

REINVENTING IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

Put Pickles on the Restaurant Menu

Eateries can source right ingredients and have the manpower to do traditional pickles that are becoming harder to preserve



VIKRAM DOCTOR

You're having a nice meal at an Indian restaurant and all you need to round out the flavours on your plate is a small spicy kick of pickle. Perhaps there's some already on the table, or you ask for some, but as soon as you taste, the disappointment hits. It's standard, mass-produced stuff, too sour and salty.

Restaurants have little incentive to provide good pickles. They can't charge for something consumed in small quantities, except for Bengali restaurants and their tomato-date chutney that's more palate cleanser than classic pickle. Raintree, the Taj Group's original Chettinad restaurant at the Connemara in Chennai, pioneered a pickle cart as part of the welcome experience. Pancham Puriwala, the iconic eatery near Mumbai's CST station, has big bowls of freshly pickled chillies on each table. Restaurants have good pickles if the chef has a personal interest, but otherwise it's easiest just to buy commercial pickles.

This matters because there's a difference between commercially and traditionally made pickles. Western and Middle Eastern pickles use vinegar as their base because it is an excellent preservative. Indian pickles emphasise on spices and oil, which is great for taste as the essential oils in most spices dissolve in oil, and the mouthfeel is also better. But oil isn't a good preservative, other than acting as an airlock against atmospheric bacteria and fungi.

This is why most traditional Indian pickles have a layer of oil floating on top and why there are rituals over removing it. The older ladies who usually controlled this insisted that just a few people could do this, using a special spoon. Commercial pickles can't control this, so add extra vinegar and preservatives, which means they rarely taste as good. With fewer people making pickles at home – and the gradual passing of the pickle-guarding grannies – we are losing the taste of traditional Indian pickles. To get them now we hope to pick up pickles from places like fairs and farmer's markets.

The home confinement imposed by the pandemic has revived interest in making them, and might also have encouraged another kind of commercial pickle making. Home cooks selling their food direct to other homes opened another way to obtain pickles, particularly from cooks of different regions and communities, while social media gave them a way to market their products.

Restaurants have also had to innovate with new incomes streams in the pandemic, like better quality takeaway and selling meal preparation kits, with portioned out ingredients



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TICKLING THE TASTE BUDS

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and instructions for how to cook them. It isn't a big leap from there to continue doing this once they open again, selling ready-to-eat food, which is what delis already do, and ingredients to make their food at home.

Some restaurants have been doing this for quite a while, like Sindhudurg, a Konkani restaurant behind Sena Bhavan in Mumbai. Several years back, it set up a counter just outside where customers could buy good quality raw fish to cook at home. There have always been enthusiastic home cooks who want to get their hands on the kind of produce available to chefs, and there's clearly a market in supplying them. And regional or community restaurants have long been an informal way to sell niche ingredients to community members.

Traditional pickles fit easily into this concept. Restaurants have ability to source the right ingredients and the manpower for the often tedious preparation. It would give them better pickles to serve in their restaurant and also something that diners could take home, to extend the restaurant experience.

IITC already does this with its Kitchens of India range of ready-to-eat foods based on offerings from restaurants in its Welcomgroup chain. They include a few pickle-like chutneys, but these are still meant for mass market sale. Restaurants have the ability to do really traditional pickles, carefully stored and bottled on demand for customers who want a taste that is becoming increasingly harder to preserve.