



Irani society

Mumbai's Irani cafes have epitomised the city's entrepreneurial spirit for more than 100 years. While many have now shut up shop, we reveal the places where you can still taste the City of Dreams on a plate.

Words MICHAEL SNYDER Photography HASHIM BADANI



The **Byculla Restaurant** and Bakery looks out to a particularly furious Mumbai streetscape in the formerly upscale, now decidedly down-at-heel neighbourhood of the same name. One of the city's many elevated roadways (known as 'flyovers') touches down at street level here, disgorging its blaring traffic at the feet of the once-elegant apartment buildings. Across the overpass, behind the faded stepped-pyramid facade of

the Palace Talkies cinema and the hawkers selling pomegranates, oranges and watermelons, the corrugated tin roof of the south Mumbai Byculla railway station — one of the city's oldest — seems to rattle every time a local train screeches through, which is often. Pedestrians cluster together to manoeuvre their way into traffic, eyes straight ahead, palms stretched defiantly towards the windshields of the cars that have overrun the city like rats.

Save for the sound of car horns (deafening), the frenetic scene outside doesn't cross the threshold of the restaurant. The wooden counter at the front still sells convenient odds and ends to a few neighbourhood people. The wood-fired oven out the back still turns out tray after tray of dainty cashew-studded *mawa* cakes, made from semi-solid evaporated milk. The chai still flows steaming and sweet and milky, served slopping over the edges of dingy white cups onto dingy white saucers.

The owner of the Byculla Restaurant and Bakery is a 90-odd-year-old man I'll call Merwan. When I ask his name after an hour of friendly conversation, he smiles affably and shakes his head, saying, "No, that would not look nice." (Owners of Irani cafes are notoriously cagey about stuff like this, often declining interviews altogether and *always* refusing to share recipes.)

Until about 20 years ago, he tells me, business here was fine. The wholesale market that used to operate across the road was one of the biggest in the city and ensured a steady stream of customers, particularly in the early morning. But by 1996, when the new market in Vashi was completed, on the far side of the harbour, across Thane Creek, the exodus of merchants — which had begun gradually a decade earlier — was complete. Now the Byculla Market is a shadow of its former self, as are the Irani cafes that once fed its merchants and suppliers. "Fifty per cent of the business has come down since the market left," Merwan says.

The Byculla Restaurant and Bakery is one of just a handful of the once-ubiquitous Irani cafes left in Mumbai. Bruce Carter, an Australian historian who has spent years researching the Iranis, estimates that at the time of Independence there may have been as many as 350 Irani cafes in Mumbai. Today, however there may be as few as 30, about 10 of which remain authentic. It's a well-known fact that the Irani cafes are disappearing.

CAFE CULTURE

Founded by Irani immigrants (mostly of the Zoroastrian religion, but also some Islamic) in the first half of the 20th century, Irani cafes served simple food at low prices. They became the first

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
A meal at Cafe Military; Byculla Restaurant and Bakery; Irani cafes still serve traditional biscuits and sweets; Kyani & Co's menu.

IRANI CAFES GO GLOBAL

Some Iranis have learned to capitalise on nostalgia. **Britannia & Co** (Neville House, Currimbhoy Rd, Ballard Estate, Fort) has become a South Mumbai institution and an obligatory stop on the city's culinary trail thanks to its berry pulao, a fragrant rice dish topped with sweet-sour dried barberries imported from Iran. Prices here are also about 10 times higher than at other Iranis. Outside Mumbai, restaurateurs are doing the same thing, opening restaurants such as **Dishoom** in London (the original Covent Garden location is at 12 Upper St Martin's Lane), **MG Road** in Paris (205 Rue Saint-Martin) and **Soda Bottle Opener Wala** in Gurgaon, one of Delhi's soulless satellite cities (3 Cyber Hub, DLF Cyber City). They all do for the Irani what Balthazar did for the brasserie in late-1990s New York.

democratic dining spaces in the city: cheap enough for the working poor, but respectable enough to be popular among the middle classes. They served breakfast items such as *akuri* (spiced scrambled eggs with tomato), omelettes and *brun maska* (sweet bread buns lathered with butter) to everyone from humble taxi drivers to suited businessmen. For more substantial meals they offered *kheema pav*, simply spiced mutton mince with bread, or *kheema pulao*, the same mince over a bed of rice.

