

A Study of Mughlai Cuisine

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Abstract

This paper studies the Mughal cuisine. Initially demarcating what can be considered a part of Mughal cuisine then expanding on its diversity. Finally, the paper will trace the evolution of cuisine in modern times. The study will include the food and ingredients available in the empire, dishes served to the elites, and eventually the 21st century rendition of the cuisine.

Keywords: Mughal, Cuisine, Emperors and Dishes

INTRODUCTION

The word Mughal refers to an empire that ruled most of the Indian subcontinent between 16th to 19th centuries. The empire hails its origin to their patriarch Zair-ud-Din Babur, who founded the empire in 1526. Although Babur was from Uzbekistan and was a decedent of Timur (Genghis Khan's son) the Mughal cuisine was greatly influenced by the Persians, who were often present in the empire as guests, dignitaries, diplomats or married to the emperor. The empire reached its zenith in the 16th century, particularly under the reigns of Jalal-ud-Din Akbar. Akbar, along with his son and grandson; Jahangir and Shah Jehan had more than 100 courses. The Mughal emperors were known for their meticulously kept records. This includes- Ain-i-Akbari and Nushka-e-Shahjahani to mention some. These written sources are still being used by chefs to make or/and customizes Mughlai dishes. These dishes are very diverse from mild to spicy, some take hours to prepare, and others have rare spices in them. These royal dishes have entered the home of everyday Indians while some places still specialize in this cuisine.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

The data used in this paper is secondary data. The sources are the elaborate documentations kept by the Mughal courts and their historical interpretations. They are (Narayan, 2015)-

- Gazettes and chronicles like Ain-i-Akbari
- Memoirs and personal biographies like Bāburnāma, Humāyūnnāma, Tazkira-i Humāyūn u Akbar, Akbarnāma, Ā'in-i Akbarī, Muntakhabu-t Tawārīkh, Jahāngīrnāma, Shāhjahānnāma and the Ma'āşiru-l Umarā'
- Persian culinary manuals like Ni'matnāma, Kḥwān-i Ni'mat, Nuskhā-i-Shāhjahānī and Risāla dar Bayān-i-Aṭ'ima
- Persian travelogues like Ānand Rām Muḥliṣ's Safarnāma-i Muḥliṣ
- European documentations
- Paintings

Some of the accounts and documents are written in the name of the emperor often deal with ideas of politics and governance rather than gastronomy. Hence to make the data more understandable and relevant I have also tried to use the accounts of Gulbadan Begam, Jauhar Āftābchī and Bāyazīd Bayāt which are written in simpler language in contrast to traditional histories.

These sources are rich in description of the food prepared and present in the empire. But they are susceptible to the bias of the person writing them. There is also the problem of elitist outlook to most of the information. I have tried to keep this in mind and hence exercise great caution.

INGREDIENTS AND PRODUCE AVAILABLE IN THE EMPIRE

The empire stretched from present-day Afghanistan in the north-west, to the Sindh-Indus valley in the west, to the west till Bangladesh and till the Deccan plateau in the south. Hence there was an availability of diverse variety of crops, vegetables, pulses, fruits, etc. beside this pastoralism and animal husbandry was a popular practice. So dairy and meat was available. The Mughals had close and continuous diplomatic relations with other countries hence there was an import and export of produce. Exchanging of gifts was a necessary and mandatory

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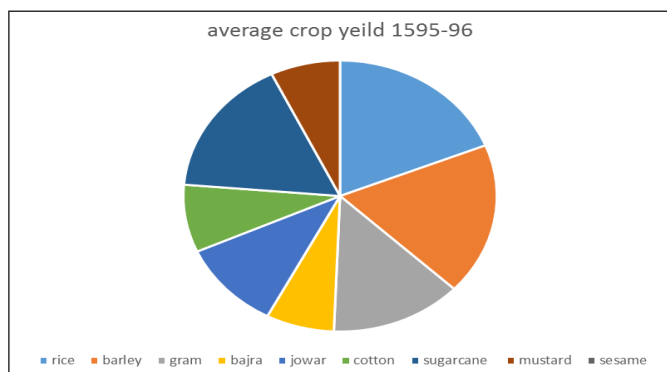
requirement in the Mughal imperial court and food was one of the commodities that were exchanged. Besides this marriage was another popular way by which new influences were introduced into Mughal cuisine.

