

# Dinning out in great ambience

SAJID ABBAS visits the Food Street to see how the old sleepy quarter of Gowalmandi has transformed into the most popular night spot of Lahore

Arriving now close to the bright and well-lighted Bazaars, indeed before I entered them, the smell of the savoury dishes almost conveyed to the mind's eye that which, upon entering, was witnessed by the eyes of the body, — a great abundance and variety of occupied tents, or rather kitchens; some in which was sold the roasted meat of various domestic and forest-born animals... We saw other tents filled with large spits containing the flesh of birds, such as fowl, capons, chickens, pigeons, peacocks, turtledoves, quails and other kinds of birds bred in those parts. We also saw other tents filled with metal utensils and brass pots, in which though, the same kinds of meat were offered for sale, yet they were all different to the taste on account of the varieties of dressing...

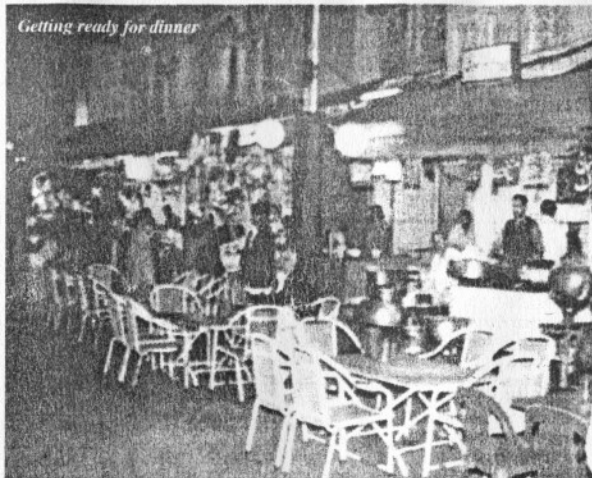
That was part of a page out of the diary of Sebastian Manrique, a well-known Augustinian Friar, who was here in 1641, some 360 years ago, during the days of Shahjehan, when Lahore was at the peak of its glory. He had written all that when he came to Lahore. Manrique's remarks illustrate that the hospitality of the people of this city is not a recent phenomena but an old tradition. It seems that certain details may have changed, but customs and culture have remained the same.

Lahore has been sitting astride crossroads by which travellers of all description have been journeying up and down and exchanging diverse elements of different cultures, leaving imprints on many things Lahorite. Such exchange has definitely given a Lahorite touch to the cuisine found here, for instance, chefs of Lahore have given their peculiar touch when they adopted both the Chinese and European cuisine to the local taste.

Lahorites are fond of doing things in a grand way, they have separate bazaars for a particular line of goods, such as pots and pans, shoes, fabric, trinkets etc., it seem that they have bazaars for food, too. Though, a restaurant or two, or at least, an eatery can be found in practically every locality, there are large concentration of restaurants in Abbot Road, a recent one in Old Anarkali and around the Railway Station, albeit the most popular is in Chamberlain Road in Gowalmandi, the Food Street.

Gowalmandi, in the past, was the place where cowherds of Lahore used to gather

Getting ready for dinner



Baqarkhanees go with Kashmiri tea

early morning before the sun was up, to dispose off the production of their herds. Later, in the earlier years of the 20th century, when the walled city came under

pressure and residents started moving out of the walls, this was one of the first spots to be developed as a residential and commercial area. By the time of

Independence it was the abode of prosperous Hindus busy in respectable professions and occupations. Most of the newspapers owned by Hindus had their offices located here, in Chamberlain Road. Many a leading physician and surgeon had his clinic in Nisbet Road, near the spot where it crossed Chamberlain Road.

All that changed at the time of Independence. The Hindus abandoned their residences and businesses and fled Lahore. The vacant properties were, in due course, allotted to people from East Punjab who had been driven out of their homes by the Hindus. Most of the refugees were Kashmiris from Amritsar and were expert bakers, confectioners and restaurant or eatery owners by profession. They quickly set up shop and it wasn't long before the place became known for both regular dishes and delicacies.

Walking along Chamberlain Road from the Nisbet Road crossing towards Mochee Darwaaza one came across a dairy selling the usual milk and yoghurt and of course falooda in the hot season and barfi throughout. On the other side of the road was a tikka-wala specialising in karahi gosht. Then further on some more dairies and then fish stalls on both side of the road. In between a baker had tucked his oven, baking naans or sometime baqarkhanees and of course there were shacks where one could get fried delicacies.

