

# Chef Vernon Coelho: My Journey



# Table of Contents

- 1: Where it all began...
- 2: My First Trip to Goa
- 3: My School Days
- 4: Entry into IHM
- 5: Studying at IHM
- 6: Back to School
- 7: Early Culinary Memories
- 8: Early Teaching days
- 9: Of Trade Fairs & Theme Dinners... Of Times Gone By...
- 10: Jingle Jangle Bells
- 11: Travels & Travails Overseas - Kathmandu
- 12: Travels & Travails Overseas - Jordan
- 13: Travels & Travails Overseas - Ireland & Scotland
- 14: Travels & Travails Overseas - London & a few neighboring environs...
- 15: Travels & Travails Overseas - Still in London
- 16: Travels & Travails Overseas - Many evenings in Paris...
- 17: Travels & Travails Overseas - French Fries & more...
- 18: Travels & Travails Overseas - Viva Espania
- 19: Travels & Travails Overseas - Italy, Part 1
- 20: Travels & Travails Overseas - Italy, Part 2
- 21: Travels & Travails Overseas - Two Nordic Countries
- 22: Travels & Travails Overseas - Two mighty cities at the Crossroads
- 23: Travels & Travails Overseas - Konnichiwa Japan
- 24: Travels & Travails Overseas - The Land Down Under
- 25: Travels & Travails Overseas - Here and There...
- 26: Travels & Travails Overseas - Inverness Revisited and The Last Hurrah!
- 27: Back to College, Part 1
- 28: Back to College, Part 2
- 29: Back to College, Part 3
- 30: The Chef Competitions
- 31: Post Retirement

# 1: Where it all began... [10th Aug 2019]

Hello everyone,

I'm back!

I've decide to share with you, a few incidents & experiences in my life...a couple of times each month.

Hope you find them interesting.

Here's the 1st one in "My Journey".

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It was in the cavernous kitchens of my grandmother, that I got my first taste for good food. I spent time with her in that hot environment, since we had charcoal and wood-fired stoves in those days and I still remember it very clearly. It was one of the largest rooms in the house with bunches of onions and garlic hanging from the ceiling, which absorbed the smoky aromas that came out of the cooking fires. It must have been hard work for her since there were no gadgets like mixers, blenders or masala grinders...everything was done by hand and it came naturally to her. Of-course, she had a bit of help in the form of two maids who used to come and do most of the hard work, but even then there was a lot of sweat and toil which went into the cooking.

Some of the cooking was done outdoors, like when Bibique (Bebinca)...which was her speciality - was made, it would take the whole day. It wasn't made too often, but on certain days I recall waking up to the sounds of the 40-odd coconuts being broken, to be used in the dish. We would wait all day eagerly for the first taste. Those of you who might not know, Bibique a multi-layered dessert. Each layer had to be cooked, one at a time.

My grandmother was not one to answer too many questions about this & that. It was mainly by observation that I picked up a lot of the finer points and I was too young at the time, to sit & make notes. Whatever stayed in my head, I can still remember now. I must give credit to my grandmother who maybe unknowingly, was the first one to instill in me...an interest in good food.

As I said earlier, there were no cook books or recipe books at that time...that she used to use. No TV programs for her to watch, so all her food was by instinct and perhaps what she learnt from her mother in Goa. Whatever I learnt at that time, is still very precious to me and I hope one day to make a note of all these...to keep them for future generations. Let's see how it goes.

I grew up in an old bungalow in Bandra where I imbibed not just a lot of food, but my grandmother had a whole menagerie of domestic animals like chickens & ducks and at one time...even a pig. I realized that year that my grandfather would bring home a pigling around September or October and my grandmother would fatten it in time for Christmas when she would slaughter it.

I can still see my grandfather coming down the pathway to our home, carrying the pigling under his arm. I was most intrigued. They didn't tell me at that time that it was to be our Christmas lunch. My grandmother had a pen where she used to keep some of these animals, but I think she wasn't expecting the pigling to come home so soon, and she asked my sister & I to put the pigling in the bathroom, and told us to look after it while she went to repair the latch of the pen.

We had by then, given the pigling a nice bath, dabbed on some of my mothers powder and though we had no idea whether it was male or female, put some ribbons on 'her' neck. It became a kind pet then and that pigling died only much later...of old age. When we knew what it's purpose was, we refused to eat pigling that year and didn't allow it to be slaughtered. It became almost a part of the family, the only animal allowed inside the house...while all other animals like cats & dogs were kept outside...in the big garden & compound, where they had enough place to ramble about.

More next time...

## 2: My First Trip to Goa [24th Aug 2019]

Thank you all for reading my first post and for your overwhelming responses to it!

Thank you for your likes, comments, shares, sms' & whatsapp messages!

Please be assured that I have read each & every one of your replies and thank you very much for them!

...though I am unable to respond & thank each one of you individually.

Since many of you have urged me to continue, here's my next post...

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Although I am Goan, I unfortunately hadn't spent enough time in Goa in my early days...since I was born and brought up in Mumbai, in Bandra to be more specific, and my roots have always been here.

When I was around 6 years old, I went on a family holiday to Goa and at that age, you are allowed to do and say...pretty much whatever you want to. To be very frank, I never really enjoyed that trip at all, and neither did I enjoy the food.

Of-course, I've grown to love Goa over the years and have gone back several times to appreciate its beauty, culture and naturally its food; but my first experience there was very traumatic. Let me try and describe it to you.

My parents, siblings and I reached Goa early one morning all excited and went straight to an 'uncle's' house (not a real uncle) where his wife offered us breakfast, asking what we would like.

We had no idea what to ask for until she suggested porridge. We were happy to have it since we ate it at home. She was most excited too, since we had come from Bombay which for her, was a big event as well. She soon got busy in the kitchen and returned with some 'Goa Soup plates' brimming with what I could see was some brown liquid mass. I looked at it and said straight away - "This is not porridge". She suggested that we try it, saying it was very good. It was made with Ragi, coconut milk and Goa jaggery, so the colour wasn't white...as we were used to.

We simply said we didn't want it. Remember as children, we could say whatever we wanted. My father was most embarrassed. He asked us to eat it, saying that it was good for us and would make us strong. I immediately replied that I didn't want to become strong. He began losing his patience and looked at my mother for help. It appeared to me that my mother didn't want to eat it either, and so we found further reason not to have it. She simply stared stoically at my father and asked him to sort it out. Seeing this, that poor 'aunty' said, "Ok don't eat it". My father asked her not to give us anything else that day or the next, until we finished eating the porridge. He went on to finish his own bowl telling us how nice it was. Aunty promptly offered him another bowl, which he then had to have. I say so, because I am quite sure that he didn't really enjoy that porridge either, but had committed himself to swallowing his second bowl.

When aunty asked what else we might like, we were weary of answering her wondering what else might come out subsequently from her kitchen.

Her next suggestion was sausages and eggs. Ah, we thought, now that's something we know and can't go wrong with. Next thing we know, in came some curried Goa sausages & potatoes with strong smelling eggs, which I have a suspicion were local duck eggs from the ducks in her compound. We looked at our plates and said, no way we were going to eat this either. By now my father had reached the limit of his patience and threatened to take us back to Bombay. So those plates were taken away as well.

Once again aunty asked what we would have. It wasn't easy at the last minute to whip up something back then in Goa; so my father suggested some bread and butter with tea. The bread was Goa bread and

fine, though they didn't have any butter in those days in Goa. My father asked us to simply dip it into our tea and eat it. When the tea came however, it didn't look like tea at all since it was made with Goa jaggery and goat milk. They didn't have cow milk in Goa then. No Goan sweets like bibique or dodol at that time...were made with cow milk. It was either coconut milk or goat milk. So once again we declined eating it. We just ate dry bread which was difficult to swallow by itself, but by then we were really hungry. We were also quite unhappy and my younger brother suggested we go back to Bombay, where my grandmother would fuss over us.

Anyway, we then asked for some water which turned out to be from their well in the backyard. We were astounded by the taste and were wondering just what they were giving us. We refused to drink it. My father was by now exasperated. He went to a shop round the corner and got us some bottles of soda. We were quite enamored by the bottles which had marbles instead of caps. That was something we hadn't seen before, but the soda tasted like soda. We drank a few and then kept asking my father for more. The poor man kept obliging. I think during our trip then, we must quite likely have finished all the soda bottles at that shop.

That was my first day in Goa. As I said, traumatic and an experience which I will never forget.

Other incidents in Goa were equally memorable. We refused to go to the toilet because it was outside the house and had no plumbing. It was an independent room at the back of the house. You had to climb up some steps on-to a plank of wood with 3 holes in it and had to do your job over there. What was most disconcerting was the pigs loitering around underneath. I was scared that they might nibble at the family jewels, and so I refused to go.

The other thing was taking a bath standing next to the well. We all refused to have a bath in the open until my mother intervened about not washing up. So undercover of the darkness at about 6 in the evening, when it got dark in Goa; with my mother and father standing on either side of me, I had my fastest-ever bath in record time. There was no electricity in the house, just oil lamps which gave off a very eerie feeling.

While I can write about it now very comfortably, back then as I said, it was quite an unpleasant experience.

This was the 1960s when Goa had just got liberation or was on the verge of getting it, so I'm sure that people must have had many other things to think about besides toilets and plumbing. Of-course all that changed over the years considerably, and since quite a while now I absolutely enjoy going to Goa.

The food I ate at home in Mumbai was a variation of Goan and Anglo Indian food, so I was used to potato chops, stews and roast meats with a touch of spices thrown in, but it was not authentic Goan food. Over the years I got used to real Goan food and began cooking it at home as well and now...I thoroughly enjoy Goan food.

In fact, when people ask me which is my favorite Indian food, I'd certainly say Goan. Unfortunately, not too many restaurants in Mumbai make Goan food as well as I've had at home or on my subsequent trips to Goa.

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That's all for now...until next time.

### 3: My School Days [7th Sep 2019]

I went to arguably one of the best schools in Bombay in the 1960s-70s... ..but according to me, it was. I'm talking about St.Andrews High school in Bandra and although I didn't get into my first choice of school, which was St.Stanislaus, I never regretted it.

I was a mediocre student. I'm not going to tell you that I stood top of my class, because I simply did not. I managed to get through from one year to the next, till they introduced Hindi and Marathi. Then, I was stuck. I couldn't tell the difference between one & the other... and to make matters worse, the teacher who taught us both languages...was the same, but I managed to get through with a lot of red lines in the report card.

Then came Maths. I was OK with Arithmetic, I could understand 4 apples cost Rs 16/-, so 1 apple will cost how much. Addition, subtraction, multiplication and division I could handle. In the 8th standard came Algebra, followed closely by Mr.Geometry and Trigonometry. I couldn't for the life of me understand head or tail of what was going on in class, but routinely put up a brave front. I liked the drawings and theorems of geometry, but with Algebra which was my bug bear, I was completely at sea. I was failing regularly in Algebra and barely passing in Geometry, but Arithmetic saved me. In those days, the total of all your Maths marks were counted and I used to pass somehow.

My poor father a whiz in Maths, tried his best to teach me. He just couldn't understand how his son couldn't get the basics of mathematics. He used to wake me at 6 in the morning, to explain the subject to me. I used to get up because it made him happy, but more for the nice cup of bournvita that he used to make for me. After that, I was gone, lost in my own world, one of cricket matches...unable to understand anything he was saying. But with a brave face, I kept nodding at everything he said. At exam time, he would ask, 'Are you ready now?' and I would say 'Yes'. 'Are you sure you'll be able to answer the paper?' and I would say 'Yes of-course'. As usual however, when I went for the exam everything was Greek & Latin to me; but I didn't have the heart to tell him that I didn't understand anything of what he explained to me.

One year in particular, I remember I'd got 2 marks out of 100 in Algebra. I shook my head as I knew what was coming. To make things worse that year, we were asked to get the exam paper signed by one of our parents. I thought I'd be able to convince my mother to sign, but she took one look at it and said 'Maths paper! Give it to your father to sign.' I said 'No, no, any parent can sign it, just sign it'. She refused and so I had to take it to my father to sign.

I presented it to him with my thumb over my marks and told him 'Just sign, just sign'. He asked what it was. I held on to the paper as he tried to take it out of my hand. He finally yanked it out. Poor fellow looked at it incredulously and said '2 marks out of a 100!' 'Yes', I said blandly 'that's what it says, now let's get on with it'. He was astonished that a son of his could bring home a paper with 2 marks. I looked elsewhere and told him that another good friend of mine got zero, at-least I got 2...which by the way was for neatness and nothing else. Then he lost his temper. He said 'I don't care about your friends. I am concerned about you and how much time I spent on you with this, and you got 2 marks!'. I felt really bad for him. Poor fellow had spent so much of time trying to teach me, and all I had to show for it was 2 marks, that too for neatness.

But as I said, thanks to Arithmetic and Geometry I was able to get through Maths and even Hindi and Marathi in the board exams, so I was happy. My saving grace was French which I was very good at and English of-course. My father once asked me 'How is it that you can get 88% in French and you can't even pass in Maths'. I promptly replied that it was because it was my mother who was teaching me French. That really got his goat and he said 'Go now, I'm not teaching you anymore'. I was relieved. Anyway, I managed to pass my SSC with 58% which back in the 1970's was good, unlike the 90%'s and 99%'s you hear of these days, which I think is quite unreal. Back then, people who failed a subject failed the year;

unlike later when they would get pushed up. I dreaded that I would be the first failure in the family. Everyone always told me - 'Look at how well your sisters are doing' and I'm sure they quietly sniggered at my results too. My sisters were indeed very good in academics, one in particular...was excellent in Maths.

I enjoyed my time in school at St.Andrews, since it had a lot of extra-curricular activities like plays and operas which fascinated me, and I spent more time in that, than doing my actual homework.

So as I said, I muddled my way through school.

Now came the time to choose what I was going to do after school. I didn't want to do Science or Maths. Neither did I want to do Hindi or Marathi, which were compulsory at-least for the first year. I'd never heard of a subject called Commerce.

I once very seriously considered doing a course in typing. 'What?' said my father, "Typing!". I even went to a typing school called Claires to enquire, but beat a hasty retreat when I discovered it was only for girls.

So in choosing what to do next, I was back to square one; but what led me to IHM? I'll tell you that story...another time.

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Thank you all for each of your comments on my last post. I appreciate all the time you spent reading it. Bye for now...

## 4: Entry into IHM [21st Sep 2019]

First of all, thanks very much for the huge response to my previous post. It's wonderful to hear from so many people, who I thought I'd lost touch with and are still around & reading. Thank you also, for all the phone calls and other messages which you've sent. Thanks again!

