

Tailored menus offer an array of global cuisines online

Variety the spice of life for Mumbai's tiffin carriers

MUMBAI, Sept 23, (AFP): Mumbai's world-renowned tiffin service is no longer the preserve of loyal housewives cooking up generations-old family dishes to be delivered to their husbands' offices by the city's famous "dabbawallahs".

Now a host of health-conscious young start-ups are using — and sometimes superseding — the dabbawallahs to deliver lunches catering to all diets, with tailored menus offering an array of global cuisines online.

The 5,000 or so lunchbox delivery men, instantly recognisable by their white cotton uniforms and Nehru caps, pedal through Mumbai's congested streets carrying everything from Thai to Mexican, as well as healthy takes on local favourites.

"The number of tiffins (meals) being sent by food companies has gone up sharply in the past few years," said Raghunath Medage, president of Mumbai's dabbawallah union.

Expect

"The share of homemade food we carry has fallen from 100 percent to around 60 percent, and we expect that number to keep dropping," he told AFP. Dabbawallahs, literally meaning "box carriers", have been plying Mumbai's



In this photograph taken on Sept 4, an Indian dabbawallah or lunchbox deliveryman, carries a cart filled with lunch boxes to an assembly point before delivering them to offices in Mumbai. (AFP)

streets for well over a century.

They featured in the hit 2013 Indian film "The Lunchbox" centring on the story of a wife whose home-cooked meals were collected by a dabbawallah and then delivered, incorrectly, to a stranger's office rather than her husband's.

But now many of the meals inside the

tin containers that clatter against each other as they hang from the dabbawallahs' rickety bicycles are handpicked on the Internet by busy professionals enjoying a wealth of choice.

Yummy Tiffins, which proudly bills itself as "India's first customised online tiffin service", allows users to design

their own menus from around 40 dishes for every day of the week up to a month in advance.

"We wanted to fill the gap between a tiffin service, which has the same old pattern of food, and a restaurant, where you can order whatever you want, by providing customers with a choice of options that still have a homely feel," said founder Pratik Jain.

"There's a lot of variety in the menu, not just Indian food but international too, and plenty of healthy options as well," the 29-year-old former management student told AFP.

The website, which Jain says has around 300 users a day and is growing at around 70 percent a year, has teamed up with a nutritionist who designs low-calorie meals to attract health-conscious customers.

"It's a competitive business with lots of players in the market. It's much more professional now with several tech-savvy start-ups, and people keep switching from one tiffin service to another," said Jain.

Tina Parikh, an office worker in the south of the city, said she orders from a company called SoulCare because it allows her to focus on her job.

"It's purely about convenience. Early in the morning, to cook meals and then

come to work gets a little tiring," she told AFP, collecting her tiffin from a handcart.

Offer

Her friend Vinayak Azad has stuck to home-cooked food but joked that he may consider switching to one of the many low-calorie alternatives whipped up by professional chefs that are on offer.

"There are a lot of good services around and I think I should try them considering my tummy is still out even with home food!"

Yummy Tiffins employs Mumbai's famously efficient dabbawallahs who deliver lunches to around 200,000 people a day via trains, bicycles and handcarts using a complex colour-coded alpha-numeric system admired the world over.

Their business model has been recognised by Harvard as working to a "six sigma" rating, meaning it is virtually unheard of for a lunch to be delivered to the wrong place.

But some caterers are moving away from the dabbawallahs in favour of private delivery vans.

Maqsood Patel, co-founder of Foodizm, another online meal delivery firm, said his company was increasingly

opting for a concierge service to ferry lunches to their "elite" clientele.

"They deliver the meals right to the customers' desks, whereas the dabbawallahs often drop them at the front gate and you have to go downstairs to look for your meal," Patel told AFP.

"Also, since they travel by train there can be a three or four-hour gap from the time a dabbawallah collects the meal to the time it's delivered.

"Obviously with the food travelling in the heat something like a salad can go a little bit off," he added.

Patel said the drivers' English was often better than that of the dabbawallahs who hail from rural Maharashtra and speak Marathi, making it easier to communicate, while customers can also use a mobile app to track the progress of deliveries.

But Medage, president of the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers' Association, is unconcerned.

"We are still getting fresh recruits from villages because not many opportunities exist there. With hard work they can make at least 10,000 rupees (\$150) a month instead of nothing back home."

Suresh Pawar, a dabbawallah for 12 years, said: "The number we deliver goes up and down. When one stops here, another starts somewhere else."



Palestinian and foreigners sit down for a traditional Palestinian meal after preparing the food during a cooking class at the home of Fatima Kadumy (third left) in the West Bank city of Nablus on Sept 19. (AFP)

Peace, love and hummus?