In the Indian sub-continent, there are 2 important agricultural seasons - Kharif (autumn) and Rabi (spring). The most fertile areas are the Indus valley and the Gangetic Plains. The staple crops were rice, wheat along with millet and pearl millet. Rice grows in the Kharif season and requires more moisture. Wheat is the opposite, it is a Rabi crop that requires less water and more heat. Millet was cultivated in the Kharif season and was the food of the poor because it was cheaper.

Along with these various lentils and pulses as well as vegetables and fruits were also grown. The pulses include arhar (*Cajanus Cajan*), mūng (*Vigna radiata*), masūr (*Lens culinaris*) and urad (*Vigna mungo*). The vegetables recorded include onions, turnips, spinach and various other greens (sāg), carrots, aubergines, sweet potatoes, bitter gourd (karelā), ridged gourd (torī) and snake gourd (chachindā). Fruits included mangoes, pineapples, plantains, pomegranates, oranges, sugarcane, jackfruit, custard apples, pears and guavas. Various varieties of melons, apples, plums, quinces, figs and other dried fruits were also brought in from areas such as Kabul, Bokhara and Central Asia (agricultural production in Mughal India, n.d.).

The cash crops were referred to as jins-i-kamil or perfect crops. The most popular cash crop was sugarcane along with oil seeds, coffee, opium, etc. India was also known for its spice trade that took place from the southern coast. These included-pepper, clove, cardamom, ginger, turmeric, beetle-nut, including others (agricultural production in Mughal India, n.d.).

The productivity was high and keenly monitored hence there was food security.



Graph 1: Agricultural Yield Under Emperor Akbar of Half an Acre (Agricultural Production in Mughal India, n.d.)

The meat included mutton, goat's meat, venison and many types of fowl, such as chickens, pigeons, partridges, quails and varieties of waterfowl such as geese and duck. Although both beef as well as pork was eaten but they were prohibited in certain communities. Mutton was considered expensive so it was substituted by goat's flesh and beef was substituted by buffalo (agricultural production in Mughal India, n.d.).

A key question pertains to the prevalence of vegetarianism or the complete abjuration of meat. Vegetarianism was largely a practice of 'upper castes' such as Brahmins and Banias as well as certain other communities such as the Jains. It was also sometimes adopted by other 'castes' or communities in imitation of the 'upper castes', a process that the sociologist M. N. Srinivas termed 'Sanskritization however the lower caste could not afford meat (Narayan, 2015).

THE EMPEROR'S TABLE

Babar, the first Mughal emperor, was born in Uzbekistan and did not focus much on art-architecture rather he focused on warfare. Hence the food prepared under him was meant to ensure the health of the soldiers. He also liked fruits from Afghanistan like grapes and melon. The Bāburnāma contains rich descriptions of food and feasting traditions within the Central Asian social context that Bābur originally hailed from, as well as his encounters with Indian food and dining customs. Relative to the high Mughal period, there was a greater degree of permissiveness and freedom with regard to homosexuality and women's participation in social intercourse. Meals were often shared with women. For instance, Bābur on one occasion mentions having dined with his sister, K̄hadīja Begam (Narayan, 2015).

The successor of Babur was Humayun. The period under emperor Humayun was a period of political instability as he was overthrown and sent into exile by Sher Shah Suri. This was the period of food symbolism. Etiquettes mattered. As Humayun remained in Iran during exile, the cuisine of this period has Iranian influence. For instance, Akbar's mother, Hamida was Iranian and included pistachios while cooking. This way Iranian influences found their way into the cuisine. The emperor was also very fond of sherbets and often fruits were put in all his drinks. (datta, 2020) Through the accounts of Gulbadan begam, Humayun's sister, we know that although there were campaigns to dignify the position of the emperor but

there was little or no gender segregation in the banquets (Narayan, 2015).