As promised, this one is about how & why I got into IHM, but before that, I must mention something else from my school days, when as I openly admitted...how bad I was at Maths. It was an etching on my school desk, I think in the 9th standard...which said "In memory of all those who died here waiting for the bell to ring in the Maths class".

That so nicely sums up my sentiment towards Maths in school, and from some of the responses you've sent, I can see that many of you have also had the same problem.

But enough of that now. Those days are gone and I'm happier for it. :- ) Trust you are as well.

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As I said earlier, I had no clue what I was going to do after I finished my school. It was time to join the big bad world, but where I was going to fit in...was the question. I was literally whiling away my time waiting for my exam results, until I needed to join a certain college...but showed no inclination towards the standard options of Arts, Science or Commerce. I was actually trying to postpone my decision in having to make a choice.

At the time, one of my friends Elliot Boccarro, asked me whether I'd go with him to catering college.

"For what?" I asked, and he replied that he wanted to join Air India as a purser. He'd been told that since he was too young to work (just sixteen), they wouldn't accept him and he was thus advised to do a course in catering (which we didn't even realize at the time, was actually a hotel management program)...which would allegedly help him 'very easily' get the job he wanted. So he thought he'd get the application form and find out about the program, and asked me whether I'd go along.

Since I wasn't doing anything much those days, I said OK. We took the 83 bus from Bandra Talkies Cinema to Shivaji Park, which was going to be my route for the next 4 years...but I didn't know it then.

At IHM, we met B.P.Desai. Not sure how many of you will remember him, but the older among you...certainly will. Desai played the role of a councillor getting students to join the college. Back then, the demand to join wasn't as much it is today. I remember him telling Elliot who was interested, that it was a very good course and that he should sign up. I of-course was more interested, in the posters that were hanging around...rather than listening to him.

Anyway, the cost of the form which was a cyclostyled (photocopied) sheet of paper, was 25 paise. Elliot took out a 50 paise coin and gave it to Desai who promptly said he had no change. Elliot needed the 25 paise to go back home since that was the bus fare then and he had no intention of leaving without his change. That's when B.P.Desai said..."Why don't you take 2 forms?...one for you and the other for your friend, and let him fill it up as well".

I straight away declined saying I wasn't interested in catering, until Elliot suggested that I at-least fill it up since I had nothing else planned. So we sat there in the IHM lobby, filled up our forms and submitted them. I thought that was that and forgot about it until one day...I got a telegram from them. I was foxed for a while and then realized that it was a response to my application. So I spoke with my mum & dad who asked what this course I'd applied for, was all about. I said I knew nothing about it.

The last date to respond was looming and I was in two minds whether or not to go for it. I asked Elliot whether he was going. To my surprise, he said he wasn't interested anymore. I told him "You made me



fill up the form and now you say you yourself aren't interested?" He said yes, and suggested that I go for it instead.

Since I hadn't applied anywhere else and had no other option, I went to IHM to find out about the course. Simultaneously we discovered that one of the faculty then, Timmy Ayre who was Head of Department of Food & Beverage Service was known to my dad. So off we went to meet Timmy Ayre to find out what the course was about and to figure out...whether or not I'd like to join it.

Timmy, a wonderful man who unfortunately passed away only recently this year, very nicely explained to us what the course was about.

My first question to him was "Is there any Maths?" He said "No. There's food costing which is simple arithmetic." My next question was whether there was any Hindi or Marathi. He said no, just French which we can coach you in. I said that I didn't need any coaching in French, which was one of my favorite subjects. By now my mind was made up and I immediately told my dad "This is the course for me".

So rather than what they taught at IHM, I was more interested in what they didn't teach.

I asked my father to pay the fees, which in those years was a princely sum of Rs 330/- for the first term; while the normal B.A or B.Com was around Rs 80/- to 100/-. So Rs 330/- then, was quite a big amount for my dad to cough up, but he said "OK. If you want to do it, do it". He wasn't very keen on it, but I guess he thought that it would be better than having me sit at home doing nothing. My mother was happy that I had finally decided what I wanted to do and that her Novena prayers...had been answered.

Soon enough, I went to pay the fees. We were a small batch of around 80 people, which dropped to about 60 by the third year. Some really good people joined the program with me and though Elliot wasn't there, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Incidentally, Elliot did eventually join Air India many years later though in Sales and in the UK; so his dream of travelling internationally with an airline finally worked out well. I'm still very much in touch with him and am the Godfather to his son. I used to visit him regularly each year, sometimes more than once. So Elliot, if you're reading this...remember you are responsible in a big way for me getting into IHM and for my long and successful journey in the field.

That, was my entry into IHM. I was very happy and never regretted a single day there. Without hesitation, if I was to do it again, catering college is certainly what I would do.

With 3 years of studies at IHM, I'd have been too young for the job market, so I did the 4th year as well, then taught at IHM for around 3 years.

The itch to work overseas was strong, so I left IHM for a while and went on to work with the Grand Metropolitan at Jordan, then the UK and Bahrain for around 6 years, before rejoining once again...at the behest of Ms.Thangam Philip. I strengthened my roots with IHM and continued to work there for eventually around 34 years...enjoying every moment of it.

There are a lot of stories to tell you about at college...which I've leave for just now. Catch up with you'll again soon. Take care. Bye...

## 5: Studying at IHM [5th Oct 2019]

I was all set to join IHM, very excited...but didn't know what to expect.

Everything was going to be new for me which was pretty much how the rest of my life had been until then. So I went off to college, only to find out...that I hadn't really left school yet; because back then, IHM was so strict...that I'd say students going there now, have it good for them.

No coming late, no long hair and all kinds of rules that made my school days seem like a picnic. Gates used to be locked by 8.50 in the morning and no going out until 5.30 in the evening. We were never allowed to leave the campus for lunch break, tea break, or anything. There was nothing like a gate pass in those days. I remember one of our students being so desperate to get out, that he 'banaoed' one of the housewives from the other program to hide him in the dicky of her car, but someone must have seen them...I think it was Timmy Ayre. He called the watchman at the gate and said "Don't let that car leave". The housewife kept saying she wasn't a student, only a housewife but she was asked to wait while Timmy Ayre and Ms. Phillip came down. They opened the dicky and you can imagine the students face when he saw both his teachers staring at him and shaking their heads. Don't know what they did to him eventually, but it couldn't have been good. I wish I could tell you his name, but he might sue me for it.

Despite the rules, we managed to enjoy ourselves. We had a great bunch of batch mates and I'm in touch with several of them. In fact only recently, I got in touch with two of the girls. One who's come down from the US and the other who I haven't met since a while. They were also very good friends of mine, so we recently reconnected and met up.

College days were good fun with studies simple enough, no problem there. What stood out the most for me, was the great faculty.

We had Manju Singh who used to teach us what was called basic science, till the nomenclature changed to food science. Her subject was simple and so we gratefully spent most of our time staring at her, since she was a young attractive 22 year old girl. She knew we were staring at her, but pretended like nothing was happening.

Then there was Freni Panthaki our English teacher, who taught us novels like Lord of the Flies, Romeo & Juliet and other interesting stuff. She was noted for the big bunch of keys she carried at her waist tucked into her sari and we could hear her approaching all the way from the end of the corridor...as her keys jangled.

There was Ossie D'Cunha who taught us Food Cost and Book-keeping. He was very strict. If we didn't do our homework, he'd make us stand on the bench. Can you imagine big hulks like us standing on the bench? By then schools had got rid of that practice, but not Ossie.

Mr. Shalia taught us Financial management in the third year. Everyone one remembers him fondly... as we did too. He was a tremendous person and a great teacher. Especially for those of us who had not done accounts earlier, he made it all seem very simple.

Timmy Ayre and Mr. Gomes were the two stalwarts of the F&B department, who taught us from the first year right until the third year.

Our nutrition teachers were Swarnam, Annama Joseph and Dr. Eapen...all excellent teachers, two of them doctorates; so naturally well read and recognized in the industry.

Then we had Mrs. Bullen a British army veteran, a good friend of Ms. Thangam Phillip, a nurse who served under General Patton in World War 2, who came to teach us this "very important" subject called first aid. I don't know how many of you subsequent students learnt first aid, but it did come in handy

every now and then. We most enjoyed the practicals which included mouth-to-mouth resuscitation or CPR. Whether it was a boy or a girl, it didn't matter. Your partner was your partner.

Of-course the boys used to enjoy it. The girls, specially on first aid days, made sure they came to college with trousers, since the boys would be lying down all over the floor. and Mrs. Bullen was very strict. No laughing or giggling in class. We had a first aid class once a week all through the first and second year, in which besides CPR... was also included, tying bandages and many other things; but I remember that class very well. She was the only faculty member who was allowed to smoke, and that too during class. Poor Mrs. Bullen died of lung cancer and had unfortunately lost her voice totally by that time...but we had good days with her.

Of course there was Thangam Phillip, the Queen of all she surveyed. A good teacher, a nice human being, extremely strict. Boys would tremble in front of her. She knew how to put everybody in their place. There was one year I remember, the hostelites were unhappy with the mess food, and decided to boycott the dinner. They waited to do this on a day when Ms. Phillip was out of town. All the other staff, went into a tizzy.

On hearing this when she returned, she called all the hostelites after 5.30pm, told them to sit down and asked "Which of you don't like the food in the hostel, raise your hands". A few people began saying we don't like this or that, the rice or something else. She said "I didn't ask you why? Just tell me how many of you don't like the food? When they raised their hands, she said "Pack your bags tonight and leave the hostel. I would not like to keep you here if you are not happy. Why, where, what, how, doesn't matter. Just leave".

That evening a big group of hostelites were sitting with their bags on the pavement outside college. She did take them back eventually, but only after they gave her written notes of apology...signed by their parents. Their parents came to the college and much to the surprise of the students, took the side of Ms. Phillip and fired their children...who realized that they were mistaken if they thought they were going to get any sympathy from their parents on this matter.

There was also Mr. Panicker, the big daddy of them all, very strict, though some laughed at his mannerisms...after he left the room. A very nice man.

All the faculty were very strict, but very nice. They were more teachers and I'm sure they'll come up in future conversations. I associate each of them with some incident or the other. God bless them all. Most of them unfortunately, are not alive any-more...but good souls, each of them.

Another thing in college days was this Rs. 5/- fine that we had to pay if we were absent, a steep amount in those days. You had to bring a note from your parents the very next day after you were absent, not later, or else it wouldn't be valid. You weren't allowed to go for your preliminary exams and your results weren't declared till all your pending fines were paid up. So many people paid their fines at the last minute which sometimes reached Rs. 100/- or 150/-. In those days, we were kept back the year, if we hadn't passed our preliminary exams. I remember one of our fellow students going around asking each of us for Rs. 5/- or 10/- to raise money for his Rs. 80/- fine...only to discover that he had failed.

Back then, we had uniforms only for practicals, but no uniform all the time...like we have now. We were not allowed to wear T-shirts, bush-shirts (shirts hanging out) or jeans. We needed to wear trousers and full-sleeved shirts only.

I remember how strict, the short hair rule for students was. My sister was getting married and I didn't want to look like a clown in the photographs...with close cropped hair. So I grew my hair very surreptitiously and flattened it down with oil and hair cream so that it wouldn't be noticed and thought I'd cut my hair the day after the wedding, and I did. To my bad luck, some of the photographs clicked during the wedding didn't work out and we had to click those photos again. So we all found ourselves once again in wedding gear clicking photographs. I was with short hair in some pictures and with long hair in others. Not sure how many people noticed...but some certainly did.

There were more incidents of-course, which I'll tell you about another time.

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Thank you all once again for the comments that you have given. :-) I would say passed...but I'll say 'given'. Thank you for taking the time to read and send whatsapp messages. Thanks very much! See you next time. Bye-Bye.

## 6: Back to School [19th Oct 2019]

Hi everybody, this chapter Back to School...has a few incidents which I thought I must mention to you'll.

I was very fond of stage performances in school and was always a part of them. It goes right back to the 1st standard when our teacher then, Joyce Pereira and us...put up this song called 'Teddy bears Picnic'...and we found ourselves all decked-up in white outfits holding a teddy bear in our hands.

I still remember that song. It went something like this..."When you go down to the woods today, you're in for a big surprise. If you go down to the woods today, you'd better go in disguise. For every bear that ever there was, will gather there for certain because, today's the day the teddy bears have their Pic-nic. Picnic-time for teddy bears. The teddy bears are having a marvellous time. See them there and watch them merrily dance around. At 6 o'clock their mummies and daddies will come to take them home. They are tired little teddy bears"...

My school was quite famous for putting up Operas and I remember two of them very clearly, one called the Micado and the other called the HMS Pinafore.

The Micado had a Japanese theme, set in the times of ancient Japan and told the story about the son of the Micado (the emperor in those days) and an ordinary girl who he fell in love with. We were all dressed up in kimonos, in the 5th standard at that time. Being an all-boys school, some of us, me included...had to take up the part of the girls. We had to go for practice after practice, as Mrs Antoinette Selkirk our music director, trained us on all the songs.

On the day of the play, we were all dressed up in these Japanese outfits with Japanese hairdos. Then along came this army of mummies of the participants...with makeup kits. We said "Makeup? No one told us anything about makeup!" But they came and plastered it on our faces. The worst part, was this thick red lipstick they stuck on. When it was time to sing, naturally our lips wouldn't easily open. So in our first performance, no sound come out. But subsequently, it happened and we put up a good show, which everybody enjoyed. It was well applauded of-course, mainly because most of the audience were the parents & relatives of the students...so whether it was good, bad or terrible, they had to applaud loudly. But we were happy...

I also remember taking part in fancy dress competitions. The one where I got the first prize had me dressed up as a gypsy doll...and because I was a doll, I was shoved into a box. But I managed to pull it off, say a few words for the judges and get the prize.

As we grew older, the pranks and antics grew. I recall that once someone had brought a full watermelon to class which we wanted to share, but had no idea how to cut it. One of the students had a blade used to sharpen pencils. With it, we cut the watermelon and very nonchalantly threw the peels and seeds out of the window. Unfortunately, it fell on the principal. We had a new principal in St. Andrews at that time and he came storming up with the fruit peels, seeds and all...to the 2nd floor where our classroom was...and since he didn't know who had done it, he caned us all...mercilessly.