The shops are still there but have new fronts. Things have changed a lot since the last couple of years and have taken a very different look now. First, the edifices have got a paint job and taken a smarter appearance. Secondly, the road has been attended to, potholes removed, the surface paved and the place made into a pedestrian zone for the evenings. Thirdly, more restaurants have been added to offer a greater variety of eatables, such as, chicken karahis, kebabs of different varieties, curried dishes, pulaos of varied types, kheer, firnee, assorted deserts and confectionery, light snacks, hot and cold beverages and so on. Every thing showing signs of improvement.

One can now just take a stroll and will find the whole ambience exhilarating. Or one can sit on the roadside and watch,

over a cup of jasmine tea, the crowds strolling by, or enjoy a bowl of frozen kheer or have a poulet braised to a delicious dish before one's eyes, or dip his freshly baked naan in thick spiced nihari or in steaming soup of heads and trotters, or to change the taste have a few golguppas with a dash of tamarind juice.

For diners, the choice is large. One can base his meal on rice dishes or dishes which are accompanied with bread. A variety of biryanies or pulaos are available. Biryani of chicken, pulao of mutton, or of vegies, especially, fresh green peas. On the other hand one can have curried meat, chicken or vegetables, or lintels with many varieties of bread, unleavened chapatis cooked on an iron pan or unleavened roti baked in a tandoor or naans and kulchas baked in an oven or, not to be forgotten, the cold weather

speciality of the Punjab, mustard spinach relished

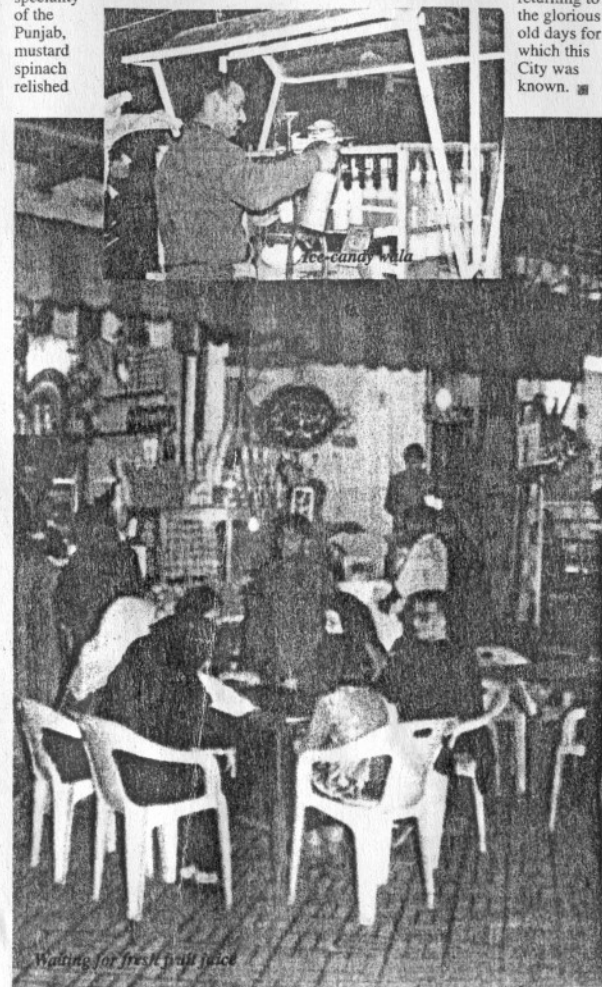
with corn meal bread and a lump of freshly churned butter.

The other day this scribe met a number of people at the Food Street from all over the country, visitors here from Gilgit to Karachi and Quetta, even from Canada, all savouring the delights and delicacies of Lahore.

A group of college going youngsters of Islamabad were there, some of them for the first time. All were fascinated by the attention they got from the restaurant owners and their staff. They were pleasantly surprised by the service. Tables had been properly laid out with spotlessly clean crockery and glasses, shining silver, deftly folded napkins.

They were all praise for the properly attired staff that waited upon them with attention and courtesy indicating that at least this place in Lahore seemed to be

returning to the glorious old days for which this City was known.



Ice-cream wala

Waiting for fresh fruit juice