

Afghani tandoori chicken, ashak, sheer pera take part in SAARC Food Festival

With Afghanistan's delicious Afghani tandoori chicken and ashak, Pakistan's simmering chappali kebabs, Sri Lanka's tempting fish ambulthiyal, Maldives' delicious masbai and Nepal's spicy maasu bhaat — the food chapter of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) cultural festival held in New Delhi was a cauldron of flavours of South Asia.

Open to the public from December 7 to 9 last, the food festival — organised by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), at the Ashoka Hotel — was the one place where the best chefs of the eight SAARC countries — India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan — came together to whip up some of the best loved delicacies of their countries.

Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, who inaugurated the festival, said: "Food is a product of centuries of evolution, it is the window on the culture we belong to. In this food festival one will see that there are a number of common things that we South Asian countries share. Whether it's our spices, our cereals, the form of cooking, or the traditional form of service, everything is very similar. This festival reinstates the fact there is unity in diversity."

All Foreign Ministers of SAARC countries were present on the occasion. They all shared the appetizers served on a silver plate, which symbolises the belief that breaking bread from the same plate fosters kinship among the people.



On the first day of the festival, Afghanistan presented its specialities — ashak, Afghani tandoori chicken and kabuli pulao.

Asif Ali Yousufi, the chef, said Afghani food is generally non-spicy. "Afghani food is not as spicy as Indian food is. Ashuk for instance is steamed and not at all spicy. It's a flower which is found in countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Turkmenistan," Yousufi said.

Bhutanese food, on the other hand, is very hot and spicy. "Ema dati for instance, which is made of chillies and cheese, is a delicacy

and it's very spicy. Similarly, Ra-Cha which is a mutton delicacy is again very spicy," said Regina, the host at the Bhutan stall.

Those who love gorging on fish had a wonderful time sampling delicacies at the stalls set up by Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh. "Hilsa and prawn dishes are a speciality and we have made a range of fish dishes. The green Bengal chicken is a speciality one must try," said Tommy Miah, the chef at the Bangladesh stall. "Its rich green colour is because of the spinach and mint and not because of any artificial colour," Miah added.

Besides that, the Bangladesh stall also had shadkora gosht, masala jhingra and lhow ghoota.

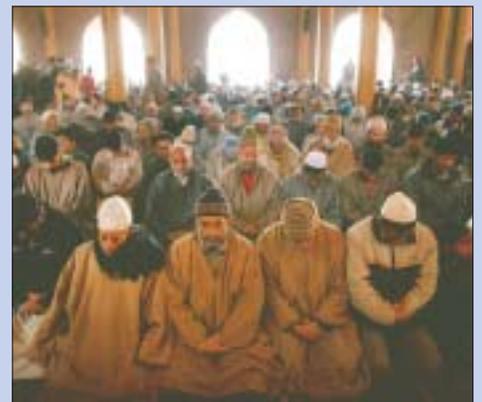
Similarly, the Maldives stall had lots of fish dishes like masbai, which is rice flavoured with tuna and pepper and theluli rihaakuru, another fish dish, while the Sri Lankan stall had fish ambulthiyal.

Manoj Amardeepi, the Sri Lankan chef, said that the island's food is spicy, seasoned with lots of herbs but much less oil.

And then of course the Pakistan stall ruled the festival with its aromatic fare, simmering on hot plates. Kadai gosht, kohati bhindi bhujia, chappali kebab... and many more sumptuous dishes.

But how can any meal end without a sweet lacing the end? So Maldives stood forth with its special paan, Afghanistan with sheer pera and aft mewa, Sri Lanka with a jaggery dessert watalappan and Pakistan with its famous phirni. ■

Eid-ul-Adha celebrated throughout India



Eid-ul-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice) was celebrated in various parts of India with traditional fervour and gaiety on December 21. Indians seen offering prayers at Jama Masjid in Delhi (left), Jama Masjid in Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir (centre), and Mosque Kharudin in Amritsar, Punjab. The Eid Al-Adha marks the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca.