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STORIES OF ASIAN DIASPORIC FOOD

WHAT DOES THE ADAPTATION OF A WESTERN DISH TELL US
ABOUT SOME ASPECTS OF THE ASIAN DIASPORA?

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STORIES OF FOOD AND IDENTITY

Toronto airport.

On August 31, 2023, I arrived in Canada.

Yes, I had always been interested in cultures and people from across the globe. This might be why I couldn't help but wonder how almost the entirety of other studying abroad students coming that day seemed to be from a country of the Asian diaspora. It might be a common understanding for anyone living in Canada that there is not one singular Canadian identity, but rather many Canadian identities, but that wasn't something I was aware of from my external point of view (and I'm not complaining).

Following thorough research through article reading and online exploration, I learned that the Canadian migrant past reflects a history of both exclusion and refuge, from the late 18th century onwards when the first wave of migration arrived predominantly coming from the east Asia region. During this time, Chinese, Japanese, and later Korean, Indian, or Vietnamese immigrants arrived in Canada, generally driven by the search for better economic opportunities.

Migration often means breaking away from the social network you've always known, creating a somewhat temporary isolation. But interestingly, it is also a process that produces a lot of social activity, through exchanges, discussions or trade, which make up for the loneliness of isolation. As diasporic people engage in new communities, they also help to contribute to the much larger scene, perpetuating and extending their social networks nationally and transnationally through food, traditions, communities and identities.

But how are we building an identity in a new place? – and where one isn't necessarily welcomed. When we talk about food, we rarely talk about food to express culture, identity, aspirations, ideas, pleasures, or anxieties. Given the many links between food and how humans communicate, speak and live in our societies, food offers a wonderful lens through which we can explore the social world.

The history of the Asian diaspora is a culinary history that encompasses the whole process of adapting, reinterpreting and reappropriating food, sometimes from their homelands to their new communities, moving it through generations and market-places, and finally placing it on the stove and onto the table. As such, their gastronomic apport and influence on today's Canadian cuisine, and more generally Western cultures, is undeniable.

In this book, I weave together the tales of those from the Asian diaspora, creating a narrative that stretches across both national and transnational borders. It's a collection of different groups' intimate culinary experiences told through a lens that captures the essence of their stories and reflections. This volume is not intended to be only a book about food, but is also meant to be a source of information that will foster a greater awareness of the process of identity making, belonging and allow readers to understand more about how a recipe can mean a lot about a community.

It is the result of months of analysis, listening, observations and research aiming to testify and record the evolving nature of Asian diasporic cuisines and their impact on people and societies. I paid close attention to how people from various backgrounds interacted with their food and culinary heritage and analyzed how it embodies a confluence of stories, traditions, and dialogues while uncovering layers of memories, feelings, and identities.

Quoting from the Italian academic and author Fabio Parasecoli, I propose to set the terms of these culinary exchanges through the phenomenon he defines as “gastro-nativism”, aiming to discuss the ideological use of food to advance ideas about who belongs to a community and who does not, and to reflect on the connections between food, identity, and politics is important.

To that end, I have included a number of simple recipes and ideas along the way, while analyzing their contributions not just to our palates but to our society as a whole – culturally, economically, and humanely.

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Chapter 1

Moksha

Getting settled

WHERE TO EAT?

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Butter chicken

On the curry trail

It all begins with chicken



CULTURAL UNPACKING

Today's my first day in my new campus house. I'm exploring, doing some grocery shopping, and snapping lots of photos. I meet my roommates Jenna, Moksha, and Riya. Jenna's from Hong Kong, Moksha and Riya from Australia, but the two of them are of Indian origin. We hit it off over dinner.



ON MONDAY WE EAT BUTTER CHICKEN

It's fascinating to see their cooking styles. I'm into pastas and meats, Jenna loves ramen and Chinese takeout, while Moksha and Riya are all about Indian cuisine like chickpeas, dals, and sheera, with a kitchen full of spices and unique ingredients like ghee and paneer. They often get Indian food delivered or have a friend bring over home cooked meals. Living here really opens my eyes to how food shapes identity and culture. Like, Moksha and Riya haven't touched pasta since they've been here, which blows my mind.