The empire reached its zenith under the rule of Humayun's son- Akbar. He was called the 'insan-i-kamil' or the perfect man by Abu'l Fazl. The empire was greatly diverse. There were people from all across the sub-continent and from the neighboring empires. The Mughals had amicable relations with the Turks because Akbar's mother was Turkish. They also had good relations with the neighboring kingdoms of the Rajput and Marathas. Raja Bharmal was made a high ranking noble in Akbar's court. Through the accounts of ain-i-akbari we know that Akbar was very interested in the functioning of the kitchens. This was because he wanted to ensure that people were eating balanced diet and that the food ensured the well-being of the body. He also had a minister to look after the kitchens. Under him the famous chicken dish-murgh mussalam was developed. He preferred eating alone and only drank the water from Ganga River. He loved his gardens and used scented water to water the plants in the garden. (datta, 2020) He rarely consumed meat and ever ate cow's meat because it was sacred to the Hindus. In reference to this Abu'l Fazl writes- "His Majesty cares very little for meat, and often expresses himself to this effect [lit. Is brought forth from his jewel-like tongue]. It is indeed from ignorance and cruelty that, although various kinds of food are obtainable, men are bent on injuring living creatures, and lending a

ready hand in killing and eating them. None seems to have an eye for the beauty inherent in the prevention of cruelty but makes himself a tomb for animals. If his Majesty had not the burden of the world on his shoulders, he would at once totally abstain from meat; and now it is his intention to quit it by degrees, conforming, however, a little to the spirit of the age" (Narayan, 2015).

Another important fact to consider is that under Akbar's reign there existed a gender segregation between the ways in which each consumed their meal.

Under Jahangir eating became an elaborate affair and food became a status symbol. For instance when sir. Thomas roe was entertained by one of Jahangir's nobleman he was served- "shallots and meat roast, fried, boiled, and diverse rises [rice]". He followed the tradition of not eating meat because of the advice of his father in order to ensure good relations with the Hindu kingdoms. Jahangir also fasted on 2 days - Thursday, day of his coronation and Sunday, day of his father's birth. Jahangir's wife, Noor Jahan, would use fruits and flowers to increase the taste and appeal of curd (pal, 2018).

The Mughal cuisine touched sparkling heights under shah Jehan, who is known for his contribution to the art, architecture, and cultural realms. He is known for building the famous fortress city of Shahjahanabad. The city was a nurturing ground for culinary masterpieces.



Fig. 1: Map of Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi), Dated-1857 (columbia.edu, n.d.)