Palestinian cooks put resistance on menu

NABLUS, Palestinian Territories, Sept 23, (AFP): Fatima Kadumy's weapons of resistance include stuffed squash and yoghurt with garlic — for her, food is just as powerful as stones or petrol bombs.

"To defend the country some prefer war, but there are other, more pleasing, ways to do it," said Kadumy, a Palestinian who runs a cooking school in the West Bank city of Nablus that does much more than teach students proper knife skills.

Kadumy came up with the "crazy idea" seven years ago to use Palestinian traditional cuisine to promote her people's cause and act as advocate for the independent state they have long sought.

Her efforts have not gone unnoticed. Since 2008, she has hosted more than 1,200 visitors from countries including China, Australia, Germany and the United States, among others.

Politics

"There are politics and resistance behind cuisine," she said in the small kitchen at her centre in Nablus's Old City that she has named Bait al-Karama, which is Arabic for House of Dignity.

"We show our city and our lives as we see them. Foreigners can then judge Palestinians from the inside."

On one recent day, an American couple from Washington learned how to prepare stuffed leaves and courgettes. A quiet but skilled chef, Nidal, led the class.

One of the Americans, Rex, said he appreciated an opportunity to "share the daily lives of residents" in

Nablus, the site of heavy clashes during the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, between 2000-2005.

Before the cooking lesson, they followed Kadumy through the streets of the old city to buy local Palestinian produce — and only local Palestinian produce. Her organisation boycotts Israeli goods.

Kadumy says a meal sets the table for a talk about politics.

"And over a meal, we always talk more calmly, more easily," said Kadumy, wearing a blue and gold veil with her sunglasses balanced on top.

Her organisation is also part of the global Slow Food movement based in Italy that promotes local traditional

cuisine, and she showcases dishes at the organisation's expo.

"For too long, we have allowed the Israelis to speak," Kadumy said. "Now there is the Israel stand, but also the Palestine stand."

Palestinians and Israelis do not only dispute territory — they also disagree about the origin of certain dishes.

One prominent example is hummus, the paste made from chickpeas so often associated with Middle Eastern cuisine. Another is falafel, also made from chick peas but this time ground and deep-fried.

They do, however, tend to agree on one point when it comes to hummus: the best comes from Abu Shukri, a

small restaurant in Jerusalem's Old City recommended by in-the-know tourist guides.

Yasser Taha inherited the restaurant opened by his father in 1948, the year Israel was created. He is not shy about taking credit for his family's sought-after recipe.

"The Israelis learned to make hummus with us," he said of the dish with ancient and unclear origins.

"They watched and learned to make hummus and now they say that they invented it," he added with a smile.

Tourists

A number of Israelis sat at tables among tourists on a recent day.

"Look at our plates — empty!" said Eldad, a 52-year-old who had come with his daughter, after polishing off the last bit of bread dipped in hummus with parsley and red ground sumac on top.

"We love to come here. It's delicious."

An Israeli woman named Neta who had driven for half an hour to come and eat in the Old City has bigger ambitions for the humble dish.

"Everyone loves hummus," she said. "It's something that we have in common. It can bring us together and bring peace."

Nearby postcard sellers don't necessarily share her vision — or at least they don't think that potential customers do.

Some postcards show falafel with an Israeli flag. But at other stores not far away, it's the black, red and white of the Palestinian flag.



Palestinian restaurant owner Yasser Taha poses with a plate of hummus (right), a paste made from chickpeas, at the Abu Shukri Restaurant in the Old City of Jerusalem on Sept 12. (AFP)

Food**'Pay-as-you-feel'**

UK food recycling cafes go global in waste fight

LONDON, Sept 23, (AFP): When former chef Adam Smith opened a small cafe in Britain's industrial North two years ago, serving up dishes with food destined for the scrap heap, he had big aspirations — to fight global food waste.

"From day one I set out to feed the world and I intend to do that," the Yorkshireman said ambitiously, as he charted the growth of his ethical empire — the Real Junk Food Project (RJFP).

From its humble roots in a community centre in the deprived Armley district of Leeds, northern England, the project now has around 120 affiliated cafes worldwide, including Australia, France, South Korea, the US and, most recently, Nigeria.

"People are beginning to realise we are a serious organisation," said Smith, having just returned from an awareness-raising event feeding MPs at Britain's parliament with food saved from garbage bins.

The simple concept involves collecting food that would otherwise have been thrown away — usually because it is "out-of-date" and unsellable under trading rules — and turning it into perfectly edible meals.

Since the project began in December 2013, almost 200 tonnes of food has been "intercepted", Smith said.

Consumption

Roughly one third of the food produced in the world for human consumption every year — approximately 1.3 billion tonnes — gets lost or wasted, according to the UN.