One day, while cooking, I'm greeted by the aroma of garlic and spices. Moksha offers me some butter chicken. "Do you want butter chicken?" she said to me. "It's chicken pieces wrapped in a mixture of cream, tomatoes, aromatic spices, and butter dollops, and it's also one of the most popular Indian dishes here." She tells me about her plans to visit her uncle who lives in Toronto. "Oh really? When did he arrive in Canada?"

"He's my mother's older brother. He was born in India and moved with my family to Australia in his teenage years. But he decided to settle here in the 80s. He met my aunt who is Indian-Canadian in Australia and decided to settle to live with her here."





BUTTER CHICKEN POUTINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

A few days later, we went out to eat poutine. We really wanted to try what was considered as the ultimate Canadian food.

We went to Smoke's Poutinerie. She ordered a classic poutine while I saw something interesting on the menu: it said "butter chicken poutine". Under it there was a little paragraph about the history of that fusion dish: "Tracing its roots back to Delhi's early 20th century kitchens, where butter chicken first sizzled to life, butter chicken poutine is a nod to the culinary wizardry of Chef Kundan Lal Gujral. The first apparition of butter chicken poutine can be traced back to a 2009 restaurant review in the National Post. Since then, the dish has woven its way into the culinary tapestry of Canada".

Our poutine arrived quickly, and I curiously asked the waiter who usually orders it. He mentioned it's a hit with the Indian diaspora as comfort food and popular among Canadians trying new flavors. Suddenly, a man at the next table chimed in: "Butter chicken poutine isn't just food; it's a tribute to family heritage. I work myself in that restaurant across the street and you know we've added butter chicken poutine to the menu too. The chef of the restaurant comes from India and her take on the butter chicken poutine is inspired by her grandmother's recipe. We use fresh butter chicken and spices, layer it on fries, and top it with either classic Canadian cheddar and mozzarella or homemade Indian paneer. He continued, "You know, the importance of the Indian diaspora's culinary apports today has gone wild. India isn't at the stage of adapting to Canadian cuisine, it's more the other way around. Canadian culture has to adapt to Indian food inclinations. It reflects how we're all evolving, we're all about embracing the blend of cultures we've got going on here. Seeing this fusion on so many fast food menus across Canada. That tells you it's not just a hit, but it's also a sign of how open we are to mixing things up. But hey, this isn't just about adding something spicy to our menu. It's bigger than that. It's about recognizing the integration of the Indian community into the Canadian culinary landscape. These guys are doing more than just cooking up great food; they're shaping what people eat and what they crave. And let's not forget the impact they're making on the economy too. It's not just about good eats; it's about how these flavors from the Indian diaspora are stirring things up in a big way."

As I was going back home, I started thinking about if it was possible to have a health-conscious twist on butter chicken poutine. I thought about using lean chicken breast to reduce fat and baking potato fries in the oven instead of frying them. For the sauce, maybe I could use low-fat coconut milk and a lighter substitute. Adding some veggies like peppers and spinach could make it more nutritious. And instead of regular cheese, maybe a low-fat cheese or just using less cheese. This healthier version of butter chicken poutine seemed like a great way to enjoy a favorite dish in a better way.



FROM DELHI TO QUEBEC

He then showed us a video of him making this famous poutine on his social media account. "Heat some oil in a pan. Toss in your onions, ginger, and garlic and cook 'em until they smell great. Next, add all your spices – garam masala, turmeric, coriander, cumin, chili, and a bit of salt. Then, pour in your crushed tomatoes and a splash of water. Let that baby simmer. Once it's simmered, blend it up until it's nice and smooth. Put it back in the pan, stir in your cream or coconut milk, a touch of brown sugar, and a spoon of almond butter. Adjust the salt if you need. Now, for the poutine – lay out your fries, sprinkle some cheese on top, and pour over your butter chicken gravy. And there you go, butter chicken poutine!"

I loved that dish. I found that combining a foreign favorite like butter chicken with a Canadian classic offered a delightful way to experience new flavors while not being completely disoriented. It's a nice way to introduce new communities to another culture.



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Chapter 2

Jenna

... *come over for dinner
tonight*

WHERE TO EAT?

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