The city had 3 locus of food. They were (Narayan, 2015)-

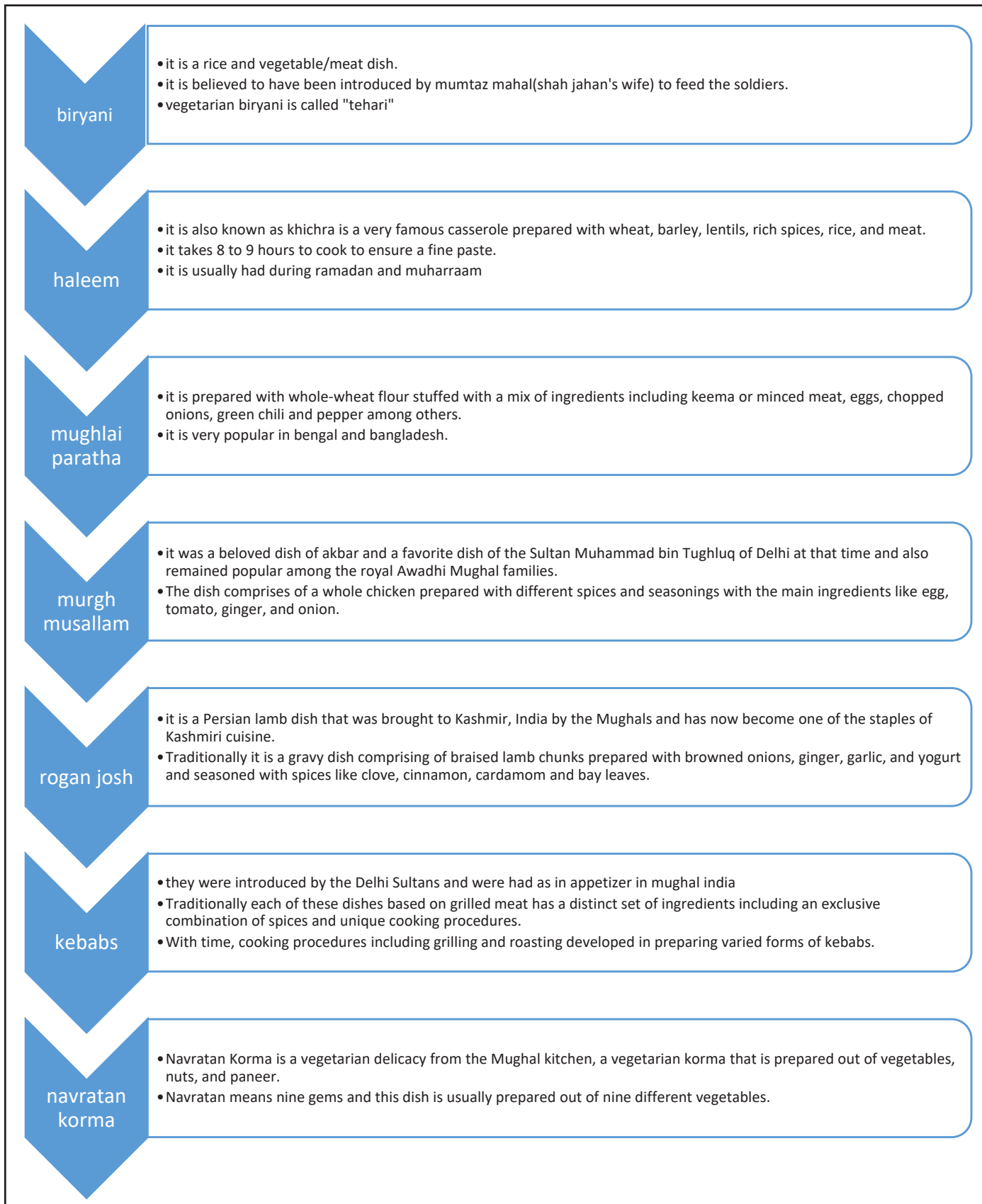
1. The bazars-the bazar stretched from the palace gates to the Fathepuri masjid. the bazars were not only places where people could purchase goods but food was also sold here. There were stalls that sold spicy kebabs and other types of roasted meats. Outside. Although this was the prominent bazar but there were many other bazars as well which were the epicentre of food and entertainment as well as commerce. A reagent of these bazars can be found in the present-day Chandini Chowk bazars present in old Delhi. These bazars were set up by Shahjehan's daughters-Roshanara begum and Jahanara begum.
2. The coffee houses or Qahwa *khānas*- these coffee houses were very popular in the Middle East and Central Asian empires. Nobles and aristocrats would come here for merrymaking. Besides this the place was also occupied by many revered poets and writers. Hence they would come here twice a day and there was a good flow of ideas. Many of these coffee shops exist in present day old-Delhi and Chandini Chowk.
3. The suburbs-this was the place where many large grain shops were present. People bought, sold, and prepared food here. There was plenty of raw materials like grains, oils, lentils, etc. available because of food security in the empire. Many rich bungalow and mansions were also located here.