Another time that I remember in my school days, was waiting for the report cards to come. The first principal I had was Fr. Nereus. Those from St. Andrews will know him very well. He was really strict. He would come personally to give the report cards to each student. A few minutes before he arrived, the peon would come with the report cards and place his cane on top of them. Father would soon follow and the buzz would quieten down as he began calling out our names. If we failed in one subject, we got one whack, two subjects, two wacks and so on. Between Hindi and Marathi, I never got less than two. If I somehow passed in Hindi, I failed in Marathi and in the next exam...vice versa...till they introduced French and I dropped Marathi in class 8. But then I had to cope with Algebra and Geometry...so it was like jumping from the frying pan to the fire. My hands would be sore, but I made it through the years.

Those were some of my memories of school days. Next time I'll tell you a little more about what happened in Catering College.

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Managed to find a picture of my batch mates with our class teacher Ms. Doris Fernandes. By the way, I can clearly recollect the names of all my school teachers from the 1st standard to SSC...very vividly. Wonder if any of you can spot yourselves in the photo. No prizes for guessing where I am...



## 7: Early Culinary Memories [2nd Nov 2019]

Hi everyone, this time I thought I'd tell you a little bit about some of the culinary experiences that I had in school...though they were very different from the kind that I had at catering college. More simple, and school boy-ee I'd say.

I'm talking about the vendors who used to sit outside school trying to sell food stuff to us. I clearly remember the bora-wali, with those tasty sour boras with salt liberally sprinkled on them, contributed to a lot of us boys...having bad throats. The school did their bit trying to stop people like her by shutting the gates, so we couldn't go outside to buy them. But that didn't really stop us.

And who can forget the gola-wala with those violently coloured syrups poured on top. There was also the kulfi-wala whose Mewad brand of kulfi-sticks were quite tasty; though we favoured the gola-wala more...mainly because he was much cheaper. Then there was the guy who sold buddhi-ka-baal, the white spun sugar. Of-course there was also magenta pink candy floss, which we found fascinating, because it was made right in front of us.

We took our lunch dabbas to school from home, never had a school-meal as such. We had a dining room where we used to eat food sent or brought from home. Few of us went home to eat, but most of us preferred spending our time eating on the playground...so as not to lose too much time in other activities during the break.

Before we knew it, it was time to appear for our board exams in school. I was blissfully unconcerned about tuitions, except in Hindi where I was forced to go for one Mr. Fadnis' classes after school hours. Though it didn't do much for my improvement in the language, a lot of girls from the neighbouring convent schools also came for his class. We would stand outside the gate, not allowed to go in while the girls were there. Only after they came out.

Eventually, I barely managed to pass with 36 marks out of 100, 35 being the passing. My mother always told me, "We don't want you to come 1st in your class; just do your best". So I took her at her word and did just that. Imagine my shock when I scored an overall of 58%...considered good in those days; while 60% and above was very good. French, Science and Social Studies (History, Geography & Civics) which I was interested in & good at...saved the day for me. I was happy. My parents, were extremely happy with my result.

After this, as I mentioned, I started my culinary journey at IHM, quite unprepared for what was to come. I realized the fact that I had to learn to cook. It took me back to my childhood days with my grandmother which held me in good stead, since I was able to understand some of the nuances and terminologies that were being thrown at us.

In my 1st year, my culinary teacher was an elderly Parsi lady called Ms. Talati. She was the motherly type and used to nurture us as if we were her children. Not like a school teacher, and definitely not like a college teacher. She took a lot of pains to train us in the basics of cooking and I must thank her for that. Unfortunately, she is no more.

We started our culinary practicals learning the basics of Indian food. I clearly remember our 1st menu was Fried Rice (not the Chinese one, but more like a pulao), Mutton Korma and Onion Kachumber. It took us 4 hours to make this on charcoal fires, since that is what we were given in our 1st year. The most difficult part was to light the fires and constantly having to fan the flames, with the cinders flying into our eyes. By the end of class, we all had red eyes, much like we'd all had a good drink and come back.

Our plan of work was to first start with the mutton on the fire, and then put on the rice. When the rice was ready to go on the fire, the mutton had to be shifted, to what was called a "side fire", which was a few of the charcoal embers placed on a utensil lid which continued to cook the meat while the rice was being cooked. Each of us had only one charcoal stove to work with. Being individual cooking, it was very

small portions, so half the time if we weren't careful, the mutton or the rice would burn. But we managed, and the food was very tasty.

So most of the 1st year we spent on charcoal fires. Our 2nd menu, was Yellow Rice, Mutton Vindaloo and Tomato Kachumber and the 3rd was Moong Dal Khichdi, Mutton Buffad and Cucumber Kachumber. So we didn't realize at the time, but it was most often a rice dish, a mutton dish and a salad which we first became familiar with in cooking.

We didn't cook many vegetables then, and went on to other items like sweet dishes. I recall when we started doing sweets, we had to grease the moulds. Poor Ms. Talati didn't realize that our wicked minds were at work when she was saying "Now grease your bottoms very well" or "Take oil, apply it on the inside and then rinse it out". The boys howled with laughter, while the girls who also found it as funny...hid their sniggers.

We did do a few continental dishes like Hungarian Goulash, Mutton of Mutton and others, but mostly mutton then...no beef.

We had a bakery class in the afternoon, where we made bread, tea cakes and biscuits collected them, tasted a little of each and sold most of them in the canteen.

I enjoyed my 1st professional culinary training at IHM, and as I began getting the hang of it, enjoyed it enough to begin cooking at home as well. My mother always encouraged me to make at home...what I had learnt in college. Sunday was a well-earned day of rest for my mother, and between my two sisters and I, cooking on one Sunday each and one Sunday ordering a meal from outside...we covered the month.

While my grandmother's cooking was more home style, my mother liked doing more of the fancy stuff.



## 8: Early Teaching days [16th Nov 2019]

Hi everyone,

Those of you who tried to identify me in the earlier picture, I'm 3rd to the teacher's left. Looks familiar? Many of you did guess and some even called to check whether they were right. So there you have it now. As you can see...:-) not much has changed.

Now I've put another photograph in this post, of my 3rd year as a student at IHM (batch of 1975). This might be a little more difficult for you to find, but do have a go.

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I want to tell you about my first few days as a teacher at IHM. I'd mentioned earlier how Ms. Philip "conned" me into joining the faculty. No asking me whether I'd like to join or not. Just..."I would like you to join". Her word was a command. I did try to wriggle out of it, conjuring up some excuses, but she very simply said "Don't worry, I have everything covered. Go back to the Taj. Tell them you're leaving. Give back the locker keys and that's all you have to do."

Now I had no idea what I was supposed to do, or how I was supposed to behave...as a teacher.

The day I joined, Mrs. Moraius (Blazy's mother) who was P.A. to the principal, handed me a timetable...of which classes I was supposed to take. There I saw, that the next day, I had to go for a food production theory class. In my mind, I'd agreed to do the practicals, but not the theory class. Now I saw the theory class in black & white. Mrs. Moraius told me to meet Ms. Philip if I had a problem with it; so I went to meet her and said - "I don't want to teach theory at-least just now, maybe later". She glared at me, pointed at the door and said "Just go!." Oh Fish. That was the end of the story. I had to turn & march out of her room. With great trepidation I approached that afternoon class, not knowing what to expect, since the students weren't exactly the meek and mild variety. They were quite a rowdy lot.

To my great surprise when I entered the class, they were all sitting very quietly. As I wondered what the catch was, I spied Ms. Philip herself, sitting at the back of the class. When she was there, nobody dared to open their mouths. I had a half-smile on my face in relief to have Ms. Philip on my side, and right enough from then on...I had no problem in class. Everyone knew I had strong influence, and so wouldn't mess around with me.

Things went well. Over time, I began actually enjoying my theory class because it gave me the opportunity to brush up my knowledge as well. Till the day I retired, I never went to a theory class without reading first. It gave me the confidence to answer all kinds of questions. In later years, their questions became very pointed, because the students googled them (sometimes in class itself)...before asking me. The practicals were much easier and I enjoyed them as well.

Ms. Philip never said anything much, but she had that look "I told you so". I felt solidly reassured that she would never leave me in the lurch, or hang me out to dry. I was happy.

So those were my first few days and it was smooth sailing after that.

Now when I look back, I wonder what I was so nervous about in taking a theory class....how it comes so easily to me, and how much I enjoy it.

Ms. Philip and I had a good working relationship. Wherever I had any problem, I went to her and she told me what to do. Unfortunately, she retired a few years after I joined, but her imprint was there throughout.

I remember some other staff used to mention to me later..."These are not the days of Ms. Philip". So I responded "Yes, these are not the days of Ms. Philip. That is why I am so much better than you all". Those that knew Ms. Philip, got cheesed off with me and those that never met her...couldn't understand what was so reverent about her.

I'm sure there were students in my class who were older than I was, since they'd done graduation and other courses before joining IHM. I think I handled them well and became good friends with them at large. I don't think I had many students who didn't like me. Of-course I used to be on their side, whenever they were in trouble. I always told them that even if they did something wrong, they should come and tell me about it...so I know what I'm dealing with. "Don't cover it up", I said, "Because eventually I'll know and then I'll be forced to hang you out. I want to know what you did and why you did it. Only then, I can cover up for you".

I was very young in my early days of teaching, and with little age difference between my students and I, we got along very well. I accompanied them on their picnics which was some good bonding, and we overall...had a great time between us. After a few years, I was the first one they came to when they got into trouble...sometimes even put me into trouble, because of their pranks and mischief; but I was OK with it.

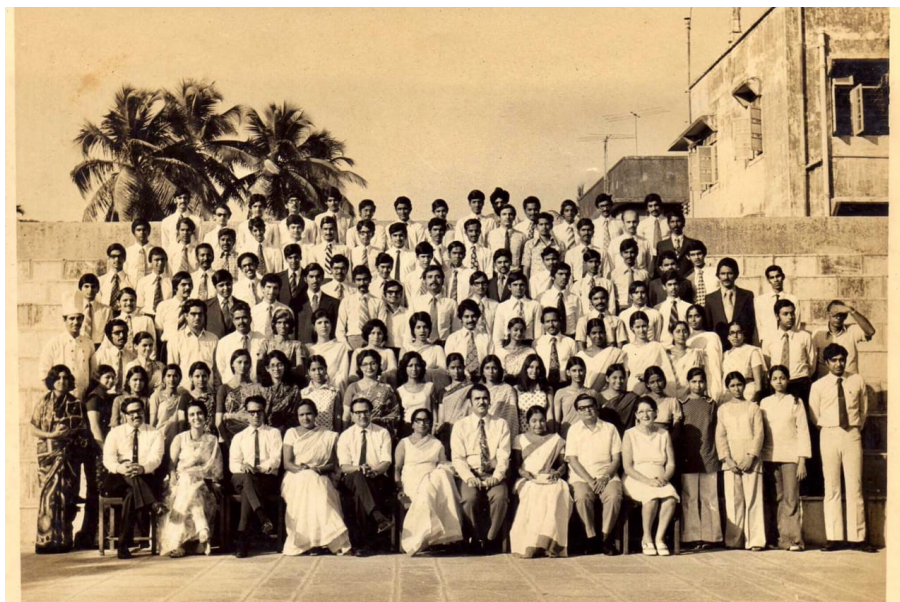
There was some faculty who I got along with very well, who helped me a lot in my early days - Timmy Ayre was one, K.H.Shaliya was another, there was Dr. Suzy Eapen though I had little interaction with her, since she was from the nutrition department...but she'd always tell me what to do and what not to.

When I went to the teacher training program there was Dr. Sundarajan who was in charge of the program, though she left halfway. So we had a good faculty. Some...I stayed out of their hair, since they had a way of doing things that I didn't approve of, but I respected them for what they were and they did contribute a lot as well to my learning...as a student and in my early days...as a teacher.

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Some of our faculty, are in the photograph below. Some of you might even recognize...some of them...like Ismay Gomes. See if you can recognize any others...

Those days if you were called for a group photograph, everybody turned up. Everyone knew one another. I think our batch was about 65 students then. Nowadays, there are probably too many in a batch to all fit, into one photo.



## 9: Of Trade Fairs & Theme Dinners... Of Times Gone By...

[30th Nov 2019]

Before I launch into this episode, I'd like to say thank you to all of you who take time from your busy schedules to read, like, reply to and share, my posts.

The trade fair was one of the highlights of the annual calendar in the 70's & 80's. It changed over the years and unfortunately by the 90's...died out altogether. What a pity!

It was a great opportunity for students to develop their entrepreneurial skills all-round, because they had to...buy the stalls, then think of the cuisine they wanted to showcase, then start working on recipes, sponsors and all kinds of things.

Trade fairs also helped students develop their culinary skills and try out new dishes. I clearly remember eating momos all those years back...for the first time, at a trade fair. Then they caught on, and eventually became very popular.

Overall, the students enjoyed trade fairs as much as the thousands of visitors who came. I'm sure many of the older students know what I'm talking about, and have their own memories to share.

Looking back, many things which shouldn't have happened...did; like the '91 batch who set fire to the stalls. They were first year students, making Chinese food. They didn't know head or tail about Chinese; neither did they know how to use a high pressure burner. They were only used to working on charcoal fires until then.

The stalls in those days, were made with bamboo and cloth. So this girl, I won't tell you her name, cause she lives nearby and will come after me. She put the high pressure burner on full and then lit it with a burning piece of paper. Suddenly, the flame blew up to the ceiling, burnt the cloth on top and the next 2 stalls as well. That created quite a hullabaloo, but was also part of the learning of how to be in control of a flame. The food, regardless of how authentic or not it was...was tasty. I don't know whether it was the burnt cloth flavour or something else, but somehow from then on, Chinese food became very popular.

That's one story which comes readily about trade fairs and then...there was Basil Nainan!

Basil was one of those characters who took 6 years to complete a 3 year program. Very good at heart, but I used to feel sorry for his mother who I think spent more time at college than he did. Everyone from the faculty would ask for her to visit, just to tell her how badly her son was doing. But I liked the boy...a good soul. Every class he cut his fingers. I'm not sure whether it was intentional to avoid doing work, since he was rather clever. I won't mention his other activities, but there were plenty of them.

I remember one particular trade fair in which he'd taken a stall with 2 of his equally notorious partners. Their stall was empty for 2 out of 3 days. We'd told them, that they must have something to sell and they couldn't just have an empty stall. So on the third day, I saw them roaming around with a pizza in their hands, which they'd bought from outside, trying to convince people to buy it.

Late at night after everyone had gone home, I think Basil and his friends had paused for a drink somewhere probably to get over the "stress"...from what...I don't know. Only Basil was left in college, possibly to keep a watch on the equipment in the stalls. After I wound up finishing my work, I came down the stairs and spied him sitting in the lobby. So I tried to divert my route to go straight out the main door and not to cross him; but he dodged me and confronted me at the door, cooking knife in hand.