By offering meals on a "pay-as-you-feel" basis RJFP cafes sidestep food regulations since it is against the law in Britain to actually "sell" food past its use-by date. Smith's formulation is tantamount to a voluntary donation, with the amount up to the customer, which keeps all on the legal side of matters, he said.

The team, meanwhile, is discriminating, not all food is accepted. "We make our own judgement, by tasting and smelling, as to whether food is fit for consumption."

Smith is clear that his vision was not about feeding poor people, but for many communities it is a way of reaching those on low incomes or none.

Helped by around 90 volunteers, retiree Shena Cooper runs "Elsie's" cafe in the town of Northampton, central England, as part of the RJFP network.

"We want to create a mixed society within the cafe," she said. "Some people come in for coffee and cake and give a few pounds. But there are people who cannot

give anything."

Volunteers face the challenge of creating tasty dishes from whatever food is available, but this is "part of the joy for them", said Cooper.

At Elsie's "binner" event this month, a guest chef transformed discarded local produce into a three-course feast of gourmet crostini with pear salsa, sausage plait with polenta cake, and a chocolate fig dessert.

"You can actually have a conscience about eating cake," joked Heike Mapstone, a call centre worker, after the dinner.

Collective

"I think it is a great idea. Why should we waste all this food?"

Cooper knows her cafe is only "scraping the tip of the iceberg" but hopes collective efforts will "expose the food system for what it is".

"There is so much wrong with it," she said. "The fact that we can fly bananas half way around the world and then throw them into landfill is ridiculous."

Adam Buckingham feeds some 200 people a week at a church-based RJFP cafe in Brighton, where food donations have included legs of cured serrano ham and huge stockpiles of chocolate.

"It shocks people that all this food would have gone in the bin," he said, adding that a change in attitudes and legislation is needed.

"Unfortunately we have got to a point where we think it is OK to throw away food and buy more. We're blinded by convenience."

In north London, a pair of entrepreneurs have harnessed what they believe is a growing aversion to this mindset.

Tessa Cook and her American business partner Saasha Celestial-One launched a new app — "Olio" — to connect consumers with sources of surplus food.

The app allows donors to upload pictures of items that may be nearing their sell-by-date and users can browse for food and arrange a pick-up via private messaging.

"We did some market research and found that one third of people were 'physically pained' throwing away food. To me that was mind blowing," said Cook.

So far the pair have signed up 15 "founding merchants" — individuals and businesses willing to share produce. Although currently focussed on London, Cook hopes the app will eventually go global.

"The more we looked into it the more we were overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the food being wasted. It seems totally wasteful, irresponsible and immoral," she said.

Nahi Tha' amazing live saga on Friday, Oct 2, with legendary Padmashree Anupam Kher and actress Neena Gupta accompanied by film and theater director Rakesh Bedi. Mera Woh Matlab Nahin Tha is brilliantly written by Rakesh Bedi with the right ingredients of almost all the emotions be it comedy, fear, or heartbreak.

The two actors will bring you the story with each one playing 2 characters in the live flashback. ICS team is waiting to welcome you for memorable evening on Friday, Oct 2, 2015 at Dr Ramesh Auditorium, American International School Near Police Station Maidan Hawally Kuwait.

For more details please contact Email: ics.kuwait@gmail.com

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Onam Fest 2015: Mavelikara Association Onam Fest 2015 program will be conducted at Pravasi Auditorium, Abbasiya on Oct 2, 2015, from 9.30 am onwards.

Mavelikara Association is a non-religious and politics association from **Continued on Page 25**

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measures against them?

Dr Muhammad is a Petroleum Geologist holding a PhD and MS in Petroleum Geology from the Imperial College,

University of London. He lectured on Petroleum Geology and established the Department of Petroleum Geology, Institute of Earth Sciences, King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, conducted E&P research at Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research. He designed in-house structural, geothermal, geological, geochemical and petro physical computer programs and used several generations of industrial software packages. The program will start at 7 pm, on

Tuesday, Sept 29, 2015 and will be followed by a dinner buffet. RSVP requested at joumana@aware.com.kw

Oct 2

Sparsh semifinals: Sparsh semifinals will be held on Oct 2, Friday, 10:00 am to 8:00 pm, at Salmiya Indian Model School (SIMS), Salmiya, Block 12. Over 90 individual auditions in Solo

Singing / Solo Dance / Group Dance / Bands / Musical instruments. It is a whole day event and there will be a mini-carnival with more than a dozen stalls selling food, jewelry, art, ethnic wear, etc. Please follow our facebook page 'sparshtalent' for more details.

ICS presents Hindi play: Indian Cultural Society (ICS) proudly presents theatrical production "Mera Woh Matlab