Besides the bazars, coffee shops, and suburbs another place for the glorification of food was the emperor's table along with the domestic residence of women (haram). The Mughals were famous for their gardens and hence they had many fruit trees. These were not only a pleasant sight but in the Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures fruits held great symbolic meaning. When emperors wanted to establish truce and end strife they would use fruits and sugar as the messengers. Even when foreign diplomats like Sir Thomas Roe or visitors like Francois Bernier would visit the emperor they would bring fruit as a mark of respect. People even exchanged fruits when they bid adieu and this was seen as a mark of good will and friendship. This way fruits held an important position in the Mughal diet along with condiments like betel nut or paan. Even the famous traveler Manucci wrote about how it was considered disrespectful to refuse paan (Narayan, 2015).

During and after the period of Aurangzeb, the successor of Shah Jahan, the empire saw a decline. Although Aurangzeb's own food discourse centred largely on simplicity and asceticism. He remained a vegetarian for most of his life.

Popular Mughlai Dishes from the Mughal Period to the Modern Period (Sagar, 1968)-

1. Entree and Main Course



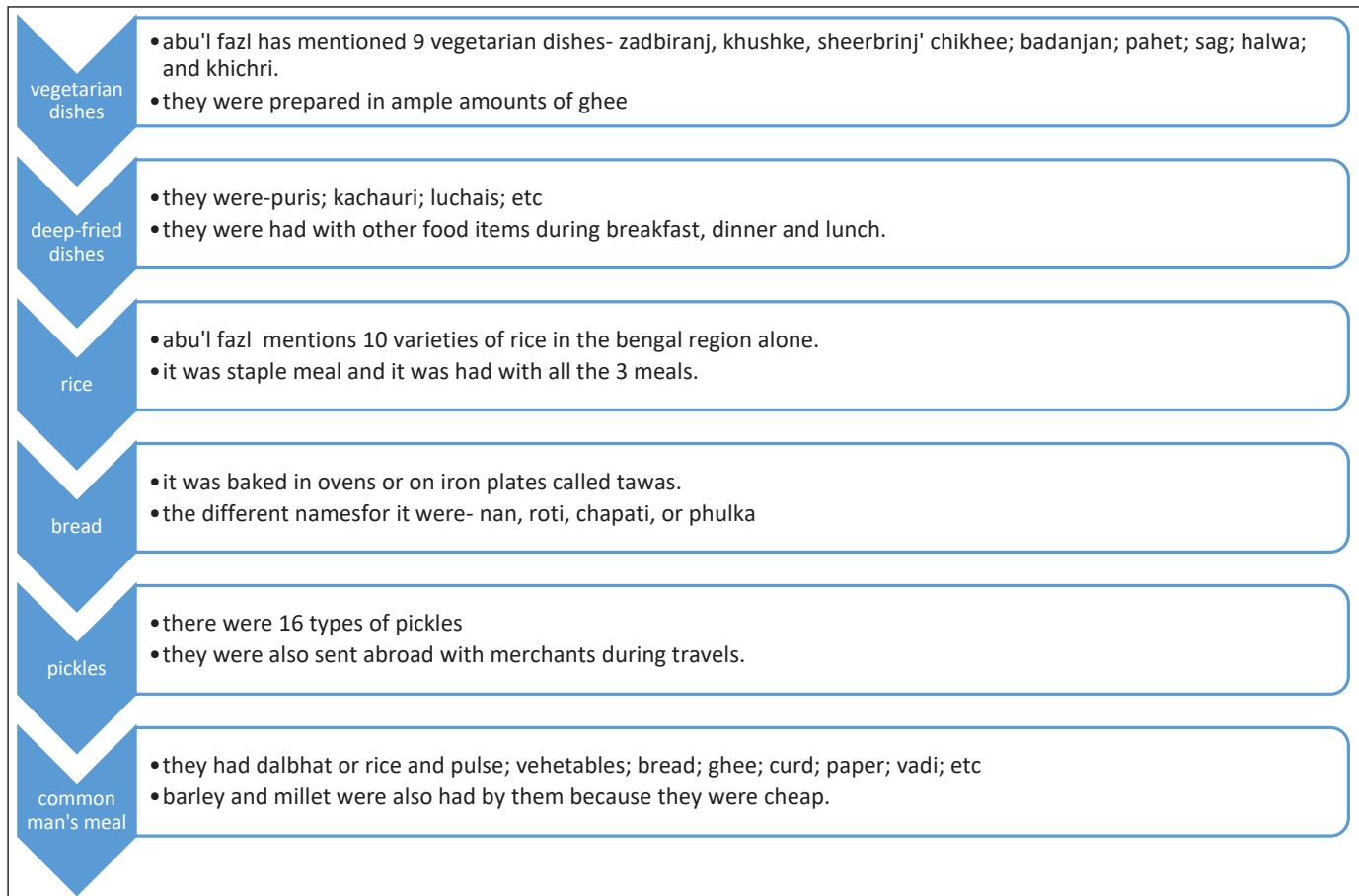
2. Sweets or Desserts

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| kulfi | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The term Kulfi is derived from a Persian word which means a covered cup. • It is a 16th century frozen dairy-based dessert. It is a mixture of thickened milk seasoned with saffron and pistachios that is frozen in a metal cone and later served with falooda, a kind of noodles prepared from starch, and garnished with pistachio nuts, saffron and ground cardamom. |
| sheer korma | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a very popular Muslim vermicelli pudding that is prepared during festivals like Eid ul-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. • The main ingredients of this dish, the name of which literally means milk with dates, are whole milk, vermicelli, dates, and sugar, while rose water, almonds, raisins, pistachios, saffron, cloves, and cardamom are added depending on the choice of the region. |
| firni | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firni is a kind of rice pudding that is set and served in a shallow earthen dish. This rice-based sweet is garnished with saffron, pistachios and chopped almonds. |