"Yes, Basil", I said, "What do want? What are you doing here so late? Go home." He muttered something, pointed his knife at me and asked - "Are you ready to die?"

"What?" I exclaimed. Basil explained "You know, you must live your life ready to die at any moment."

Exhausted from the day, I said “Just shut up Basil and go away. I’m tired and want to go home.”

He left it at that. Later I wondered, considering his knife in hand, whether he was really going to do something, because I must have irritated him “n” number of times. Basil is doing very well for himself now. He’s left the hotel industry (thankfully) and has become a creative writer and a very successful one at that, settled in Canada. Basil, if you read this post, do give me a call sometime.

After that fire, the fire department was involved in all subsequent trade fair work; so we had to take a lot of precautions and I think around ‘94 or so, the trade fair had shifted from the terraces down to the grounds.

I recall one student particularly small-made, wobbling down the steps carrying a huge colander full of noodles, boiled in the kitchen upstairs. He soon lost his balance and found himself and the noodles splattered all over the floor. I watched from the first floor terrace as he gathered all the noodles and put them back in the colander. He was spotted by one of the guests who even took a photograph of it, probably to ensure that the noodles were not used again - as if we would’ve washed them and tried to get away with it. So the students had to start cooking the noodles all over again and that’s when we all realized something useful. Noodles didn’t really need to be boiled, just soaked adequately in hot water. Subsequent batches were done pretty fast and as usual, we learnt something new from each of these disasters.

One day, I was standing in the advanced training kitchen (ATK) near the dish washing area and observed a student of mine Zenobia, sitting on the parapet...which as you might know, we had a very strict policy against. So I signalled her to meet me in the ATK where I was. As I turned to walk towards my desk (I had a cabin at that time), I saw the girl already sitting in my office. I was surprised that she traversed the crowd so quickly. Zenobia looked at me equally perplexed as to why I was asking her that question. Then I realized that the girl who was sitting on the parapet, was not my student. She was Zenobia’s twin sister. As if that wasn’t enough, a 3rd girl looking just the same walks into the kitchen. With 3 identical-looking girls now standing in front of me, I lost it for a few seconds before I learnt that Zenobia was one of three triplets...all of whose names incidentally began with a “Z”. I wonder what they’re doing now.

In the first few years, we had both a trade fair and a food exhibition; so every department had to put up the best that they could and there were awards...for who could sell the most. While we ran helter-skelter to produce things to sell, it was a fun exercise. Each year, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd years had their own stalls. We had 2 basic training kitchens (BTKs) at that time - one run by Ms. Talati very fondly called volume 1 (After our 2-volumed textbook Modern Cookery by Ms. Thangam Philip) and the other kitchen run by Mrs. Marathe, and what could she be called?...naturally...Volume 2. Those books were our bibles in those days. Ms. Marathe used to make usal and other tasty Maharashtrian snacks while Ms. Talati made milk cream, marzipan and other home-made style Christmas treats, apt for the time around which these events were conducted.

The 2nd years, besides looking after the quantity training kitchen (QTK), also had their own stall. The 3rd years ran the restaurant and sold buffet tickets for the princely sum of Rs. 80/- or so which back then was still quite expensive considering that sweets were for Rs. 10/- a packet. The bakery did the best business with loads of sponge cake, fruit cake, biscuits and what have you. They would start their production 2 or 3 days in advance.

Later, this developed into a situation wherein the students would buy their own stalls; first under our supervision and then run purely by the students themselves. Often, students needed to go out of campus to get sponsors for their stalls...around a fortnight or so before the event. Where they actually went in the name of sponsorship & when they went out...God only knows; but half the time they were out of college during that period.

Slowly that transitioned into the 2nd years and 3rds years having 3 days each to run the restaurant. Eventually, that died out as well and I think the ‘87 batch were the first ones to have theme dinners.

When trade fairs and theme dinners happened, students spent more time gallivanting outside college than in it to get sponsors, and to sell tickets for the buffet...but they were good students, and it was great fun.

There were lots more incidents, but I'll recap them at a later time.

Bye for now!

## 10: Jingle Jangle Bells [21st Dec 2019]

Since it's Christmas time, I thought I'd bring back some memories of the Christmases gone by...spent at Catering College.

In the old tradition which goes back to the days of Ms.Philip, we used to have the Nativity play - played out on the terrace, late in the evening. It had a choir, properly trained by Timmy Ayre who was also in charge of the music and Ms.Philip herself...was the director of the play.

Of-course it was hilarious, but nobody dared to snigger or laugh at that time. As it was a religious function, no clapping and no laughing or applauding was allowed. Those were good days & it was great fun. Mr.Panicker played Santa Claus and a lot of students took their "khunnas" out on him by crowding around him and fondling him all over. The poor man couldn't see who it was because of the mask on his face and could do nothing when they pinched him and prodded him. One year was particularly bad when I heard him mutter that he'd never be Santa again. But the next year, he came back for more...possibly because he couldn't tell Ms.Philip, what had been happening.

We had the regular - 3 Kings, the Shepherd, the Star and everything associated with a Christmas story. After Ms.Philip left, Dinaz Gorimar took over and the tradition continued. However, sadly over the years, the play turned into a tableau where we had to enact the scenes but not as a play with a dialogue. We had the choir and guess who was in charge? I think I did a pretty good job... :-) even if I say so myself. I particularly remember singing "Oh Holy Night" solo, which went off rather well and I continued for a few years, until I found someone else to take charge.

One particular year, I remember Dinaz Gorimar asked Ram Murthy to play the angel. He was quite angelic looking with his curly hair and light eyes, though quite tall for an angel. After some initial resistance he agreed, but when he tried out his costume which was ready-made, we discovered that it only came up to his knees. Dinaz said we'd alter it but that didn't happen and on the day of the dress rehearsal, we found that his legs were too hairy...especially for an angel. She asked him to shave his legs which he flat refused considering it was quite macho to have hair on your legs in those days. A compromise was reached - to wear panty hose. Someone brought in a pair for him, but they came only up-to his thighs. As he tried to pull them up, they tore completely and he couldn't walk much with them. Luckily, his part required him only to pop up from some "rocks"...(boulders made of cardboard) and deliver his line to the Shepherds, something like..."I bring you good news"... and then he had to pop back down into the rocks.

The play went well, until it was time for the 3 Shepherds, one of whom was Shiavax. Now Dinaz tried convincing Shiavax that we couldn't have Shepherds with spectacles but Shiavax refused to take them off since he couldn't really see much without them. The poor fellow followed her instructions, but just couldn't see and began wandering about...eventually into the crowd. Not sure whether intentionally or not...but the crowd cheered him on, and it was good fun.

I remember Bikram Malhotra very regal looking, being one of the 3 kings. During practice they were to pretend to hold a gift in their hands, though in reality their hands were empty. On the actual day of the performance as well...without realizing he walked out without anything in his hands and spoke about the 'gold' he was about to gift, but his hands were empty. So he hurriedly ran back bumping into the other two kings to bring his gift. All in all, very enjoyable.

The choir was good. We had some good singers and I remember Maria playing on the organ.

Then was the Christmas dinner, the highlight of the evening, which at college was traditionally roast chicken with stuffing, roast potatoes & vegetables, followed by Christmas pudding...that was set on fire, luckily without any incident. One year, we even roasted a pigling in college. Can't find the picture now,

but it looked quite striking with an apple in its mouth and the students decorated it nicely, with a necklace and dark glasses as well.

We also had a Christmas dance while the dinner was being served. Everybody was well behaved and thoroughly enjoyed it. Slowly, it deteriorated into a booze party difficult to control and was eventually stopped. I know many of you will remember this party, some came only for it...but I guess we could simply put it down to the "spirit" of Christmas.

All 300 of us - faculty and students, used to get a small Christmas gift from college each year, initially. For no particular reason, one year somehow, I remember us all getting a small green plastic bowl, like a porridge bowl.

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Some years later, they stopped the play. When someone asked me why they stopped it, I said "I dunno, probably they couldn't find 3 wise men and a virgin anymore". and we all laughed and laughed.

One year they wanted to know why I couldn't be Santa, since by then I'd become quite portly. I didn't want to and so I just told them "No, because Santa Claus comes only once a year." Most of them looked at me befuddled back then, and with my most straight face I said "It's true".

That's it for now. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you all. See you in 2020! Bye...

# 11: Travels & Travails Overseas - Kathmandu [4th Jan 2020]

Happy New Year everyone!

I hope 2020 is a good year for each of us - good health & good times ahead!

Thank you all very much, for all the messages on whatsapp & sms and also for your phone calls over the season! Much appreciated.

I must also apologize to Jim Ayre. Sorry Jim, I misspelt your name when I mentioned dad in the last post. Unintentional. Of-course I knew the correct spelling and so I was mortified when you pointed it out to me.

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Thinking back, I recall my first trip overseas to neighboring Nepal with my two friends Advani and Manoj. The 3 of us were in our first year of catering college, and were seeking an adventure.

We were quite naive then, but Kathmandu was next door and not dangerous, or so we thought until we were attacked by a pack of monkeys at the Pashupatinath Temple. We'd been warned - "Be careful of the monkeys. Don't carry any open food or they will pounce on you".

We of-course said "Yes, yes"; after all what could monkeys do? I'd dealt with monkeys before at the Elephanta caves, and so off we went happily to Pashupatinath. Advani & Manoj wanted to buy prasad for the temple - some coconut, laddus and flowers. The shopkeeper told us to be careful and cover it with some newspapers. We didn't pay much heed to that but still covered our respective prasad plates and went in. There was a light drizzle as we entered the wet courtyard of the temple...when the newspaper over Advanis prasad, flew away with the wind. Our hero didn't think much of it...until we heard a blood-curling scream. Manoj and I turned around to discover that it was Advani with 6 or 7 monkeys on his back pawing away at him. As the monkeys looked at me aggressively, I threw away the prasad as far away from myself...as did Manoj. The monkeys left us alone, but not Advani, who just wouldn't let go of the prasad. Finally some temple attendants came, shooed away the monkeys and reminded us about not walking about with open food. I don't know who was more frightened - Advani of the monkeys, or the monkeys of Advani; but he was badly scratched and had to get a tetanus shot as advised by the locals.

We stayed on that trip at a small hotel called Paras...sharing a room with Manoj's older brother who had brought with him, a bottle of Vodka.

I'd never tasted alcohol before ...:-) honestly. It was the October holidays and Kathmandu can get quite cold at that time of the year. I remember feeling cold at night and wanting a sip of water. In the dark, I grabbed this bottle which I thought was water and took a big gulp. I immediately realized it wasn't just water, but some kind of firewater burning my throat as it went down...before I concluded that it was the vodka. I'm sure Manoj's brother must have wondered what happened to his vodka during the night, because according to him, we didn't drink. If he asked, we were sure that we'd pass on the blame...to the monkeys.

These were the 2 highlights of my first trip overseas. Kathmandu was a beautiful place back then - pristine, uncrowded and nowhere as commercial as I later saw it, on my subsequent trips. The food was excellent and I enjoyed my first taste of momos there, though momos aren't from Nepal. We also tried this local fermented alcoholic drink called Chaaang. I remember a wooden palace in the middle of the city where I think the princesses used to live and a big crowd always stood about. The markets were nice and rustic. I recall the vegetables being particularly gigantic - a radish 3 feet long. Indians shopping there bought vegetables, to bring back to India.

We'd traveled by Royal Nepal Airlines from Patna to Kathmandu. It my first time on an aircraft and I had no idea about the protocol. They gave us our boarding passes without seat numbers. When the aircraft



landed wherever it had come from, the passengers were deplaned and before we knew it...everyone around us waiting to board, began running towards the aircraft. We joined them and began running ourselves, not knowing why. Along the way we discovered that they were running to catch window-seats on the aircraft since no seats had been allocated. The captain had fortunately told us that he would point out Mt.Everest to us as we passed and that he would take a full loop of the mountain so that passengers on both sides of the aircraft would be able to see it from their own seats. He asked all us not to rush to one side, as the aircraft would then tilt over. Thank God he warned us, otherwise I don't know where we might have landed.

There was a lot of nice foreign stuff available in Nepal then. I had an alumni Binod Puri, a local from Nepal who had told us where to shop. Poor fellow came to India and didn't go back home for three years.

We also went to a Casino in the Soaltee Oberoi, which was not open to locals. They gave us a few chips to play with. There was a game called Keno that was nice. Manoj's brother told us that if we spent enough money there, they'd let us stay a night at the hotel but naturally as students we never had that kind of money, so once we lost the free chips they gave us, we just left.

After this first trip overseas, I was bitten by the travel bug and went on to visit many more places, which I'll write about over the next few weeks.

## 12: Travels & Travails Overseas - Jordan [18th Jan 2020]

Continuing with my travels, my next trip, one for work...and the first one overseas in 1980, was to Aman in Jordan. I arrived there not knowing what to expect in an Arab country, but was working for a British Company, Grand Metropolitan so at-least language wasn't a problem. The work there was good, their standards pretty high and I settled in quite quickly.

Jordan was very modern compared to other Arab countries like Saudi Arabia or even Dubai...in those days. People dressed mainly in western clothes, very few in traditional Arab gear, but I believe that's changed over the years and it has become more Arabic now. The locals were very nice, not oil-rich spoilt and pampered... but very cultured, educated and easy to get along with.

Mansaf was a popular dish there served on special occasions. I remember one of my Arab cooks - a 55 year old, proudly inviting two of us (his British boss - the executive chef and I) for his wedding...to his 4th wife...a 16-year old. The 2 of us were his chief guests at the party and the venue was out in the desert under the stars. We were seated in groups of 15 to 18 people each. This big thal of flavoured rice, sprinkled with pine nuts and sultanas arrived covered with the innards of the lamb, and a full roasted goat with the head included...sitting on the top of it all. We sat with our host between the 2 of us and began hungrily tearing off pieces of meat & eating it with the rice. With great elan he dug his fingers into the head of the animal, scooped out the eyes and presented one to each of us. As I recoiled at the suddenness of it, I realized from a co-guest that it was a privilege we had as chief-guests and not accepting it would mean dishonour. With no intention of insulting him, I closed my eyes and swallowed it. Not sure what it tasted like, but it went down. There was some very rustic local wine, quite horrible actually, but we gulped it down as well. That was my first experience at an Arab feast. The celebration went on well into the night with music and dancing.

Jordan is a very historical place and besides work, I did a lot of site-seeing looking at monuments & museums. Great memories of floating on the water in the dead sea, drying off in the sun and our bodies shimmering with the salt that was stuck to them... :-) stuck... in every crevice you can imagine. It took at-least 2 or 3 baths to wash it all off. Now I believe the dead sea area is well developed with roads, resorts and hordes of tourists; unlike back then when it was quite deserted and we pretty much had the sea all to ourselves.