When mill workers had family in town, they took them to the Irani. When middle-class families wanted to go out for an afternoon snack, they went to the Irani. Men ate there. So did women. Iranis brought dining into the public sphere, revolutionising the way Mumbai ate. With their marble- or glass-topped tables, bentwood chairs and efficiently desultory service, they were, as local historian Deepak Rao puts it, "the fulcrum of the social life of the common man".

Arriving at this particular historical moment, Iranis were also essential to Mumbai's emergence as a modern city. An outbreak of bubonic plague in 1896 left thousands dead in the cramped 'native town' and drove out nearly half the population. In response, the colonial administration then founded the Bombay Improvement Trust, which plotted new avenues through the town, opening up an essentially medieval urban structure with wider boulevards and grand new intersections. Hindus, however, were reluctant to rent prime corner plots at these new intersections because of the restrictions of *vastu*, the Vedic answer to feng shui. Newly arrived Irani migrants, bound by no such beliefs, snatched them up and, before long, Irani cafes occupied nearly every major corner.

Irani cafes quickly became a central part of the city and social life that defined India's urban imagination for a century.

More than that, Iranis encapsulated the timelessly seductive idea that has driven Mumbai's growth from the start: that here in the City of Dreams, *everything* is possible. Take Merwan's father (let's call him Rustom). He was eight years old when he left his home near the central Irani town of Yazd and travelled 40-odd days, most of them on foot, to his new >>



home in Mumbai. It was 1899. There was a drought. Few Zoroastrians were left in Iran — many had already migrated to India following the arrival of Islam in Persia about 1000 years earlier and had since become extremely wealthy; these were the Parsis — and those who remained were poor and facing religious persecution.

In his first years in Mumbai, unable to speak any of India's indigenous tongues, Rustom worked menial jobs for just two rupees per month. (The even more typical story tells of the new Zoroastrian migrants making chai in the homes of rich Parsi people, then breaking out on their own to serve on street corners, and eventually pooling their money to open cafes.)

By the 1930s, Rustom had earned enough to open two restaurants, and by the early 1940s he had generated enough profits to take over both the Byculla and Regal restaurants and bars. In a former pool hall down the road, he also opened the Byculla pharmacy.

TASTE OF NOSTALGIA

Practically every Irani cafe owner has a similar story. Sheriar Khosravi, who runs Cafe Military, a popular eatery near the stock exchange, says, "They were looking for a much better life, better opportunities, so they moved down to India."

Khosravi's father, Behram, had only completed Year 10 at school, but he made sure his children were educated. "I had lots of choices, but I [run the restaurant] because it's family tradition," Sheriar says. "My son is not up for it, I can see that. He's looking for other opportunities."

Farokh Shokriye, who has run Kyani & Co since taking over from his father Aflatoon, says much the same thing. While he remains at the cafe working alongside some staff members who have been there for decades, his son may not follow the same path. "The young generation is an educated lot compared to their forefathers. In my circle of friends, I'd say about 80 per cent has migrated abroad. When the exodus begins, things start closing."

Set on the ground floor of a gorgeously dilapidated building in the busy south Mumbai neighbourhood of Dhobi Talao, Farokh Shokriye's restaurant looks today much as it has since first opening in 1904. Ropes hanging in the two broad doorways

ITINERARY

EAT

Try **Byculla Restaurant and Bakery's** (Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar Rd, opposite the railway station, Byculla) mutton puffs and mawa cakes. **Cafe Military** (Ali Chamber, Nagindas Master Rd, near Flora Fountain, Fort) does Bheja fry (mutton brains) washed down with a cold beer.