| shahi tukhra | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shahi Tukra is a rice bread pudding that is especially prepared during Muslim festivals like Eid and on the month of Ramadan. • The ingredient of this delicious dessert includes bread, dry fruits, and condensed milk and is seasoned with cardamom. |

3. Beverages and Drinks

| | |
|------------|---|
| water | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it was the most popular drink in the empire • the emperors preferred ganga water, as according to Aurangzeb it was lighter. • ice was also used. it was bought via road from nahan to delhi |
| milk | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it was also an important drink. although the muslims ate beef but they were very aware of the utility of the cow. • it was also used to make curd, ghee, etc. |
| wine | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it was a common drink among all although the muslims did not drink in public • they also drank araq and brandy. • different types of wines were available in india as well as bought from abroad. |
| tea/coffee | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • they were a popular drink in the 17th century • tea was believed to have medicinal qualities. • and coffee was bought from arabia to india |
| sherbat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it was made by combining fruits and flower in water. this let the water absorb flavours. • shah jahan was very fond of this drink. |

4. Other Important Food Items-



MUGHLAI CUISINE IN 21ST CENTURY INDIA

Mughlai cuisine is a forgotten cuisine. Although everyone enjoys kebabs and Rogan josh no one knows that we owe their scrumptious dishes to the Mughals.

In 21st century India there are continuous attempts to revive this cuisine. Almost all famous hotels have a chef that has a specialization in Mughlai cuisine. In places like Delhi, food festivals celebrate the lost recipes. (Smith, 2019) Besides Delhi places like Lucknow, Hyderabad and Agra are trying to keep the legacy going. Besides this chefs like, Izzat Hussain have been trying to revive the Mughlai dishes by adding a healthy spin to them. Another problem is that a lot of times people are given faux Mughal food, as the author of the emperor's table', Salma Husain puts it- "What we eat today is masala and oil, while the old Mughal manuscripts only refer to five

spices being used," she said. "It isn't spices that make the food, but how they are balanced."

To conclude we can expect a revival or renaissance of the Mughlai cuisine, considering the number of people who are trying to find innovative ways to tweek the recipe just enough to suite the modern appetite.

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