I also visited the ancient stone-carved city of Petra, described as half as old as time itself. It's entrance, a very narrow path called Siq allowed only one horse to pass through for protection from enemies. Protecting armies would sit high on the mountain-side looking out for invaders who they could snipe off from there. Jerash was another un-inhabited ancient city nearby that I visited along with Bahrain and a whole lot of hot water springs all over Jordan.

The port city of Aqaba on the Red sea had ships come in on one side, while on the other side you could see the Israeli city of Haifa. I once visited Jerusalem crossing over the border with a special permit that was required then, via the Allenby bridge .

On one occasion, we had a big upcoming party for a client where we had both an Arabic as well as a Western menu. Our Arabic cook made the Arabic dishes he was asked to and then I asked him to help out with the western menu as well, which was a matter of great pride for him. One of the Western dishes I asked him to prepare was Hungarian Goulash, which he did as per my instructions. When I tasted his Goulash, I felt something was missing and accordingly asked him to add some paprika and two bottles of European wine. On tasting it after he had done so, I noticed very little change. Thinking he may not have stirred it well, I began stirring it myself when suddenly I felt something move inside the vessel. You can imagine my horror when I realized that he'd put in - two full glass bottles with corks, labels and all. I only hoped that they hadn't broken inside the utensil.

I remember eating out with a friend quite often, at an Arab restaurant that made western food with particularly good spare ribs. At that time, that's in the '80s, they ate pork in Jordan. Don't know whether they still do anymore, but we had some nice mornings with bacon back then. King Hussein was quite western himself, having studied at the Sandhurst Military Academy in England and had an American wife...:-) his 4th as well, Queen Liza. She was an architect who'd originally come to do up his palace and eventually stayed back. He named his airline 'Alia Royal Jordanian' after his second wife Alia, a Palestinian, was killed in an aircrash and whom he loved very much.

I often wanted to go back to Jordan, just to see how things have changed but somehow never made it. A pity because I really enjoyed the 3 years I was there, some good memories of the place and the people...those I worked with...as well as the locals. I was happy enough to come back home only once in those 3 years.

I made many British friends there through work, 2 or 3 of whom very graciously hosted me on my visits to London and Scotland...my first trip to Europe...straight from Jordan. Some of these friends, I'm still in touch with. Next time, I'll share my experiences in London.

Bye until then...

## 13: Travels & Travails Overseas - Ireland & Scotland [1st Feb 2020]

Over the years, I made at-least 15 trips to the UK, the most recent being just about 3 years ago and am left with some good thoughts and memories of the country. Thanks to my friend Elliot Bocarro, if you remember him, who was instrumental in my having a good time there.

### Ireland

One of my first trips from London was to nearby Ireland in Oct '84. I'd asked Elliot and he'd made the arrangements by ferry from the port of Holyhead in the UK to Dublin across the Irish Sea. A memorable journey over a rough sea. Luckily, I didn't fall sick and reached the other side. Those days boats were not as sophisticated as they are now.

I landed in Dublin early in the morning. The tourist office at the port guided me to stay at a Bed & Breakfast accommodation and B&Bs are where I stayed at...most of my trips to the UK. They were cheap with homely comforts, and breakfast was always taken care of. So I just had to fend for myself for lunch and dinner. In those days when the money was a little tight, it used to be either lunch...or dinner. But the breakfast was a hearty English one and I would skip lunch and concentrate on dinner, when I tasted the local delicacies including Irish Stew.

Anyway, I landed up at this B&B in the city and there was a duo of two old ladies Edna and Enid, possibly unmarried sisters, who were staying together and renting out their rooms; I suppose to supplement their income. Every morning, they used to make me a nice English breakfast of orange juice, either porridge or cornflakes, some slices of toast with jam and creamery butter. Sometimes they even brought clotted cheese, also quite a treat. After breakfast, I'd be on my way sightseeing or whatever else I wanted to and come back in the evening by about 6 when it got dark. It was quite cold at that time of the year.

One day I got caught in the rain. I was soaked and it was bitterly cold so I came home shivering to my bones. I opened the door with the key they'd given me and as I walked through the drawing room, they saw me enter like a drenched chicken. Everyday I used to return home, the two of them would be sitting in the drawing room having their peg of Irish whiskey and they would very politely ask me if I wanted a bottle and I would say no. Now that night I was particularly cold and thought...why not, if they're offering. After all I couldn't be rude and say no all the time, so I said yes. They asked me to go up to my room, get out of my wet clothes and they would bring the bottle up. I dried and warmed myself in front of the heater in the room when one of them came up with a tray and on it was a hot water bottle... :-) not the whiskey bottle I thought they were going to bring. I stared at it realizing I couldn't be ungrateful and say this is not the bottle I had in mind. I was thankful that they were kind enough to give me the hot water bottle.

Over the years, I listened to and sang lots of Irish melodies and heard a lot of Irish folk stories. One story called the jumping graveyard wall, was about a not so good person. When he died and was buried in the cemetery, the wall was supposed to have jumped across to exclude him.

Another story was about two thieves who'd entered a church late at night to rob it of the chalice and other such silver and gold-ware. As soon as they entered looking for their loot, the church bells began ringing by themselves and woke up the people who went to church and caught the pair.

I didn't venture to the northern part of Ireland, Belfast, because it was too dangerous with the Irish Republican Army quite active and rampant in those days.

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## Scotland

Another part of the UK that I enjoyed visiting, was Scotland. My British boss insisted that I visit him at his house which was actually a small hotel called the Foyers Bay Hotel, up in the Scottish Highland on the banks of the Loch Ness (Loch meaning lake) on the outskirts of the town Inverness. I don't know how many of you have heard of the Loch Ness Monster...part of Scottish folklore, a resident of that lake. Although I was there for almost a week, I never got to see the monster... :-) perhaps she was too shy. Lots of stories about it coming out only at night. I kept my eyes peeled, but no such luck.

I worked for a few days with a gentleman called Ken Glass who ran a popular B&B out of a Manor House with around 12 rooms, partly occupied by his family. He was the General Manager and Head Chef, his wife the Housekeeper and his children the waiters and bellboys. I remember little Jaime carrying guest bags up and down. I helped out briefly in the kitchen. Every morning we used to go to the local market and buy what was fresh and in season. We looked for the fresh catch of fish and the local produce of fruit and vegetables. Groceries and meats would come directly to the kitchen. When we came back from the market, he would write the days menu on a blackboard with chalk. He showed me a lot of Scottish delicacies and operated his breakfast room like a small restaurant mainly for his in-house guests who requested an evening meal. If there were no bookings at the restaurant, we went out in the evenings.

Once there was a Scottish Festival on Burns Night named after Robbie Burns a poet who composed very stirring songs for soldiers going to war with their neighbors, the English...whom they hated back in the old times of Queen Mary and that lot. There was a saying that - the Scottish hate the Welsh, the Welsh hate the Irish, the Irish hate the Scottish and everybody hates the English. The English were powerful rich colonists who took these people as their subordinate officers, so no wonder they weren't liked.

They had this ceremony called the stabbing of the Haggis. I'd heard of Haggis in college but hadn't seen or tasted one until then. Haggis is the inner lining of the sheep stomach filled with all kinds of entrails - like liver and whatever else they could find...bound with blood. Disgusting for some, but for them...it is a delicacy. You had to stab the Haggis pretending it was an Englishman, then pour whisky into that stabbed wound till it soaked up the dry mass and then they would eat it. I remember some Americans had come for this festival. One American woman asked a Scottish man what was inside. They gave her a piece to taste, but she couldn't make out the congealed blood and innards. So the man said liver, heart, and I don't know whether this is true or not...but he also mentioned testicles. The woman spat everything out and jokingly told the man that she had promised her mother, that was something she wouldn't do.

Another incident I recall at that same festival was a pesky American woman who kept asking the crusty old Scotsman what was worn under the kilt. Fed up, he turned to her and said - "Nothing is worn. Everything is in perfect working condition".

The Scottish had this line-dancing where men and women swayed together, which was also very memorable with their vibrant music. My favorite city in Scotland or for that matter in the UK, is the beautiful historic city of Edinburgh where I returned often to take friends from India or other parts of the UK. With the amount of time I spent there...I felt I knew more about the UK than some of the English there.

That's all for now. Catch you on my later trips...

## 14: Travels & Travails Overseas - London & a few neighboring environs... [15th Feb 2020]

Let me begin this post by saying thank you to all of you who've read, liked, commented and shared my earlier posts. Thanks very much! Much appreciated!

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London at one time, seemed like a second home to me since I went there so often and my friends Elliot and Francine Bocarro always had their door open for me and made sure I had a good time. London is an amazing city and was a revelation each time I visited. So much to see and do...that you just can't get tired of the place. I loved it.

I enjoyed my trips to the West end theater, particularly the musicals like Starlight Express, Joseph & the amazing technicolor dream coat, Phantom of the Opera and the list was endless. I still have a lot of their music on CD or tape, and when I feel nostalgic...I switch them on.

The monuments of London are something else. You have to go there to see them, difficult to describe in a small post like this. Greenwich, Cambridge and Oxford which I visited, have a lot of history behind them. I even went rowing on the Thames river in true Oxford tradition. I didn't go the House of Lords. Like a lot of the other lords sitting there, I'd almost doze off...since they were so boring.

I happened to be there once at the year-end, when the students were passing out and traditionally they jumped into the river from a particular bridge, with their gowns and caps on...which I happened to witness and found amazing. Thank God I wasn't standing anywhere near them or I'd have been thrown in myself.

As far as London food goes, I think its very difficult now to find good old fashioned British food in London. You have innumerable Indian restaurants there, quite a few run by our ex-students who'd invite me and we'd have a nice Indian meal together, but rarely good English food. I had to go to the East end of London for things like pies, usually the Steak & Kidney Pie with mashed potatoes and lots of gravy. I remember often standing on the sidewalk at the Fish n Chips kiosks that served piping hot food turned out into a newspaper cone...traditionally made from the pink-colored financial times. They had some exceptional desserts as well, including Christmas cake which you can enjoy through the year...and treacle pie.

An interesting experience at the St.Pauls Cathedral - There was a rather stern guide from the Cathedral who took us around. He strictly told us not to talk loudly and everybody knew they had better be quiet and listen to him. At one point, the guide saw his friend across the passageway and called out to him, "Neil". The entire group of us immediately and unquestioningly...knelt down. It was hilarious!

I don't know if any of you are aware, the Tower Bridge in London is the one which opens out to allow ships to go in, while the London bridge is a regular bridge...but some confuse the two. I've seen pictures of the Tower Bridge, sometimes being called the London Bridge.

I visited London often then, sometimes twice a year and what Elliot wanted most from Bombay was the mangoes. I remember one year, my case of mangoes got lost at the airport. When I reached Elliot's house and told him, he shook Air France from top to bottom to find the mangoes. Thanks to his own airline industry background, he knew his way around the system. Eventually, they were found.

The next time I visited London and found myself at his doorstep, the letter box shutter popped opened and Elliot asked - "Have you brought mangoes?". :-) This time of-course, I made sure the mangoes were with me. It was great fun going out with Elliot, Francine and their two children. We had some

extraordinary meals at some way-out places. Since many were at the East end, we'd go for some rather eclectic meals, after the theater.

Just outside of London in the middle of England, is the beautiful Lake district where I went to see the grave of William Shakespeare in one of the churches. Like in Ireland, I spent most of my trips at Bed & Breakfasts, and met many interesting people there as well...some of whom, I am still in touch with. The intriguing prehistoric site of Stonehenge is in the middle of nowhere. How they managed to pile up such heavy stones in that manner, way back then... is still a mystery to me.



Did you know that the train station with the longest name is in Wales? The name is in Welsh, since as I'd mentioned in my earlier post, they didn't like the English. Try and pronounce it. It is Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch (llan-vire-pool-guin-gill-go-ger-u-queern-drob-ooll-llandus-ilio-gogo-goch), usually shortened to Llanfair-pwll or Llanfairpwllgwyngyll, is a Welsh word that translates roughly as "St Mary's Church in the Hollow of the White Hazel near a Rapid Whirlpool and the Church of St. Tysilio near the Red Cave".



Banbury was another interesting place. Those of you who know your nursery rhymes may remember “Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross...” Maybe it’s too old. Nowadays there are newer more interesting nursery rhymes. The other day, I heard some - “Mary had a little lamb and the mid-wife fainted with shock.” Another one is - “Hickory dickory dock, three mice ran up the clock. The clock struck one and the other two escaped with minor injuries.”

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That’s it for today. Keep your replies coming. I read each and every one of them. I might not answer each of them...but I do read them, so thank you and have a good fortnight.



## 15: Travels & Travails Overseas - Still in London [29th Feb 2020]

London is such, that one episode just wouldn't do it justice.

No stories of the UK would be complete without a mention of their London pubs. I spent many a 'happy' hour visiting them. You must understand, the word pub in England doesn't have the same connotation as we have for it here in Mumbai. Here, a pub is a bar or a drinking house.

A pub in the UK, is of two kinds - one, a meeting place for people of the village to get together with their families and includes a play area for kids in the yard outside. A very staid place for a drink, not to get drunk and wild. They'd have games like darts and pool. Another feature was the food - Pub-grub, which was typically pies & mash or fish & chips, normally cooked in-house by the wife of the owner. Nowadays you can even get a curry in some of them.

The second kind of pubs were the more formal kind - those exclusively for gentlemen in London and other cities. They'd have valets, butlers and waiters who knew each person that visited and even knew their likes and dislikes and their favorite drinks. The decor was very formal with wood-paneled walls, carpets and hush tones. The gentlemen would stop by on their way home after work and have a quick drink before they caught the suburban trains to their homes in the country-side.



Pubs in the UK have some very strange names like - George and Vulture, The Bishop's Finger, The Widow's Son, The Famous Cock, are among those which I visited. I used to go there...not often mind you... 'wink, wink'...My friends from outside London would come into the city and I'd take them around to these pubs and restaurants. It was good. I miss that life outside London.



The best time to go to these pubs was at their Sunday afternoon roast. There you got typical British roast lunch with pork or beef whatever was available that day...thick slices of which they'd carve for you at the counter called the Carvery. Then you could help yourself to the gravy, potatoes and vegetables and of-course a pudding to end off the meal...which could have been the very popular Bread & Butter pudding or Queen of Puddings for instance. Some of you may remember these names. These meals would stretch on until 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Then you'd go home, have a good rest and a light sandwich at night before going to bed and getting ready for the week ahead.

