

The Telangana Table

I'm in the HiTech City office of Hyderabad restaurateur and caterer Gandra Praveen Rao, the go-to guy when the Telangana Rashtra Samithi wants to showcase Telangana culture through its food. He is the organising force behind the TRS' Telangana Sambarulu Festival held at Hyderabad's Nizam College Grounds, an event that sees 20,000 visitors a day sampling hundreds of Telangana dishes. As he describes for me in loving detail those dishes that "you will not find anywhere outside Telangana", I tell him I'm in Hyderabad to sample just the food he is describing so passionately. "Impossible," he says, "you won't find Telangana food here."

I am determined to. I do know a thing or two about Andhra food. I can tell a pulusu from a vepudu. Depending on the accompaniments to a pulusu, I can tell if the chef hails from Andhra or Rayalaseema. But my knowledge of the cuisine of that third region of Andhra Pradesh is close to zero. That's why I'm talking to Praveen from Karimnagar, to Usha Rani from Nalgonda and to anyone who can help me hunt down and devour Telangana cuisine in Hyderabad, which is Telangana's largest city. It proves a very difficult task. But not impossible.

Telangana is a vast region covering ten districts in the hardy Deccan countryside of north-central Andhra Pradesh. I came to Hyderabad expecting to find a robust cuisine that uses the produce of the plateau, from corn and peanuts to tamarind and sugarcane. Before the agitation for a separate Telangana state began, which has raged since the time of Andhra Pradesh's inception, Telangana was for long ruled by the Nizams of Hyderabad. So I expected to find a cuisine which would reveal influences of Hyderabad's globally famous Asafjahi culinary traditions, just as Deccan ingredients like mango and tamarind add tartness to Asafjahi food. After frustrating days of trawling Google and learning very little, after calling scores of Andhra restaurants which had recently hosted Telangana food festivals and finding only one which had Telangana food on its regular menu, I landed in Hyderabad with very few leads.

Sarva pindi powers people through the day to what is often their only other meal, dinner

One name that Google did throw up was R. Pramada Reddy. She has been making 'sweets, hots and pickles' the traditional Telangana way in a quiet colony near Tank Bund, for over a decade now. As a visible outpost of Telangana culture, Pramada has gained quite a bit of media attention during the recently revived Telangana agitation. She dismisses that identification with a smile, and says she makes and sells Telangana items because her family and friends encouraged her to. Pramada, and most of her workers, are from Khammam. She stocks a huge array of snacks and sweets in her little shop on the ground floor of her home. In her kitchen, the air is rich with the aromas of frying spices and flour. Pramada points to the giant vats of

Telangana pickles and explains that though similar avakkai (mango), chintakaya (tamarind) and nimakkaya (lime) pickles are made in Andhra too, the Telangana style is to make pickles with boiled, and not cold oil. And the allam-bellam (ginger-jaggery) pickle is unique to Telangana.

Downstairs, she introduces me to the world of Telangana snacks. First up is karijelu, akin to the Maharashtrian karanji, which in Telangana can have a sweet stuffing, or a savoury one of mutton or chicken kheema. Next come sakinalu and sarva pindi, which she says are the most popular snacks in the region. Morning is the time to eat sarva pindi, a rice flour disc thicker than a paratha, flecked with chana dal, ginger, garlic, sesame seeds, curry leaves and green chillies. It powers people through the day to what is often their only other meal, dinner. Ajwain adds its aroma and roasted sesame a deep crunch to every bite. I asked her where she would go if she wanted to eat Telangana food in Hyderabad which she didn't have to make herself. She thought hard for a moment and said, "Habsiguda." Any more details? No, just Habsiguda. As I left, she handed me a bag of sakinalu, karijelu and pally laddus to take home. She refused to accept any payment. **Pramada's Sweets, Hots and Pickles—Traditional Telangana Spice—A missing taste in life is in House No. 70 (040-27613276; open 9am-9pm).**

On to my next lead, a place suggested by Usha Rani in Tilak Nagar in New Nallakunta. **Sri Lakshmi Telangana Pindi Vantalu** (9392656368) is run by Pradeep Rao's family, who hail from Jagityal in Karimnagar. The Raos also make sarva pindi and a green chilli-infused sakinalu variety, ariselu, boondi laddu and bakshalu. I sample the lone sarva pindi left over from the morning and pappu garelu, a fried snack of moong dal balls mixed with onions, red and green chilli, curry leaves and chana dal. If you wanted to eat Telangana food in Hyderabad outside your home, where would you go, I ask the Raos. Habsiguda, they say.

