

Even a ruler had to know how to cook a *dal*

MAHARAJA VIKRAM SINGH chats with DIVYA KAUSHIK about prized recipes from his family's royal kitchen



For many Indian maharajas, cooking was a passion, and recipes were guarded like precious treasures. Even daughters and daughter-in-laws weren't allowed purview into their secrets. And they were often passed down to sons in the family. Sometimes, the recipes of royal kitchens were buried and forgotten after a chef had died. So a particular dish would remain associated with him, until it disappeared forever.

Maharaja Dilip Singh didn't want to have dishes made in his family be forgotten with time. Indeed, the royal house of Sialana takes great pride in its cuisine. So, Singh took it upon himself to pen down recipes, and place them in a briefcase. They were later discovered by his son, Digvijay Singh, who produced a book of the Sialana household recipes in 1983. These were later reprinted about 15 times. Titled *Cooking Delights Of The Maharajas*, the book is on the prized list of royalty cookbooks in India.

Today, Maharaja Vikram Singh, Digvijay Singh's son, continues his forebears' tradition. He organised live cooking sessions at Surajgarh Fort and is behind the Sialana Food Festival at the Park Hotel. "The aim is to take forward a legacy that dates back three generations," said Vikram Singh. He will be in Delhi till February 11, monitoring how dishes are made and guiding the chefs.

He explained, "These are traditional recipes. And although spices used are common to most dishes, the method of preparation differs. The important thing is quantity of spices. It should be perfect." Singh went on, "Our cuisine reflects the use of exotic ingredients and has been



inspired by various cultures." We realised what he meant.

There was the Shikampur kebab, a golden fried minced meat kebab, that originated in the court of Hari Singh of Kashmir. While the rabbit keema recipe had belonged to "the late Hakim Nizamuddin Khan Sahib of Ajmer."

It appeared the dish of Rajpiplani Margi was touched by Gujarati cooking. Though women in royal families had little to do in the kitchens, their influence remained," explained Singh. He added, "Rajpiplani Margi is a dish that was introduced to Sialana cuisine, by my mother."

"She was originally from Chhota Udaipur but her mother was from Gujarat and she inherited the recipe." The dish stands out in Sialana cuisine for sweet flavours. To add to it, there was Mutunjay Pulao. This is like Hydrabadi Biryani. Sweet and sour.



designed to be consumed while the royals were on the hunt.

Like the Banjara Dal and Khad Khargosh, Singh said, "My grandfather came across some *banjaras* who were returning from the hunt. He was impressed by their simple preparation cooked in *desi* ghee, salt and a mixture of different lentils.

Khad Khargosh is rabbit made in a pit with spices, sealed with charcoal. Aside from beef, every kind of meat is part of Sialana cuisine. And there is a legend attached to most dishes. Maharaja Vikram selected the best."

To start the meal, he suggested Gular Ke Kebab or wild fig kebabs. The option was Murgh Ka Soola. These are cloves and smoked chicken skewers, with chillies and almonds. Most of the main course dishes and biryanis were influenced by Persian cooking.

Mutton Dahibara, a unique prepa-

ration of mutton cutlets, was soaked in mini-flavoured sweetened curd and *sasringa*.

The last was a rich minced mutton pie with almonds and raisins. "The challenging part is finding the right cooking utensils and measurements," Vikram Singh said.

In the olden days, measurements were in *tolas*. Conversion was the challenge. Most ingredients used were traditional. But treated differently. Tomatoes for souring. Curd and mustard seeds soaked in water overnight for *dals*. After it is cooked, fresh curd was added to mustard, and not re-heated."

The Petha Ke Kebab and Aloo Ka Rajal Salan are both must-haves for veggie. Rich, but very healthy.

The desserts included Hare Chane Ka Halwa or Gulab Ki Kheer. "The rose petals used make a huge difference to the preparation. We just used *desi* gullah," he concluded.

Like most maharajas, Vikram Singh's grandfather, Maharaja Dilip Singh, was a great foodie, but he did not cook.

What happened to him and food was a chance occurrence.

"During 1890, he was out hunting with the chefs and nobles. It got dark in the evening and the chef's cart was lost. They slept without food that night.

He went on, "Dilip Singh soon realised he had to learn basic cooking. At least, how to make *dal* and *roti*." Sialana cuisine has several dishes