London is quite an eclectic place and besides British and Indian food there were a lot of restaurants serving other cuisines like Greek, Turkish and even Ethiopian. Besides Chicago where I experienced this wide a range of cuisines, London was another dynamic potpourri of cultures where every nationality would feel at home. Speaking about Ethiopian, I remember a joke - "Who runs faster than an Ethiopian?" The answer - "An Ethiopian chicken."

Some British food has very school boyish names, must have gone back to the days of their boarding schools like Eton and Harrow. I was horrified when I heard the name Spotted Dick which was nothing but a steamed pudding shaped in the form of a long roll with lots of black sultanas on it. Its original name was Spotted Dog named after Dalmatians for their white fur with black spots. Over the years, it slowly it got corrupted to this by the school boys. There was also Bubble & Squeak a term for a potato patty mixed with boiled cabbage. Sounds terrible, but it was a specialty. The cabbage part of it would squeak and make all kinds of peculiar sounds when it was put on the pan and spread across it. The bubble was one big patty which would plop with air every now and then. Later, they started making smaller ones. This kind of food was referred to as Nursery food probably because of the strange names attached to it which could only have been given by school boys.

I remember when I was studying in college, I thought that Yorkshire Pudding was a sweet pudding. Only in London, I got the real version, two types actually - one, a savoury dish made with simple pancake batter poured into the roasting tray after the roasting was done and served nicely puffed up along with it

after cooling. Now they make them in individual portions. In the other version of Yorkshire pudding, they'd put small sausages, in the roasting pan and pour the batter over them. This, strangely enough was called, Toad in the hole.

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I also want to say Hello to so many ex-students in London. All of them doing very well for themselves, some of them in Indian restaurants which they now partly own and others working in the industry and have made a name for themselves. I don't want to take names now, because it would be endless. Thanks to all of them for the hospitality they showed, each time I was in London!

So I'll wind up this episode here with sweet memories of the many vacations I had in London. Next time, I'll share with you some fun things I experienced in France.

## 16: Travels & Travails Overseas - Many evenings in Paris...

[14th Mar 2020]

France was one of my favorite countries to visit whenever I was in Europe, and Paris of-course was always the first stop. I spent many an exciting, adventurous, humorous and gastronomic evening in Paris and I don't think this post will be able to do justice to all that happened...some behind closed doors, but some which I'll tell you about.

I used to travel from London, which was my base...to Paris by ferry, since flights were too expensive.

We used to go first from London to Dover (in England) by bus, then this bus would get onto the ferry from Dover to Calais in France. We'd get off the bus once we boarded the ferry. We'd land at the Calais port very early in the morning, so I'd spend a few hours roaming around or catching up on sleep there, then get back on the bus and drive to Calais town.

I enjoyed the leisurely boat trips rather than travel by the hovercraft in which, before you knew it the journey had ended...and wasn't as enjoyable. If the sea was calm, the ferry took about 6 to 8 hours; if it was rough, it took even longer. On the ferry, I most enjoyed the fish & chips which I thought were the best in all of England. I made friends with one of the chefs on-board and discovered that their secret was to use beer in the batter. Beer being a fermenting agent, gave it a crispiness, which made it very different from the other fish & chips. The ferry also offered a lot of British food from roast to curry (which by now, was also considered British). I ate a lot more traditional British food here, than I did in Britain.

Immigration at Calais used to take a long time and if they saw one Indian, we got the treatment. Got pulled off the bus and taken to the shed where the immigration officers asked a lot of questions, while the rest of the people in the bus waited, and either grumbled...or slept through it. Felt a little guilty because it added a good half an hour to the trip.

When there were more Indians, we felt safe in numbers. From Calais town, we'd drive to Paris reaching at about 7 am and take the metro to the L'arch de Triomphe tourist office (which opened at about 8 o'clock), to find accommodation at a B&B. I was often the first one standing in the queue. Once the accommodation was done, I'd buy train tickets from the station nearby. In Paris you bought one ticket for all journeys, whether you were going to the next stop or to the end of the train-line, whether you used the same train-line or changed lines...as long as you didn't come out of the station. I usually bought a set of 10 tickets called Carnet, which were cheaper and could be used over the whole trip. The underground system is as good as that in England, and is called the Metro.

I used to spend time in Paris before I went to other parts, and enjoyed my time there. The cafes were on every street and had their menus written on the chalk-board outside, so you could see what was available to eat and at what price. I almost always frequented the cafes, since they were far cheaper than restaurants (risorante) which were more sophisticated with white table cloths and silverware.

I told myself that the food in the cafes was much better, the ambience more informal and you could just have a coffee & watch life go by...as you sat on the rather wide sidewalks, on which the cafes spilled over.

We got things like Rognons Saute (sauteed kidneys) since the French are big time into offals like liver, brain and the like which I grew to love, after a while of having my usual meat and fish that I was more familiar with. I enjoyed some leisurely times at the cafes of the Champs Elysees, though at meal times you couldn't get a table there. Every suburb of Paris had its own share of cafes with its own specialties like Croque Monsieur and also Croque Madame...which just had a fried egg on top of the Croque Monsieur, since women always had to have something better...but fair enough.

Every street had a bakery - a 'boulangerie' for breads and a 'patisserie' for cakes & pastries. As you walk through Paris you can feel the heaviness of these bakery items being made...lingering in the air and your mouth is always watering. Bread is very important for the French. It's their staple diet and they buy it fresh separately for each meal. There were different breads for different meals, like for breakfast the bakeries would open at 5 am and offer soft breads like Croissants, Vienna rolls or Brioche. For lunch and dinner there were different types of breads, but the most popular was what we usually call French bread, the long crusty bread often sold by the meter.

Sometimes people would go across the city to buy bread from a particular bakery that they considered to be the best. So often in the evenings, you'd see a Frenchman or a lady with a Baguette under their arm waiting for the train or bus...nibbling pieces from the end of the bread to keep them going, until they reached home. French housewives always knew how much bread to buy for their family. Very rarely were there left overs for the next meal. Anything leftover would be used to make breadcrumbs or a bread & butter pudding or pudding de pain. The French pastries were delicate and rich, like I've never eaten anywhere else in the world.

There was an amazing array of food items on sale in the market, but my favorite highlight of the trip was the shellfish section called Coquillage, which sold oysters, mussels, clams and such. Since I had no home to take it to, I stood there and ate raw oysters...6 at a time, like you'd eat pani puri. They'd be shucked open with an oyster knife, the beard of the oyster would be cut out and then the muscle that joined the flesh to the shell, so it was loose. Then you tipped it over into your mouth and swallowed it. The Frenchmen will tell you that the sensation of that fresh oyster slithering down your throat, is as good a sensation as...you know what I'm talking about...

The French aren't big time meat eaters. Meat is only on special occasions. They prefer offals and fish. Since France has a big coastline, all kinds of fish find their way into the fish markets across the country, but the Paris fish markets were another level where you could easily spend half a day wandering about the market. What I noticed was you'd never get the smell of fish at these places, since fresh fish doesn't smell fishy. I'll tell you another time about the fish markets in the south of France, which had some of the biggest fish markets till more recently, when I think Japan built something bigger.

Whenever I was invited to a French home or to a restaurant for a meal, wine was a must. It was considered downmarket to order house wine which was the cheapest. I've had some good house-wine, but normally they'd order by the bottle...which I enjoyed. A lot of Frenchmen have cellars in their homes. If they found a good wine while driving down the countryside vineyards, they'd pickup a whole case and keep it in their cellar. I had some very good friends in France.

One was Lee Ryan, a Kiwi who lived in France for a while, before moving back to Newzealand. I spent many an hour on the verandah of his cottage in Angers on the banks of the river Mayenne, a short train ride from Paris, watching ducks float by & boats maneuvered...while eating Raquette. Lee is a fantastic cook and some of the best meals I enjoyed in France were in his home, so thank you Lee for all those wonderful meals and times spent visiting nearby destinations. Another friend of mine, was Pierre Labalette.

Some of you may remember both these gentlemen worked via the International Labour Organization (ILO) who had funded us (IHM) for equipment and revamping the syllabus. While Labalette led the food production out of Mumbai, Lee led the food & beverage service out of Delhi... visiting Mumbai from time to time. Both remained good friends and increased my appreciation for French culture. Labalette later went on to become the Executive Chef of Research & Innovations at the Accor Group of Hotels.

I must tell you some hilarious incidents that happened during my trips to Paris. I once met this delegation of Indians and was asked to share a room with one of them. It was my first night in Paris and very cold that evening. As we retired for the night, he asked to use the toilet first. When I finished in the toilet after him and came out, I got a fright as saw him wrapped up from head to toe in a monkey cap, muffler, scarf, sweaters, pyjamas and the works. We had just arrived in Paris that day and were tired, so

we soon went off to sleep. I got up in the middle of the night bitterly cold despite the heaters and blankets, only to see the windows wide open and the wind rushing in. I wondered whether someone had entered the room. I cautiously put on the light, woke up the gentleman and asked who'd opened the windows. He casually admitted that he had. Astounded, I asked why. He dryly replied that he couldn't sleep without fresh air. Now I knew why he was fully covered. They were big open French windows with no grills. I decided to use that...to tell him that we weren't safe and that someone could easily enter our room. He reflected on it briefly and soon said, Acchaa? Bandh karo! Bandh Karo! It was only after I closed that window, did I get some sleep. I'll never forget my first night in Paris.

Stuck with him during the day, I found he didn't want to eat any offals, and was horrified that in a city like Paris...he actually wanted to eat at Mc.Donald's. It was Sacrilege! He was fascinated because one of the meals they offered was a fish burger which he enjoyed with chips and a beer instead of coke. This was his ultimate meal every-time we went out. I declined accompanying him after the first time.

Accor was also the caterer for Disney and one day Labalette invited us to have a look at the facility. He showed us the modern, well run kitchens and also the staff cafeteria which he said was actually a Mc.Donald's outlet from which the staff got their meals almost for free, though I never saw any golden arches. He pointed out that the smell there was because in France they fried their French fries in beef fat. This gentleman jumped up, stood still and said "Beef fat!"...and began abusing in Hindi. At first I didn't catch what had happened. Then he started berating me and asked why I didn't tell him there was beef in it, since he didn't eat beef. He had been happily gobbling up the french fries which he admitted were tasty. From then on, whenever he saw a Mc.Donald's he would cross the road. So one problem of mine got solved.

Anyway, such are the characters you meet on your way in a journey...Another time, I'll tell you about another character I met on another trip.

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That's it for today. We'll catch up again in a couple of weeks.

Thank you once again for reading and for writing in! I can assure you, I read all your comments. Unfortunately I cannot reply to all of them. Neil George will testify to that because he came over and I recalled his post...so he was quite happy.

So do keep your replies coming. They keep me going, wanting to write more...

As the French would say - 'Au Revoir', which as you know doesn't mean 'goodbye', but 'till we meet again'...

## 17: Travels & Travails Overseas - French Fries & more... [28th Mar 2020]

Since the title of this episode is French Fries & more, let me start with talking about French Fries. Some of you may be surprised to know that French Fries are not from France. In France they're called Pommes Frites, that is fried potatoes. No self-respecting French chef will offer French Fries on his menu. You get them mostly on the roadside. Nowhere in the world have I eaten fries as delicious as in towns of France like that of Épernay, where they are very popular. They fry the potatoes on the spot and put them into a paper cone after draining off most of the oil and topping them up with thinned down mayonnaise to coat. No ketchup! The French would rather die than serve ketchup with their frites.

The Champagne fields where they grow their grapes are in the town of Reims. From there are brought to Épernay which is about an hour and a half from Paris and also the home of Champagne Houses, where they are converted into that famous drink with lots of bubbles in them. There is one road in Épernay called Rue de Champagne (Rue being Road), which has all the Champagne Houses From Moët et Chandon to the rest, which I hope you'll remember, otherwise Mr.Gomes will come after you'll.

Over the period of a few years, I visited every Champagne House which had free tasting (which is why I went so often). I made friends with a sommelier at Moët, when he visited India for some promotion. We had a long chat again in Épernay in one of their special rooms, when he asked me which my favorite Champagne was and I said Pink. I didn't expect him to actually open a bottle especially for me, which he did and we finished that bottle between the two of us. Not sure whether I walked straight after that, but I managed.

Épernay is in the province of Alsace and Lorraine, the German Quarter of France so a lot of German influence on their food. Lorraine was also known for its Quiche Lorraine, which I thoroughly enjoyed. Of-course, we made Quiche Lorraine in college, but this was at another level altogether.

Mayenne where Lee Ryan lived, was also known as the Garden of France because it had some of the best produce of fruit and vegetables. It was here that the French Kings and Queens had their summer houses where they'd stay in the summer months and have a good time...with or without their wives.

I enjoyed myself in Bordeaux as well, though Burgandy has some of the finest French wines and the heartiest meat stews. Can't forget the experience of eating a delicious rich bœuf bourguignon or beef stew. Burgandy is also known for some of the best food in the country and how can I forget their escargot. It is very, very tasty, but my only problem was the yield was very measly and the standard portion of 6 snails one got in the restaurants...was never enough. I also visited the town of Cognac more to the south of France. Spent a lot of time there... visiting the Cognac Houses, met many interesting people and :-) of-course tasted a lot of Cognac. My favorite was the Remy Martin where I spent a particularly large amount of time. They treated me very well when I mentioned I'd come all the way from India and were surprised at my knowledge of French food and wine - Thank you Mr.Gomes and Mr.Ayre!

Going further down south we came to the city of Marseille, which until recently had one of the largest fish markets. It was an open-air market where the boats came directly up-to the pier and unloaded their catch. It was there on the water-front, that they'd sell their fish. You'd be amazed at the variety of fish you'd get at Marseille; from the cold waters of the Atlantic to the warm waters of the Mediterranean, they had it all. I remember spending hours looking at the fish. The fishermen were quite nice and some would even give me a fish.

The Marseille fish market opened early in the morning at around 4 am, and people from all over France (often driving overnight), would come there to buy their fresh catch of fish for the week... for their restaurants or hotels. It was so busy bustling with activity, that there was no time to ask questions. But

once it was over at about 10 am, it would slow down with the fishermen sitting there with their left-over catch, mending their nets. Then, whatever was left over from their catch, they'd clean and throw into these cauldrons of hot water to make Bouillabaisse. They'd sell this famous soup in wooden bowls with some pieces of fish thrown in. You could sit there on the benches and enjoy the soup with some bread. I went there many a time and found the taste always the same; don't know how they managed it. They used lots of tomatoes, olive oil and garlic and it was one of the most delicious soups I've ever tasted. The Bouillabaisse they serve in hotels outside was not really the same. I feel lucky that I tasted the original.

