the course of her culinary tours across the subcontinent, she poses compelling questions about the nature of authenticity in a time of great flux, the mutability of tradition and the place of food in secular life and religious culture. For answers, she looks not only to the past but to the present as it unfolds in roadside shacks, sweet shops or a temple canteen, describing how outside influences such as colonialism and immigration have shaped India's regional cuisines. Early in this engaging work, Banerji recounts how whenever she invites Americans to her home for an elaborate meal, rather than sampling each dish in sequence-the better to appreciate its subtle flavors-her guests heap together meat, rice and

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Melisa says

I loved this book so much. It took me months to finish it because I so enjoyed wandering back and forth through the chapters. It's a book that can be picked up and read, a chapter at a time, in no particular order. But each page is rich with scents and flavors as well as history and culture. A perfect little book for those of us who love to eat and who dream of India.

Judy says

Delicious! The author takes us on a regional tasting tour of India, describing both the dishes and their origins that she encounters on her odyssey. While the map provided is very helpful in tracking her journey, the lack of text features (photos, illustrations, glossary, index, recipes) detracts from the book's potential.

Kandyce says

i mostly enjoyed this book, and it was a lot of fun to read it while traveling around india. in each new city, i'd hurry up and read the chapter pertaining to the city we were in, and be sure to eat some of ms. banerji's highlighted foods. kathi rolls, daal fry, fish kebab and rosgulla in calcutta, kitchuri in varanasi, MTR spice packs purchased in bangalore, rarely did she lead me astray.

her recounting of memories from her childhood seemed a little contrived at times, but i most definitely give her credit for trying, as i can criticize all i want but would never make it as a food writer. one of the best parts of the book was the discussion on how particular foods were birthed out of a particular culture, or how the foods themselves influenced the cultures from which they came.

in sum, i enjoyed this so much i wove it into curriculum of a class on indian food i was helping write a syllabus for. definitely worth reading, even with the personal narratives that sometimes seem a little awkwardly plunked in.

Lilisa says

Travels through India via the stomach - an enjoyable sojourn of Indian cuisine - east, west, north and south with some interesting historical tidbits in between. Made me rather nostalgic for the wonderful foods of India, which I should have appreciated more while there, alas! This book is not necessarily for everyone but for those interested in getting a better understanding of the diverse nature of the country - this is an interesting way to approach it - through its cuisine. You learn how history, geography and culture have contributed to the diversity of Indian cuisine. The so-called "Indian curry" doesn't do any justice to the complexity, richness, aroma and deliciousness of the Indian culinary experience. Now, off on a quest for some Indian snacks- maybe starting off with some great pani puri and bhel puri.

Poorni says

For a book that claims to be about food this certainly disappoints. I picked this up expecting an in depth analysis of regional Indian cuisine but all I got was a history of the evolution of certain cuisines interspersed with descriptions of meals the author had. Not that this wasn't interesting but I wish the book was more about food and not about its history or philosophy. The language certainly good and the author does have a charming narrative style but at times the book seemed too tedious and I had to stop midway, read a couple of other books and then come back to this.

Alisa says

At first, I was really excited to read this book, but in the end I didn't learn much that I didn't already know. I can't believe that my knowledge of India is all that vast, so I can't but blame the author for being lightweight. It was nice to ponder the idea that the famous Bengali sweets are an accident of climate (sugar cane fields) and colonialism (the introduction of Portuguese desserts), and to be reminded of the unlikely and disappearing Jewish communities of India.

Okay, so maybe just once or twice I imagined myself in Paranthewale Gali choosing from 19 kinds of vegetarian paratha...I'll have the papad paratha, please, with extra pickle.

Happyreader says

This book has so much to offer that I don't know where to begin. It's a travelogue; it's a history book; it's a culinary reference. The author, who is a native Bengali, travels around India to explore the diversity of Indian cooking. Through various connections, she interviews local culinary experts, learns about the cultural, religious, agricultural, and historical landscape of each region, and samples the quintessential dishes of the local fare. She questions what authentic Indian cooking really is since Indian cooking has always been influenced by outside colonizers – the chilis native from the Americas, the tea native from China and promoted by the Portuguese, the Muslim style of haute cuisine established by the Mughal conquerors. She also mourns the potential loss of all these various distinct cuisines as India modernizes, urbanizes, and homogenizes.

I made the mistake of borrowing this book from the library. If you read it, buy it. There is so much to highlight for future reference. You'll definitely want to bring this along for any future trips to India -- and you'll want to travel to India after reading this, if for no other reason than to eat your way around the country.

Rachel Brown says

Bengali food writer Banerji begins with the promise to investigate whether the foods she thinks are traditional really are of ancient origin, or whether they are more modern developments from the originals.

