

# Marathi food for Bong palate

**APARNA PALLAVI** took 20 years to understand Vidarbha's culinary character: it lies in its bread diversity

**T**o my Bengali-cosmopolitan taste, cuisine of the Maharashtra region lacked both variety and subtlety. There are two types of vegetable dishes—*mokli bhaji* or fried vegetables and *rassa bhaji* or vegetable curry. Both are fiery spicy, oily and prepared in a similar way. Non-vegetarian recipes are no different.

It took me five years to coin my first adage about Vidarbha's cooking: one can't add too much chilly to curries. It took me another five years to notice the flavours of chutney powders made from oilseeds and lentils. But chutneys are just fringe foods. It was after 20 years of wandering in the hinterlands that I grasped the charm of Vidarbha's food—its bread.

I had come across Maharashtra's festive bread—*pooran poli*—but promptly learnt to hate it. After my marriage, my mother-in-law wanted me to learn how to make *pooran poli*, but I put my foot down. The sweet delicacy is a fried *chapati* made from refined wheat flour, chickpea paste and sugar. That was the biggest blow to her; after all, a Marathi *bahu* must know how to make *pooran poli*.

We found common ground by accident. During a visit to the Melghat region in 2006, I got stuck in a tribal hamlet for 36 hours. The residents were drying and preserving *mahua* flowers for the rainy season to make *mahua bhakhar*—sweet bread of *mahua* flowers and sorghum flour. They believe that it protects from chills and aches during rains. An elderly lady prepared *bhakhars* for me and offered me a bagful of dried flowers.

I tried making *mahua bhakhar*. But instead of moulding it with hands, as the elderly lady had shown, I rolled it out with a rolling pin and proudly showed it to my mother-in-law. Soon we were deep into our first food conversation.

She explained how my shortcut technique had changed the flavour. My mother-in-law holds that moulding *bhakhar* between two palms is the best way to bring out the flavour. It took years for my palate to develop the refinement to realise that she was right.

My trips to villages in the meanwhile led to the discovery

of *bhakhars* made from other millets, such as finger millet, little millet and buckwheat—each with its own distinct taste. My mother-in-law did not match my enthusiasm for these. For her Kunbi community, the powerful landed class, these are inferior, tribal foods. Then, I inadvertently struck a deep chord with her. After interactions with tribal women in Yavatmal, I asked my mother-in-law about wild vegetables like *tarota*, *kundar* and *latari*. She joined me eagerly in scouting around for these in the small pockets of roadside greenery.

With repeated *bhakhar* meals, the hot, oily *rassa*; thin *kadhi*, and cloying *kheer* began to make sense. Though crisp and delicious, the *bhakhar* is nevertheless coarser than rice or wheat *chapatis*. It is difficult to gulp down without the strongly flavoured liquid accompaniments. It is best when made into a mush with dal or curry.



**AMBADI CHI BHAKHAR**

*Fresh, young Deccan hemp leaves - 8-10*

*Sorghum flour - 200 gm*

*Salt - to taste*

*Oil - 2 teaspoons*

Wash the leaves, dry them and tear into small pieces. Add salt and oil to the flour, mix it and knead with warm water. Form a heap and leave it covered for 15 minutes. Add the leaves to the moistened flour and cover it. After 15 minutes, take enough dough for one *bhakhhar* and knead with warm water till it is smooth. Pat or hand-mould into a thick *bhakhhar* of required size and bake it the way *mahua bhakhhar* is cooked (see next recipe). It is usually served hot with *ambadi chi bhaji*

**MAHUA BHAKHAR**

*Dry mahua flowers*

*- 100 gm*

*Sorghum flour - 200 gm*

*Oil - 2 teaspoons*

*Salt - to taste*

*Jaggery (optional) - to taste*

*Carom seeds - a pinch (optional)*

Clean mahua flowers by removing their stamens and pistils. Soak them in water for one hour and grind to a coarse paste. Add the paste, crushed jaggery, salt and carom seeds to sorghum flour and knead to a medium-soft dough. Add a little oil to make it smooth. Divide the dough into balls, pat or hand-mould them into thick *bhakhars* and put on a hot skillet. Roast on a medium flame, applying a thin coat of water on the upper surface to prevent it from cracking. Turn the sides to roast the *bhakhhar* thoroughly. Serve hot with spicy curries

**AMBADI CHI BHAJI**

*Ambadi leaves - 200 gm*

*Sorghum flour - as desired*

*Salt - to taste*

*Green chillies - 3-4*

*Red chillies - 1-2*

*Oil - for seasoning*

*Mustard seeds - a pinch*

*Cumin seeds - a pinch*

*Ginger-garlic paste*

*- 1 teaspoon*

*Turmeric - a pinch*

*Fenugreek powder*

*- 1 teaspoon*

Wash and dry the leaves. Tear into pieces and put in a pan with salt and water for boiling. Once boiled, cover and simmer on slow flame. A few minutes later stir the leaves into a pulp. Add more water if needed. When the pulp starts to thicken, add sorghum flour, stir to avoid lumps. Stir till flour and leaf pulp are mixed and the flour is cooked. The paste can be stored in a refrigerator for days. Before serving, heat oil in a pan and add mustard and cumin seeds. When they start sputtering, add red chillies. Then put green chillies and ginger garlic paste and saute for a minute. Add turmeric and fenugreek powder, and ladle the required amount of *ambadi* paste into the pan. Mix and cook on a slow flame for two minutes. Serve hot