Now you can't start or stop to describe French Cheese. There are more French cheeses than there are villages in France. Every village had its own type of cheese. I'm not taking about the Camembert or Brie known as the King and queen of French cheese respectively, but those from the small villages...each of whose specialty I enjoyed and they took pride in. On the weekend they'd have cheese markets, where farmers would come and bring their cheese...from hard to soft, for sale. One of the best cheeses I've tasted was called Comté. It was from the Pyrenees in the Eastern part of France on the border with Italy. I also enjoyed the Roquefort which was the blue cheese. The Camembert and Brie are nice, but now branded and available everywhere, and likely to be what anyone coming from France will bring you. I'd much rather prefer the smaller farmhouse cheeses, which were delicious in their own way.

Since bread is so important in the French diet, every village had their own baker whom they would pay, to bake for them.

Another delicacy that I enjoyed in France was frog legs. I'd never eaten them before in my life. I was invited once to a meal by a French girl called Sylvia Houlès and she asked what I'd like to eat. I felt awkward, so she mentioned one or two items which were the usual, which I said I'd tried already. Then she asked whether I'd eaten frog legs and I said that I didn't think I really wanted to eat them, since the very name "cuisses de grenouilles" put me off, but fortunately...she insisted. So we went to this restaurant specializing in frog legs which had an amusing big poster outside - of little froggies running around on crutches. The legs were frightfully expensive, but so delicious that whenever I was invited out in France, if they had frog legs, that's what I wanted to have.

Now I'm asked this question sometimes, which other legs did I sample. My answer...'Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies', but speaking of legs, I must tell you about my visit to the theater which had singing, dancing and mime. Two in particular I went to were - The Moulin Rouge and the Lido, both world famous now. Tiny tables, not meant for eating, just for keeping a glass of wine while the show on stage, went on. The finale was these Can-Can dancers, where this line of girls would come out and dance. The highlight is them kicking their legs high-up in the air. I'm sure a lot of people sprained their necks trying to peer beneath their skirts, but they were too quick. If you haven't heard of the Can-Can dancers, look them up (not their skirts though).

I'd promised you the last time, that I'd tell you another incident that happened with an Indian gentleman in France. Some people and I were invited to my friend Lee Ryan's house for a meal. The gentleman also knew Lee from his Delhi days and told him that he was fasting since it was a Tuesday and that he'd just have some fruit like strawberries and kiwi instead. Lee told him they weren't in season at that time of the year, but promised to make him a nice bowl of fruit. There were 6 of us at the table which he'd laid out nicely with tableware & candlesticks. After the appetizers, he brought in the main course beautifully dished out on plates...two or three at a time. The main course was fish, pan-fried sole with lemon butter sauce, potatoes and carrots looking most appetizing. This gentleman was sitting next to me at the far end of the table from Lee, still eating his fruit when the fish arrived. When he saw my plate of fish & in front of me asked in Hindi - "Yeh kha hai?". I told him it's Fish Meunière. Apparently he liked fish and was now stuck with fruit. He began muttering and continued doing so until Lee asked him what the problem was. Biting his lip, he told Lee, "You know, I can eat fish". "But you told me you don't want any non-veg since it's a Tuesday", said Lee. The gent reflected for a moment & said, "You know in India now, it's already Wednesday, so I can eat. Lee got up, took the last plate he'd just brought for



himself (though not yet begun), went to the kitchen to replate it & brought it for the gent. Lee must have made just 5 portions, which the gent realized, but instead of stopping his host from giving up his own food...happily began eating it himself. There were two French people in the group and it was quite embarrassing. Afterwards, Lee told me in private that the gent was quite a specimen. I felt bad, but in this instance...kept silent.

Another amusing incident I recall was when Lees' neighbor invited the two of us plus an ex-IHM student Aman Dubey (who was visiting briefly) for dinner. Between us, we consumed 7 bottles of wine, the last one being a dessert wine. We were all in high spirits. After dinner, we thanked our hosts, said goodbye and walked across the street to Lee's house. Somehow on our return, our journey seemed far longer than it took us to reach there. When I asked Lee why, he pointed out that while we'd walked to his neighbor's straight, we'd zig-zagged all the way back... from one side of the road to the other.

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For those who asked whether they could come to see me and when, I would not advise you to come now since the virus is rampant and my immunity is very low, as advised by my doctor. Do call. You'll have my number...or message here if you don't, I'll share it.

Take care, until next time when I tell you about some other countries in Europe that I've visited...Bye, bye!

## 18: Travels & Travails Overseas - Viva Espania [11th Apr 2020]

I am writing this to tell you about my experiences in Spain, but at the same time I have very mixed feelings about what is happening in that country just now...and for that matter in Italy as well, 2 of my favourite countries as far as the food scene goes. I hope they get over this pandemic quickly and that the hospitality industry over there does not suffer too much.

I spent most of my time in Spain, in the city of Barcelona, one of the more eclectic eating places that I have come across. Barcelona is a vibrant place and you can spend days rambling around, but I spent most of my time on the main avenue called Las Ramblas, which goes from the heart of the city right up to the waterfront and there is a statue of Christopher Columbus on a tall pedestal reaching out to the sky and pointing towards America, which he thought at that time...was India.

This street is a pedestrian-only area with restaurants and shopping, very touristy. My mum had asked me for just one thing from Spain...a ladies hand fan. I spent a lot of time looking out for it. Since people there spoke very little English, it was difficult to explain what I was looking for. Finally I arrived at a shop which I thought should have it and began explaining in my broken Spanish with some actions and a few words of English. He replied in perfect Hindi, inquiring whether I was looking for a ladies fan. I was stunned. When I looked at him again, he did look Indian, but then so do a lot of Spaniards, especially those who come from the south of Spain. I asked incredulously, "You know Hindi?". He said "Yes, I am a Sindhi." "OMG, what a small world!", I exclaimed. We had a small conversation after that and I was glad that I got the fan, and my mum was happy.

Now coming to the food part, you must have heard of the Tapas Bars. While Madrid is more famous for them and I did visit a few on my short trip there...according to me, Barcelona had some better ones. Those of you who paid attention to my classes in the third year, will know that the word 'tapas', literally means 'a lid'...or covering.

Spain is a warm country, which back in the day sold glasses of sherry in its country-side bars or taverns. The bar keeper or owner would give you a piece of bread to cover the glass to prevent flies from falling in. Slowly, over the years, things changed to pieces of bread with a piece of fish, or meat or vegetable on them and slowly became into something more fancy which we now call Tapas. The Tapas Bars are really something you must experience. People go there more for the food (tapas) than the drinks, which usually include a variety of different sherries. Everyone who goes bar hopping there is actually sampling the best food at each place. 32 items on the menu is a very limited amount, but it is an amazing array which ranges from small containers of artichokes to picked tomatoes.

There was also calves feet, (what we call paya here), they were boiled, the meat taken out, the liquid part converted to a jelly and then the meat put back into the jelly which was molded in small bowls. There was the famous Patatas Bravas, which was pieces of potato deep fried most of the time, tossed with garlic or some other herbs. So tapas has a different meaning to what some of you might think. I've seen some restaurants here in India serve tapas where you need to order your tapas from a list of starters, but the concept is not the same.

In Barcelona, I wanted to eat Paella. I learnt that this dish is not from any one place. It comes from the entire Eastern Coast side and varies from place to place. The Eastern Coast is called the region of Levante which gets its name from the word levant which means to rise (raising agent). and since the sun rises in the east, it is called so. So if you ask me what is Paella made up of, I'll have to tell you it's - rice, olive oil and saffron, plus...anything else you can find. It's a dish not normally made at home, more of an Al Fresco dish (eaten outdoors or literally "in fresh air") when Spaniards would go out for picnic and carry with them available ingredients (fish, shellfish, sausages, green peas, tomatoes, asparagus, peppers, etc) left over from the fridge and over an open fire, in the open air and cook the Paella in a special pan also called the Paella (very similar to our jalebi frying pan. In fact in college it was used for

both purposes). They would throw these ingredients to the pan which already had the rest of the ingredients. I once heard a student very irreverently calling Paella a Spanish Khichdi. While it is indeed a sticky mixture of rice with all kinds of other ingredients, Paella is very different from Khichdi.

When my friend Maria-Luiza Sopena once told me that she'd take me to the best place for Paella in the whole of Spain, I didn't quite believe her. She took me to a small sea-side town half an hour drive from Barcelona called Cijas. We sat at an open air cafe. Maria-Luiza asked me, whether I'd like to have mussels for starters before the Paella came. I thought it'd be a small portion and so I said yes...till I saw this mountain of mussels that arrived and I could barely see her at the other side of the table. Of-course it was mostly shells with very little meat, cooked in white wine with some salt, pepper and garlic and drizzled with olive oil.

Did you know the only true seasoning is salt? A seasoning brings out the natural taste of food, whereas flavoring enhances the flavour of food. So saying 'seasoned with salt and pepper', is not quite correct. For eg. A piece of fish seasoned with salt will bring out the natural taste of fish, while pepper or garlic or olive oil would enhance the natural flavour.

The Spaniards like the Italians, cook their food in a lot of olive oil and so are as well known for their olive oil as the Italians are. Next came the Paella. As I mentioned, Paella was meant to be eaten in an open air place and this was painfully explained to me by the waiter in Spanish who apologized for it not being served in the exact way it was meant to be, but it was delicious. So I enjoyed my first taste of Paella in Spain.

Another dish I was introduced to, or re-introduced to was the Spanish Omelette. What we had or cooked here in India as Spanish Omelette was nothing like what I ate in Spain. What you get here is a flat omelette topped with all kinds of ingredients like peppers and cheese, put under the salamander. This is just an open omelette. Spanish Omelette in Spain is called Frittata de Patatas. Parboiled baby potatoes are sliced into roundels, deep fried and drained of oil. The potatoes were then soaked in seasoned beaten egg for about half an hour or so with a whole lot of fried onions added at the last minute and this whole mixture was then poured into a hot thick heavy-bottomed skillet which had olive oil in it. It was cooked on a gentle slow fire. When the top was almost set, it was turned out onto a large plate and slid gently back onto the skillet to cook the other half. Then it was cut into wedges and served. I also saw it being served as Tapas cut into small pieces. That for you, is the real Spanish Omelette, as made in Spain.

Another dish which you must heard of is Gazpacho, which you would have seen featured on many menus in India as part of the international soup section; but in Spain, Gazpacho is not a soup. It is a cool refreshing drink consumed during the summer months. As I'd mentioned, Spain is a very warm country and like in the North of India where we have Kheera (cucumber) on the roadside as a cooler to re-hydrate you. They, have Gazpacho. Of-course they have many types, ranging from the cucumber and the tomato, to the cold Gazpacho made out of white grapes, which you all have tasted, that came from the south of Spain, which is very close to North Africa. The weather there is very Mediterranean and the Spanish people there are very swarthy and dark complexioned, much like their neighbours. The two regions might have interacted though trade at one time. Even the moorish architecture in the south of Spain is heavily influenced by North African countries like Morocco and Algeria. Back to the Gazpacho, it is never served in a soup cup but in a glass; not as the first course, but often times through the meal. I once had a big argument with one of the F&B service staff in our college about this. He kept insisting that it was a soup to be served in a soup bowl, while I kept telling him it wasn't and to serve it in a glass. He refused and so I said I'm not serving it and took it off the menu. That became a talking point in college for a few days after...

When I went to Spain, everyone asked whether I saw a bull-fight or a bull-run (in Pamplona). I wasn't looking for either. Found a bull-fight too gory an adventure and in any case, it wasn't the season when I went. Didn't have any steak there either, just a lot of seafood, since Spain is known for its coastline.

I hope Spain recovers soon enough, so I can make another trip there to eat some of my favourite foods including the Iberico ham and saucisson. Next time, I'll write about Italy, another country sadly ravaged by this virus.

Wish them a quick recovery. Viva Espania!

Many of you have expressed wanting to read my previous posts...which you can find by scrolling down through all my posts (the 1st one being on 10th Aug 2019) on my FB page.

## 19: Travels & Travails Overseas - Italy, Part 1 [25th Apr 2020]

Hi everyone, good to be back! This time I'm going to tell you about my sojourn in Italy. I have to break it up into 2 parts because there's so much to tell you. This one's about the food and the next time I'll tell you about the culture of Italy, which is so important.

Let's start with the North-West of Italy in the region of Piemonte (Piedmont), at the foot of the Alps on the border with France...and I think Switzerland as well. It's known for its skiing and other alpine sports, but today I'll tell you about the food. Piedmont is most famous for its Arborio rice which grows on the lower slopes of the Italian Alps, and is irrigated by the cold waters of the melting snow. The growing techniques of Arborio were a trade secret among the locals of this region and for many years, were not shared with Italians from other parts of the country. Arborio rice is traditionally used to make Risotto, which is a delicious alternative to Pasta. Some of the best Risotto I ate, was from here. It came with shavings of white truffle another culinary export from this region. Black truffles come from Perigeux (Perigord) in France and Red truffles from Vienna in Austria. A good Risotto as made by an Italian chef, would have lots of butter, but what I ate there also had olive oil in it. By the way, the Arborio rice was not washed (just added as it is), a good white stock & good Italian wine from the region which helped to cook the rice. The trick is to add the wine & the stock in stages, a little at a time...till it is absorbed and then the next lot of wine & stock is added. The constant stirring of this rice is what brings out the starchiness so characteristic of a good Risotto. When the rice is cooked, other ingredients from the region may be added like truffles, prosciutto ham, mushrooms etc. In Mumbai, I've eaten Risotto with seafood, but since Piedmont is far from the coast, seafood is not added into their classic Risotto.

Further down south, are the regions of Tuscany and Lombardy, known as the garden of Italy for their good natural produce which finds its way into their cooking. Also close by, is the region of Bologna which is well known for its sausages.

I must tell you about an incident in Bologna. I was to arrive at the railway station early one evening, but like our trains here...it was delayed and I reached there only late at night. I had no accommodation, since I'd thought I'd find myself a room on arrival. Since it was too late to find a room and the station was deserted with no one around, I thought I'd wait at the station until morning, and then find my way. I sat on one of the benches, found myself some discarded newspapers to keep me warm, and was about to doze off... when an official came up to me and asked in Italian (which I understood) - "What are you doing here?" I explained to him in my broken Italian, that the train had arrived late and so I intended to wait there until the morning. He said, "No, you can't do that. We have to close the railway station." I said "Oh. So what do I do?". "Go" he said. So I left, wondering what to do, when I saw a park on the other side of the street, went in and settled down on a bench. I was about to doze off once more, when I suddenly found a spotlight shining on me. This time, it was a policeman. He asked me in English what I was doing and I explained. He said it would not be safe for me with the burglars around. He wasn't able to recommend a place I could get a room for the night, since it was very far away and a very long walk. "Come with me" he said finally and I accompanied the nice elderly gentleman to the police station across the road. It was the first time I had been taken to a police station by a cop and I wondered what he was going to book me for. Vagrancy?... I thought. Instead, he brought me a hot cup of coffee and said I could buy a snack from the vending machine if I liked, but suggested that I stay there for the rest of the night. That I did, and found accommodation the next day.

