

Light my FIRE

Forget formal sit-down dinners. The new smoking-hot culinary enterprise is the barbecue. Beer-can chicken, anyone?

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Myth: Barbecuing is messy, expensive, requires specialised skills, fancy ingredients and is too American to appeal to Indians, who love their tandoor, thank you very much.

Reality: More and more urban Indians are adopting it, especially in centres with high homecoming NRI populations such as Bangalore, Pune, Gurgaon and parts of Mumbai. Delhi, of course, can't do without its tandoori. While meticulously managed, sit-down dinners are not exactly passé, many hosts are now looking for ways to throw a more casual and activity-oriented party, and barbecuing has stepped in to fill the gap between anything-goes college parties and formal lunches and dinners.

For Bangalore residents Rudreshwar Sen and his wife Alakananda, a party isn't complete without some grilling. The Sens, who started barbecuing when one of their friends returned from the US with a branded barbecue grill set, throw a barbecue in the garden of their



GRILLING SESSION: Participants are taught to fire up and use the grill during workshops at the Weber Experience Centre in Bangalore

their olive-infused chicken breast is almost always a hit and gets polished off along with others like rosemary chicken, beer-can chicken (in which a whole marinated chicken is plonked on top of a beer can half filled with beer and then cooked, with the beery vapours adding a special flavour to the meat), grilled pork chops, *bhetki* with black bean sauce, prawn on skewers, and spicy corn on cob. "We've also tried Bengali dishes like *bhetki macher paturi*, *daab chingri*, *begun bhaja* with mixed luck," adds Rudreshwar.

When American firm Weber launched its premium grills in India three years ago, it was encouraged by the fact that many Indians in urban centres had been exposed to the barbecue concept through popular media, people were eating at restaurants that specialised in barbecued food and there was a growing awareness of healthier cooking options, says Aslam Gafoor, the Bangalore-based COO of Weber India. The brand has doubled sales since its launch in 2009, he adds.

Enthusiastic cooks are now taking special classes to learn the basics of grilling and barbecue-tailored recipes. Weber conducts weekly barbecue workshops attended by 15-20 people and most sessions are sold out.

Young chef Sarabjit Singh, who runs a turnkey kitchen solutions company in Bangalore, has created a hospitality brand called The BBQ Story, which conducts specialised cooking classes every weekend. "We teach people the basics, right from how to light the charcoal to incorporating different international cuisines such as Chinese, Thai, Indonesian, Italian and Spanish into the concept of barbecue. We even teach people how to make rotis and pizzas on the barbecue," says Sarabjit. "There is a good mix in the profile of people who come. The last session saw a lot of youngsters."

While the American barbecuing tradition is primarily associated with cooking a plethora of meats, with seafood being a late entrant and corn-on-the-cob a barely-there nod to the vegetarian side of things, in India not providing options for vegetarians can kill the aspirations of any hospitality business. Keeping this in mind, most barbecue restaurants and classes provide plenty of choices and innovation in barbecuing vegetables in interesting ways — from onions and peppers wrapped in foils and thrown casually on the grill to cook in their own juices to elaborate dishes such as grilled *arbi*, grill crisp stuffed *bhindi* and plantain kababs. These recipes are a godsend for the likes of Sid-

dharth Mangharam, a foodie who loves to experiment with cooking techniques and doesn't want to feel hampered by the fact that he and his wife are vegetarians. Mangharam, who worked in the corporate world with companies such as Microsoft and McKinsey before starting a singles network called FLOH, lived in the US for around seven years before heading back to India and picked up his love for the barbecue lifestyle there. "In the US, almost every household has a grill and I guess we just got used to being with friends and going to parties where the grill was the centre of attraction. Barbecuing is such a fun casual way for people to come together. You don't need fancy tableware, you don't need to have perfect food — you can hand out paper plates and slightly charred bits and people are still happy," says Mangharam. Being a vegetarian has not killed

King, a retailer of imported BBQ equipment brands such as Campinggaz. BBQ King is now looking at setting up a retail store in the city.