This fascinating premise unfortunately soon falls by the wayside, and the book becomes a more conventional survey of Indian regional cuisine, with notes on its associated history and culture.

Some chapters have an emotional depth and intimacy that makes them rise above the level of a simple food narrative: the one where she visits and dines at the Golden Temple of the Sikhs, and later has dinner with her friend (and famous writer, and Sikh historian) Khushwant Singh; her comparison of the detailed rules and rituals concerning permissible food in Indian Judaism and the Brahmin kitchen of Banerji's childhood; and the early and joyously nostalgic chapters set in her native Bengal, which is famous for sweets, fish, and food in general.

The rest of the book is mostly an entertaining reference book on regional cuisine, nostalgic and charming if you're already familiar with Indian food but I would guess overly dense if you're not. The chapter on the food of India's indigenous tribes should have been omitted: it's the only one in which Banerji never tries the food herself, and it's written in a vaguely condescending manner. It also could have used a bibliography.

EagleOverTheSea says

If you are an Indophile, foodie, travel-buff or any combination thereof, you'll probably like this book as much as I did. The author has made an effort to go off the beaten track and explore "Indian cuisine" beyond the typical north-indian delicacies that the term is normally used to refer to. She does have a Bengali slant and seems to drag Bengali cuisine or Bengalis, in general, into every chapter irrespective of which cuisine it focuses on. But, that's only a minor annoyance compared to the delights of discovering a wealth of info about hitherto unfamiliar regional cuisines and also the more familiar ones. Her writing style is simple, straightforward and interesting enough to hold your attention and keep you coming back for more. I would definitely recommend this book.

Celeste Hogan says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and I am glad I purchased it so I can refer to it later. I remember checking out at an Indian grocery store where the owner told me the source of each item I had chosen. This book answers such questions, and provides a history of ingredients and cooking methods that have come and sometimes gone with immigrants.

Chitrita Banerji is from India, but she has lived in the Boston area for much of her adult life. In *Eating India* she gives us a travelogue of her return visits, but her focus in this volume is on the food of each region she explores. She describes in detail the tastes, textures, and emotions involved in regional dishes while providing an entertaining read.

Elaine says

The travelling the author did and some of her descriptions about the area, people and customs I found really interesting and absorbing, but there was too little of that. Yes I know, its a book about food, but I do think more background about the areas would have been beneficial.

The food was ok, it just got to be too much for me personally and I was lost in some of the unknown foods

she spoke about.

So I read the book to the end, but didn't really in the end enjoy it. Maybe I just missed the mark, because the book WAS about food, but you can only read that much about it, I personally found. The author does write well and I can see that writing is her forte.

Abhishek Kona says

it was a very cursory glance of various popular cuisinres. none of the information stories were detailed. feels like this book could have been written just off wikipedia articles.

the language uses a lot of phrases which are not present in modern written or spoken English. it almost has a benfalo British Raj hangover in style.

Diana180 says

Pretty good idea to tell the history of India and its native and immigrant groups through their foodways, or rather to discuss the food with reference to the history. Overwritten in places and needed a glossary, index and taxonomy of the different kinds of patties and breads, but overall a good vicarious trip.

Prathyusha says

This has been the most disappointed book I have ever read.What I expected to be a sumptuous culinary ride of different cuisines in India was a poorly researched soggy mess of half cooked stories. It felt like the author wanted to make a buck out of her travelling to India to meet her friends.And the author,whichever dish she tasted found an inevitably link to bengali cuisine. I do understand that all the cuisines in India are interlinked but not everything originated from Bengal.The title should have been "Eating India through Bengal and my friends homes".The author never ventures out of her comfort zone.She doesn't visit any major hotspots of culinary interests.All she does is visit her friends home,eat the home cooked meals and write about them. Even though I have read great reviews of this book it did not suit my palate.If there had been a negative star,I would have given to this book.A huge huge huge disappointment.

Smitha says

The book had me hooked from the very beginning when the author starts to describe a Bengali wedding – something that was so much a part of my childhood, where we had Bengalis as neighbours, friends, family friends, dad's colleagues. The book is a fantastic journey into the cuisines of various parts of India, exploring the possible origins of dishes, the foreign influences that made what we eat today, so part of Indian cooking. So many ingredients that we take for granted today, was part of what we got from various parts of the world, like potatoes, onions, and even the Bengali Rossogolla, might have other origins, which the author tried really hard to track down in the book.

The author's love and appreciation of food, irrespective of cuisine, comes through in her writing. Her

descriptions so vivid, that she made some of the food, which I actually, don't like, sound delicious. For me, it was a wonderful read and also made me want to try out the variety of cuisine that our wonderfully diverse country has.