Koolar & Co (541 Noor Mahal, Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar Rd, King's Circle, Matunga East) is famous for its mammoth wrestler's omelette, made from five eggs, and for its eccentric owner, Ali. Think *akuri* (spiced eggs) and chicken *pattice* (mini pies) at renowned **Kyani & Co** (Jermahal Estate, Kalbadevi Rd, Dhobi Talao). Go to **Regal Restaurant and Bakery** (Dr Baba Saheb Ambedkar Rd, next to the railway station, Byculla East) for a chai and to soak up the atmosphere in one of the city's most authentic Iranis.

STAY

Abode (First floor, Lansdowne House, M.B. Marg, Apollo Bunder; +91 80 8023 4066; www.abodeboutiquehotels.com) is a luxurious boutique hotel in Colaba. It has 20 rooms, complimentary breakfast and high-speed wi-fi. A hotel that incorporates Indian philosophy, the three floors of **Le Sutra** (14 Union Park, Khar; +91 22 2649 2995; www.lesutra.in) correspond to the triple *gunas* of Hinduism. On Marine Drive, prestigious **The Oberoi** (Nariman Point; +91 11 2389 0606; www.oberoihotels.com) has unparalleled views of the ocean. If you would like to stay in the Byculla area, the **Best Western Hotel Sahil** (292 Bellasis Rd; www.hotelsahil.com) is a good option.



help the more elderly customers get up the handful of steps into the dining room. A bakery window on one side of the cafe sells cakes and meat pastries — the ones that have made Kyani & Co famous over the years. Fans still churn

lazily overhead and pictures of former owners hang from the mezzanine alongside a framed image of Zoroaster and another of Jesus. When I meet Shokriye on an early weekday morning, the restaurant is in the middle of the breakfast rush, its round tables crowded with tidily dressed older gentlemen reading newspapers and mid-level office workers gulping down chai.

Across the street, another of the city's classic Irani cafes, Bastani & Co, lies abandoned, its entrance shuttered for more than a decade now. When it closed down, it generated a nostalgic maelstrom of letters-to-editors lamenting the death of the Irani cafe — and this hand-wringing is nothing new. In a 1977 issue of *The Times of India*, a headline blared, "The Last of the Irani Restaurants?" The story waxed lyrical: "It is only rarely that you can wallow in romanticism while you sip your humdrum cup of chai." So it seems the supposedly 'disappearing Irani' has been a subject of nostalgia for at least 40 years.

Mumbai tends to make a hobby of nostalgia. It's true that the vast majority of Iranis have closed down, but many others have simply adapted over the years. Cafe Military survives in part thanks to the beer licence it picked up in the early 1970s when the city relaxed its prohibition rules. Leopold and Mondegar, a pair of popular tourist cafes in the peninsular district of Colaba, began their lives as traditional Iranis and are still owned by Irani families. Lesser-known establishments such as Cafe Gulshan, further north in an area called Matunga, have thrived by changing their menus according to changing tastes. Kazim Rahimpur, who inherited Gulshan from his father, has added Maggi noodles to his menu to appeal to the college crowd and replaced the marble tops on his tables with Coke advertisements.

As Merwan says, "My father came to Mumbai crying. He did not enjoy his life, but he brought us up happily. He only wanted his children to study and be educated." He succeeded in doing that, unreservedly. The closure of the Iranis, then, is no failure; if anything, it proves that the city's promise remains alive.

What people ought to be lamenting as they rush crying for that last cup of chai is not the disappearance of the Irani cafe itself — kheema and omelettes are easy enough to find, and a mawa cake (above) is really just a teacake, after all — but rather the loss of that dazzling democratic moment in time when equality, community and mobility seemed not just possible but inevitable. That moment, that Mumbai, is worth preserving. 🍵

GETTING THERE VIRGIN AUSTRALIA OFFERS FLIGHTS TO MUMBAI WITH ITS CODESHARE PARTNER SINGAPORE AIRLINES/SILKAIR. TO BOOK, VISIT WWW.VIRGINAUSTRALIA.COM OR CALL 13 67 89 (IN AUSTRALIA).