According to Benjamin, the bulk of sales is in products priced between Rs 18,500 and Rs 32,000. The company also retails BBQ equipment priced at Rs 80,000. Weber's barbecue sets are priced between Rs 5,000 (for a small table-top version) and Rs 1.5 lakh for industrial-sized ones (for hotels) though the maximum movement is in the Rs 10,000 to Rs 30,000 range. The company also manages to get round the problem of accessibility to good quality charcoal by selling eco-friendly, even-sized 'briquettes' made of coconut shell.

The adoption of barbecuing as a way of life has a realty component to it too. After all, barbecuing needs space and not everyone wants a smoking grill in their balcony. In keeping with this, developers are creating spaces in apartments and villas where a grill can be set up. What's more, many are advertising this way of life with well-placed ads showing photogenic, happy-looking families evidently having a great time around the barbecue set. Recently, Habitat Ventures launched a high-end apartment project in Whitefield, in which each apartment boasts of its own private garden of 1,250-1,300 sq ft — a feature that's being projected as the development's USP. Interestingly, the garden area is being marketed to people as a place to host barbecue parties. "The marketing has been deliberate, keeping in mind our target audience that is typically made up of people who have either returned from US or have lived in the US and have become used to a certain lifestyle. In the US, weekends or major football games are associated with barbecue parties," says Shivaram Kumar Malakala, executive director, Habitat Ventures.

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his style, he says, because of the abundance of fresh ingredients that can be put to good use. "We do a lot of veg burgers as well as grill fresh vegetables like peppers and potatoes. We also grill branded frozen and ready-to-fry stuff that is available in supermarkets and make desserts such as honey-glazed pineapples," he adds.

While Weber is getting aggressively into the market, several retailers have been doing brisk business in importing barbecue sets from countries like China and Australia. "Many people prefer gas barbecues to the conventional charcoal ones. Gas barbecues take two minutes to heat up and there is no mess and effort involved, as compared to working with a conventional one. Also, gas barbecues are ideal for people living in apartments, and can even be kept in a 3x6 balcony. Besides, the charcoal available is very damp and hence takes a lot of time to light up," says Titus Benjamin, head marketing, BBQ

In other projects, common areas are being marked out as spaces for barbecue parties. "People look forward to having a lounge area, which can be used to host BBQ dinners for 30-40 people. In some of our upcoming residential projects, we are setting aside certain areas that can be used for this purpose," says Nitesh Shetty, CMD, Nitesh Estates, one of the city's premium real estate developers. Typically, in apartment complexes that let out the common area for parties, residents would have to book the place in advance for a fee, which could vary from Rs 10,000 to Rs 25,000. Of course, residents would be paying for an open area that would vary between 5,000 sq ft and 25,000 sq ft in size. ■



BARBIE DAYS: While the American barbecuing tradition is primarily associated with meats, vegetarians here do crisp stuffed bhindi and vegetable kababs

villa in posh Bangalore suburb Whitefield at least once a month. They also have other barbecue enthusiasts as friends and neighbours, and often carry or wheel their grill set over to their houses for joint DIY parties. "We love the food, but more than that, the social aspect of barbecuing appeals to us. It is an activity around which conversation can flow," says Rudreshwar, who works in a senior managerial position with Infosys. "It helps us get people outdoors instead of everyone just sitting around chatting, and it is the kind of cooking in which everyone can chip in." Like most barbecuing families, the Sens have their own repertoire of signature dishes:

DABBAS FOR DOGS

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Meal times were fun for Rashee Kuchroo's miniature poodle and Pekingese. They would gobble up their chicken and rice. But her Labrador Sloppy always hung behind, not enthused by the dry pet food recommended for his breed. That's when she decided to conjure up treats for him.

After doing an online course in dog and cat nutrition, Kuchroo decided to make food fun not just for her pet but for dogs across the city. "I set up Pet Café in Mumbai and began delivering food for dogs," says the 23-year-old pet chef. "I had to wind it up when I moved to Delhi recently. I have started a similar service here," says Kuchroo, who launched Doggie Dabbas a few weeks ago.

From juju chicken-rice and casseroles to banana mutt cookies and sorbets, there's a range of food exclusively for animals. Pooches have never had it better with pet lovers across the country setting up bakeries and tiffin services to cater to the taste buds of their beloved companions.