Later that evening, I head to the only Andhra restaurant which emphatically declared on the phone that they served Telangana food. **Horizon Restaurant** is atop the Celebrations complex (66A/67, near Chiranjeevi Blood Bank, Road No. 1, Jubilee Hills; 40100888, 40175761-63). A lovely view of the city spread out below as a host of Telangana dishes were spread out on my table. I wanted to know just how these were different from Andhra food. The chef explained that many dishes are common to both cuisines, but that some ingredients change and the style of preparation differs. On the coast, a kodi vepudu may be made with an onion gravy, a paste of red Guntur chillies and coconut. In Telangana, tamarind, green chilli and spices would produce a much spicier dish. With just my first bite of the Telangana mamsam vepudu, my palate was aflame. Next up was a spicy chicken pulusu redolent with fennel, a soft natu kodi, or country chicken pulao, and Telangana chapa and mamsam vepudus. A pulusu is a gravy and a vepudu is a reduction, which is why the latter is fiery hot. Soon, I was engulfed in that sweetly painful chilli high. The heat in Telangana food can make even Andhra food seem tame. But I was soothed with a few teaspoons of their Jewel of Nizam pudding, with custard poured over Hyderabad's famous qubani ka meetha. I asked the chef where he would go to eat Telangana food if he didn't want to make it himself. Habsiguda, he replied.

Thankfully, my friend Manju Latha Kalanidhi knew exactly which famous Telangana outlet in Habsiguda they were all talking about, and I followed her the next morning to Nacharam, near Habsiguda. We walk into the small shopping centre where, at **Sri Devi Swagruha Foods**, Vangapalli Savitri and her family have been serving the best Telangana snacks you can find in Hyderabad, for the past 27 years.

V. Savitri has acquired such a reputation in Hyderabad and beyond that she is now famous as 'Sakinalu' Savitramma. It was important to her, she said, to identify her food as Telangana in the name of her outlet, to differentiate it from the scores of places serving Andhra bhojanam. There are definite taste differences, she says. For instance, Telangana food uses a lot of sesame, which in coastal Andhra is believed to be too heaty. Whereas in Telangana, they believe that heating foods like sesame lead to cooling because they make you sweat. She sells upto 180 kilos of snacks, sweets and pickles every day, which for her begins at 5am. But she gets even busier during wedding season and the major festivals of Sankranti in January and Bonalu in August-September. She gives me a taste of a popular Telangana sweet, pheni, a painstakingly made, light, flaky, layered, fried maida pastry covered in powdered sugar. She also offers a Telangana ariselu, rich with sesame.

Then come the snacks and her son Ramesh Rao tells me why the sarva pindi, sakinalu and other snacks that are mainstays in Telangana are harder than usual. "So that people will eat less," says Ramesh. Eating less, so important in a land where there is never enough food to go around. It's the same reason why Telangana food is so supremely spicy. It discourages one from eating too much. Sri Devi is in the Sai Durga Complex, opposite HMT Nagar, Nacharam (65178508, 27178508). I pack some Telangana mango, tamarind and ginger pickle to take home. Savitramma hands me a huge bag of sarva pindi, sakinalu, garelu, karijelu and many kinds of laddus. She refuses to accept any payment.

I munch her snacks on the drive from Hyderabad into rural Telangana, to a space that is placing itself very firmly at the forefront of reclaiming a Telangana identity through its food. The small town of Zaheerabad in Medak district is a couple of hours westward from Hyderabad. Once you reach, watch out for the Deccan Development Society's organic millets shop on your right. A café with a sign saying 'Authentic Telangana Cuisine' is in the same lane, a few yards ahead of the shop. Within the DDS' **Café Ethnic** (08451-275632; 6am-10pm), I had an unforgettable meal prepared with the traditional millets grown in Telangana—jonna (jowar, or sorghum), taida (ragi, or finger millet), korra (kangani, or foxtail millet), saama (kutki, or little millet) and sajja (barley, or pearl millet). Lunch comprised bowls of sour tamarind gravy, korra pysham and kandipappu (tuvar dal), gongura with peanuts and chana dal, a mudapappu sambhar, a jonna pelala laddu and crisp sajja murukkulus, and all of this eaten with a sajja roti and korra khichdi. V. Srinivas Reddy, manager of Café Ethnic, tells me that it's a meal made from the millets that the DDS is trying hard to reintroduce in Telangana. For breakfast here they prepare both the idli, vada and dosa eaten in Andhra alongside taida ambuli, the traditional Telangana breakfast porridge. But the difference is that here idlis are made of korra, dosas of taida and vadas of saama.

All of these millets have been eaten in Telangana until the last generation, when rice took their place. All have more protein, fibre, iron and calcium than rice, and require far less water for irrigation. So why is DDS having to reintroduce millets to Telangana? This is a question that K. Srinivas, editor of Telugu daily *Andhra Jyothi*, would later answer in

Hyderabad. “The difference in Andhra and Telangana cuisine,” he says, “is chiefly the difference between the cuisine of an irrigated and non-irrigated land. Rice and wheat, crops of the irrigated land, enjoy a hegemony over other grains due to a colonial mindset. NTR introduced rice in the Public Distribution System at two rupees per kilo in Andhra Pradesh. Millets are not in the PDS, making them more expensive. So Telangana cuisine is in danger of dying out. This is why DDS is trying to get millets included in the PDS.”