Former instructional designer Kamini Nanda decided to launch Pet Chef in March 2010 as she was tired of her corporate job and wanted to do something she really loved. "I used to make treats for my dogs and was toying with the idea of setting up a business," says Bangalore-based Nanda.

She began making biscuits for her dogs after there was a global scare about contaminated dog food. "I wanted food without preservatives for them," she says. "I discovered that there were other people out there who wanted the same."



PET PROJECT: Rashee Kuchroo started making tasty treats for her Labrador Sloppy, her St Bernard Boss (above) and her other pets after the former refused to eat the dry pet food recommended for his breed

So she consulted veterinarians and came up with nutritional treats. "Everything is custom-made and I do anything baked — casseroles, biscuits, pizzas," says Nanda, whose client base includes 25 regulars.

She does all the cooking herself and uses no preservatives or artificial flavouring. "Many dogs are lactose intolerant, diabetic or have allergies, so I make food especially for them," she says. Pet chefs also need to know what's safe for dogs. "Chocolate is toxic for dogs so I use carob, which is a safe substitute," says Nanda.

With an increasing demand for healthy, nutri-

tious and tasty food, dabba or tiffin services are in demand. Homecare, a Bandra-based tiffin service for dogs, delivers 300 *dabbas* across Mumbai. "Our cooks are at work by 4am," says Nuzhat Khan of Homecare. Deliveries start by 8.30am. "We give a combination of rice with vegetables, chicken, mutton or beef, depending on the client's request," says Khan. Each *dabba* costs Rs 60 to Rs 150 for half a kg to 1 kg of food. "We have regular clients whom we charge Rs 1,860 a month," she says.

With an increasing number of working couples, many pet lovers opt for a daily *dabba*. "We are a vegetarian family, but I didn't want my

Pet chefs have gone gourmet and are dishing out everything from peanut butter bones to pizzas for pampered pooches

dogs to have just vegetarian food. It is more convenient to order *dabbas*," says Madhavi Gokhlay, who spends Rs 5,000 a month on home-cooked food for her two dogs. "It is delivered to the doorstep and my dogs love it."

Kuchroo doesn't do more than 20 *dabbas* a day as she does all the cooking herself. "My clients usually take it on a daily basis or thrice a week if they have puppies," she says. Her menu includes Zorro's Basket, a spinach-based dish, and Apple Twist, which people order for birthdays. "I offer package deals for regulars. So for 30 kg a month, that is one kg of food every day, I charge Rs 13,500," says Kuchroo, who dishes up treats for her St Bernard, Boss. Many of her treats are named after her pets.

Pet owners are willing to shell out money. "My vet said it's good to serve one home-cooked meal a day. This way, I also get food that's tailored to my dog's nutritional requirement," says Nisha Sheth, who has a golden retriever.

It was this demand for tasty treats that inspired Bangalore-based Swaty Chandel to add a 'cake and bakes' section to Woolfilicious, a lifestyle portal for pampered pets, two months ago. "We relocated from the US three years ago and discovered that though every neighbourhood pet store has pet food, there are not many fresh food options here," says Chandel, who launched Woolfilicious in March 2010.

"Many people would access my site to shop for

clothes and accessories and made requests for dog food too," she says. So she tied up with Mumbai-based The Spoilt Brat Bakery. The bakery was set up in May 2010 by Yadika Sharma, who also relocated from the US five years ago. "We are very conscious about what we eat, so when I got a dog, Max, I was particular what he eats," says Sharma, who began baking for Max. "I'd make muffins and send them to friends who had dogs and they loved it," she says.

Today, the Bakery ships crunchy peanut butter bones and oatmeal apple cinnamon drops to homes across the country. "The biscuits last up to six weeks in an airtight container and two months when refrigerated," says Sharma, who also makes ice-creams, sorbets and yoghurt-based desserts on request.

What's more, all these dishes can also be consumed by human beings. "None of it has salt, sugar or preservatives, so it's actually healthy," she says. "Even my husband loves the ginger honey cookies." ■

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