The PDS battle is one I pray the DDS wins. The trip to Zaheerabad is more than worth anyone’s time. You can not only buy millets at their store, you’ll also get a free copy of their cookbook of Telangana millet recipes. It has the most sharply written foreword of any cookbook I’ve ever read and I quote “...it may seem odd that someone is coming out with a book on traditional recipes. That too recipes on jonna, sajja, korra, saama, which apparently have the lowest status among food crops in comparison to preferred grains such as rice and wheat”. Emphasis not mine.

Back in Hyderabad, I pick up P. Venkatesh, who hails from Palamuru in Mahabubnagar district. On my behalf, Usha Rani has asked him where he goes if wants to eat Telangana food in Hyderabad without cooking it himself. He has answers. There’s only standing space at **Vijay Curry Point** (9133555670; 10am-11pm), next to Sowmya Nursing Home on Ramnagar Road. While Venkatesh speaks to the smiling lady behind the counter in rapidfire Telugu, I am staring transfixed at what that counter holds—huge vessel upon huge vessel of very spicy looking meat curries. What sort of paradise is this! The lady’s name is Ratna Kumari, and at some point in her high speed chat with Venkatesh, she hands me a folded newspaper for a plate, along with a winning smile. One by one, she takes a large morsel of meat from each vessel and places it on the newspaper. She says something to him in Telugu and he tells me in English just what it is I’m eating. This happens at great speed—two seconds from her Telugu word to his English and one second for me to pop this morsel in my mouth. It goes like this: Boti! Pop! Heart! Pop! Gizzard! Pop! Blood! Pop! Liver! Pop! Chicken liver! Pop! Head! Pop! Chicken fry! Pop! Egg fry! Pop! Egg curry! Pop!

The heat in Telangana food can make even Andhra food seem tame

Finally, I ask for a jonna roti from the huge pile behind her head, and now I can chew it slowly and start thinking again. Blood?! Let’s forget my first and last experience with coagulated cuisine. I would pay any kind of money to eat everything else on that counter again, at a more leisurely pace. The succulence of the meat, the chewiness of the heart, the softness of the talakaya kura (a curry made with meat from the head of goats or fish), the heat in that chicken vepudu, the lingering flavours of dhanian, methi, tamarind... Ratna Kumari says to come back in the morning for Telangana-style paya and come the next day to taste boti cooked with gongura, or puntakura boti, made with both meat and vegetables. She will not accept any payment for anything I’ve eaten. I know I will never visit Hyderabad again without a trip to Vijay Curry Point.

We walk a few steps up the road and turn left into a lane opposite the Universal store. Venkatesh reads from a Telugu board outside a small shop: **Narayana’s Curry House—Telangana Special** (8106636665; 8am-11.30pm). Another rapid exchange of Telugu between him and the sweet couple within and soon I’m eating a lovely kodi vepudu, soft morsels of chicken liver and chicken with spinach. The vepudu, they tell me proudly, is made without using even a drop of water, so one person alone can finish a whole kilo of it if they wish. They too make talakaya, boti, Telangana chepala pulusu with rohu fish, and endu chapala and royallu, dishes made with dried prawns and dried fish that are widely cooked in landlocked Telangana. They won’t accept any payment. At this point, I think I can comfortably generalise that Telangana people own a particularly big hearted sense of hospitality.

Roaming around the Charminar that evening, it was hard for me to wrap my head around the idea that food of such a high standard is not being readily marketed in all our metros, not just Hyderabad. I had been told that in the dozens of restaurants all around this great monument were many, many people of Telangana origin serving the famous Hyderabad biryani, who might also serve some traditional Telangana bagara rice. I strolled the lanes around

the Charminar for a long while, but couldn't find one. I walked further towards the heavily guarded Mecca Masjid, a reminder that a culinary struggle is perhaps the lesser among the many battles that rage in this beautiful city.

Ramesh Rao tells me why Telangana snacks are harder than most: "so that people eat less." the same reason that Telangana food is so supremely spicy

I told Gandra Praveen Rao about the Ramnagar curry points, and that it had been difficult for me to fully experience Telangana food in his city. So many of the dishes he is so passionate about, like matka gatka, golichchina mamsam and jelala pulusu, I can only as yet imagine. I ask why he, a restaurateur, can't open a Telangana restaurant himself. "I don't want to start a war over food now," he says with a laugh. Maybe he notices some disappointment, because he then says he is going to open fifteen of them across Asia.

During my quest, I heard a number of suggestions from Telangana people for why their food was so inadequately represented in Hyderabad. Chief among these was that a particular coastal community controlled most of Hyderabad's restaurants and looked down on Telangana cuisine as poor man's food. There's no way of knowing whether this the case. But I do believe it is possible to take the revival of one's own culture into one's own hands. I can't put it better than that inimitable DDS cookbook: "...food is fundamental to all our cultures. If we can retain our food culture, we can retain the rest of our identity." Until then, I hope that Telangana food is as resilient as it is special.