Way down south, was the port-city of Naples with the hustle and bustle...of our very own Mohammed Ali Road. I discovered that Naples was the home of Pizza and had the most delicious thin crusts there. None of the deep-pan or stuffed crust...they just stuck to their original. I also heard a story there that the name 'Pizza' originated from the Pita bread which came across from the Middle East. Over time, the Pita bread was topped with local Italian things like Mozzarella cheese, etc. Not sure how far that is true, but makes sense that it could have come to the South of Italy through trade with people. The original Pizza

was Margherita, named after a local noble woman called Donna Margherita who would've been thrilled to know that her name eventually travelled across the world.

I must also tell you the story of a young American sailor who was given shore-leave, while his ship docked at Naples. After a day of exploration in Naples, he returned excitedly to his ship in the evening and told his fellow officers - "Guess what! They have Pizza HERE as well." ...which shows how ignorant some people can be, but I don't blame him. He was American.

Of-course migrant Italian labour who moved to various parts of the world, took with them one food which they knew well and could relate to. Even today, big Pizza companies like Domino's, Pizza Hut and other well known Pizza brands are all American. And the American's did give it their own twist, like deep-crust, stuffed-crust and the like...So I really don't blame that American sailor for thinking that Pizza came from America. There are a lot of Trattorias, Pizzerias, Ristorantes across America, brought by the Italian immigrants and the mafia. I don't think the migrants were as badly off, as our own current migrant workers are at the moment.

Yes, Pizza is from Naples and till date some of the best Pizza that I've tasted, is from Naples. It was made with an enriched dough topped with a smattering of Pizza sauce, basically a tomato ragout and suitable toppings which were almost anything. I've even heard of a Pav Bhaji topping here in India, which Italians would faint if they heard about. During the house-wives cooking course at college, a lady once proudly told me that she made 'Pijja' at home...without an oven. When I asked how, she explained that it was very simple. She first spread some tomato ketchup on a slice of Modern bread. Then she put pyaas, shimla mirch and a lot of Amul cheese on it...and cooked it in a pressure pan. So that's the innovation of 'Pijja.'" I suppose Pizza has seen many such transformations across the world and it is one of those universal snacks which you'll find internationally. It shows that the Italian migrants did reach the far corners of the world.

If you ask a layperson what are the famous dishes of Italy, he's likely to say Pizza & Pasta, though Italian cuisine has much more to it, than that.

Pasta is eaten across Italy, but it is of different types in different regions. In the northern part of Italy which is more industrialized & rich, the pasta is made of fresh dough often with egg incorporated into it. In the south which is more agricultural and less well to do, the pasta is usually more of the dried variety. So I noticed 3 types of pasta in Italy - The dry tubular pasta like the macaroni, spaghetti, farfalle; The flat & shaped pasta like lasagne, fusilli, tagliatelle, fettuccine and... The stuffed pasta (traditionally made from fresh dough) like ravioli, cannelloni, tortellini. But the Italians have a far greater variety of pasta. In fact they proudly say that they have a pasta for every letter of the alphabet - from Amorini and Agnolotti...right upto Ziti.

Pastas are traditionally eaten with a sauce. Just one or two are eaten plain with Olive Oil and garlic. The 3 basic sauces Italians use for their pasta are - the red ragout which is tomato based like the bolognese, the white sauce which has cream and is called besciamella (like the French bechamel) and the green pesto sauce. If you look carefully the 3 colours, red, white and green are also the colours of the Italian flag, though I don't think it has any significance... but a strange coincidence.

The next important food for the Italians, is their fish. Look at the map of Italy if you get the chance and you'll see that only a small part of Italy is merged with Western Europe by land and the rest is all protruding into the sea. From Genoa in the Northwest down south to Sicily and Sardinia and back up the other side is all coastline. So in most of Italy, you are never too far away from the coastline...and seafood plays a very important part in their diet (not so much meat on a regular basis). 5 water bodies with varying temperatures surrounding Italy are - The Adriatic Sea, The Ionian Sea, The Tyrrhenian Sea, The Ligurian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. So you get oily fish & shellfish from the warm waters and large white fish from the cold waters. But I didn't eat too much of the seafood, since back then I was a big meat-eater.

They had 2 types of meats. The processed meats like the sausages (bologna, mortadella), hams (prosciutto), salamis, bacon (pancetta), all of which are also popular toppings for the Pizza. I enjoyed these cold meats which the Italians call Salumi. Often when I didn't have anything to eat I'd buy a piece of bread, some slices of salumi and cheese and enjoy it as a sandwich.

The other kind of meat they have is good fresh meat. I brought back one called Pollo Alla Cacciatora (which means in the hunters style) and introduced it in college. Akin to, yet completely different, from the French Poulet Saute Chasseur. Cacciatora is pan-fried and served with vegetables like carrots and capsicum. While the French version had a base of demi-glace, the Italian one had a base of tomatoes...both equally tasty. Their popular fresh meats were either Veal (Vitello in Italian) or Beef, not so much chicken.

The first dish (course) or Primera Plati, was usually pasta. The Secondi Plati was fish or meat. I couldn't afford eating the fresh meat at meals...so I used to eat the pasta.

The 2 noteworthy deserts I tasted in Italy were Casatta (nothing like the ice-cream we get here) which is slices of chilled sponge cake alternated in layers of sweetened cream and tutti frutti (dried fruit like Angelica) and covered in chocolate. The other dessert I ate was Zabaglione (Zabione) which is the Italian version of Sabayon. Egg yolks and sugar are beaten with white wine like Marsala (from the island of Sicily) till they form a thick tasty mixture. Yes, Tiramisu is a famous Italian dessert which means 'pick me up', (made with mascarpone cheese), but I never had it in Italy.

Speaking of Italian cheese, it is as popular in Italy, as French cheese is in France. There are 3 types:

1) The Grating Cheese which is normally very hard cheese like Parmesan (Parmigiano Reggiano is the correct name) which is chiselled into small bits and then grated & served as an accompaniment (not a topping). Most of time the Parmesan cheese which you & I might have eaten is actually a grana padano which is a cheaper variation of the parmesan (much cheaper) and very often passed off as a Parmesan. It comes from the Parma region also famous for its Prosciutto. I know some people put Parmesan on a cheese board, but that is not correct. You might break your knife trying to cut good Parmesan cheese on a cheese board. Pecorino from the south of Italy is another type of grating cheese. I haven't tasted it, so can't comment on its quality.

2) The second variety is the Table Cheese which includes cheese like Montina, Gorgonzola, Fontina, Castel Magno (One of the finest Italian cheeses that I've eaten). A good cheese platter would consist of some blue cheese and some hard cheeses. Gorgonzola does have a strong odour like other blue cheeses including Roquefort and Stilton, but doesn't smell bad. If it does smell bad, then the cheese is probably bad and needs to be thrown out.

3) The third variety of cheese is Melting Cheese or the Cooking Cheese like Mozzarella, Mascarpone and Ricotta. Ricotta by the way, is an essential ingredient in the making of Ravioli.

Italy doesn't have as many cheeses as France does, but it does have a large number of wines. While you do get some fine wines in Italy like Chianti which are expensive, the wine that I had bucket-loads of...were mostly the run of the mill ones, which I enjoyed. In some places Italian wine was cheaper than a bottle of water, so... :-) it made more sense to drink wine. I used to wobble a lot after that. Luckily, I always found my way back to where I was staying...didn't land up in someone else's hotel or bedroom.

That's it about food in Italy. Have lots to tell you about the Italian culture, but that's next time.

Until then take care, be safe.

I see that a lot of you are commenting these days, possibly because you'll be locked up at home and have nothing else to do... :-) But please do keep the comments coming. I read every single one of them. Thank you for all your likes, shares, comments & calls. Much appreciated!

Bye, bye!

## 20: Travels & Travails Overseas - Italy, Part 2 [9th May 2020]

Hello everybody, as I mentioned last time, this episode is on the history and culture of Italy.

I don't know how many of you are aware that Italian cuisine is known as the mother cuisine of European food. You might have thought it was French, but it was the Italians who taught the French the art of good food, cooking and eating. It was in 1533 that Catherine de Medici from the royal House of Florence was married to King Henry II of France. She was quite young at the time and when she went to the court of Paris, she took with her an entourage of dressmakers, hairstylists, seamstresses and chefs. She already knew the French were not well advanced in these areas, backward in fact. She decided that she was going to change all that when she went to France, so the Italian chefs she took with her could teach the French cooks (notice I'm using chefs and cooks) about good food and fine dining. It was the Italians who taught the French the art of pastry making and ice cream making and introduced certain vegetables into the French court like asparagus and small peas which the French took as their own and we know as *petits pois*. So a lot of the credit has to go to Catherine de Medici. Remember in those days, the provinces of Italy were separate entities. Italy as a country came into being much later.

After Catherine, came her cousin Marie de Medici who was married to King Henry IV of France and continued from where Catherine had left off and developed the cuisine to a much higher standard. So really the credit must go to the Italians for teaching the French and subsequently the rest of Europe the art of fine dining and cooking.

That's history for you! Some of you knowing this must have really paid attention in my class, and those who didn't...now you know.

Each of the great cities of Italy are better than the other. Let's start with Rome, the eternal city. I don't know how to start describing the magnificence of Rome. Everything there is a masterpiece and tells a story. You can spend a lifetime exploring the city and still not have enough. I spent one entire trip exploring Rome and the papal residences, You may know that the pope resides in St.Peters Basilica which is in a country by itself called the Vatican city. Of-course you don't need a passport to go there, but it has its own postage stamps. I sent a lot of my friends postcards and stamps from there, which I hope they have kept.

The second time I landed in Rome, it was without any accommodation. So I went to the tourist office to fix me up with a place to stay, but nothing was available. Every single B&B place was booked. They suggested that I spend the day in Rome and go elsewhere in the evening. I said, "No, I have lots to do in Rome". Another tourist, overhearing my conversation asked if I was looking for a place to stay. Very skeptically, I said Yes. He said that he knew a convent not far from there who keep guests, but don't advertise the fact. Only if you know someone, they will accommodate you. So I walked towards the convent which he directed me to and rang the bell. They answered and I asked about accommodation for three nights. They invited me inside and took money from me in advance. It wasn't much and the good thing was that it included breakfast and dinner, so I was quite happy. The problem was when the nun told me I had to wake up at 6 in the morning for prayers. I said - "6 in the morning! That's when I'm barely going to sleep." "No, no", she said, "You must have dinner at 6.30pm, followed by rosary at 7 and sleep early. All our guests have to attend". I had little choice and said "OK". So my first night in the convent was spent in prayer with nuns, but it was interesting, the food was good, available in large quantities and you could eat as much as you wanted. It was an experience I thought I must share with you'll.

Vatican city is a revelation and if you haven't been there, I'd suggest once this virus clears up...you start making plans to visit. You will be amazed at the art and the sculptures in St.Peters, each one tells a story. Here's one about a statue by Michelangelo. In the foyer of St.Peters Basilica is a sculpture called the Pietà which has Mother Mary holding the lifeless body of Jesus Christ when he was brought down



from the cross. The expression on her face is truly something to admire. The detailing superb. The story is one in modern times, not very long ago when a mad monk suddenly jumped up on the statue on display and started chiseling away at the face of Mother Mary. By the time people grabbed him and pulled him off the statue some damage was done. People around scrambled to get a piece of the marble as a souvenir. While it was restorable, the artists who were going to do the restoration said that it would be so much better, if they had the original marble pieces. So they made an appeal to people - "Please give back the marble chips you'll took, so we can put it back together." The pieces came back one by one...except for one piece on the veil of Mother Mary. If you look carefully you will still see the gap there. The guardians of the Pietà believe that one day that piece too will come back, and so have left it as it is for the time being.

Within the church itself, you can go up to the Sistine Chapel which has a collection of artworks, the most famous being those of Michelangelo which he did on the ceiling. Can't even begin to imagine how many hours he must have spent on his back, doing this painting of the creation of the world. There was one cardinal very opposed to Michelangelo doing this particular painting, for what reason I do not know. He had to fight the cardinal tooth and nail. Michelangelo eventually got to do this painting of-course, and also took his revenge. In one corner, you will see a picture of the devil...and the devil's face...has that cardinal's image in it. It is difficult to take in the whole picture from the bottom and easier to take the reproductions and put them together. People stand for hours in line to view this famous painting of Michelangelo. He's also done a lot of work in the church itself, lot of sculptures, paintings and tapestries are attributed to him. Even if you aren't an art fan, you'll be amazed at his work on display.

I used to enjoy reading Dan Brown's da Vinci Code because it brought back to life many of the places I had visited, while I was in Rome. While that story was pure fiction and rubbish, the settings and locations were real.

The pope sometimes comes out on his balcony that overlooks St.Peter's square, which is actually a circle though it is called a 'square'. Everyday, people wait for him by the thousands, to receive his blessings. Usually, one is either too early or too late, though I managed to get a glimpse at Pope John Paul once, who waved and smiled at everybody. He is presently being fast-tracked into sainthood. So I can say, I saw a saint in my lifetime. Most people visit the church and chapel and forget about the beautifully laid out gardens behind St.Peters Basilica.

Another city I visited was Verona, not far from Genoa. Literature buffs will know of this place as the setting for the Shakespeare novel Romeo and Juliet. The story is of a young couple maybe 15 and 16 years old at that time, each from a rich and powerful family. Romeo was from the House of Montague and Juliet from the House of Capulet...both sworn enemies. The children were forbidden from seeing each other, but Romeo still went every evening to sing for her outside her balcony. She used to make an appearance and talk to him. If you want to know the whole story, you have to read the book (possibly the modern version, since Shakespeare's language is something I never got the first time I read it), but I saw the balcony from where she used to come out and profess her love for him and he would serenade her. A tragic love story unfortunately ending in death for both of them.

Then came the magnificent city of Florence, the only city to rival Rome in its treasure of art and culture. It's work is concentrated in the Uffizi Gallery, which among other treasures contains the statue of David pronounced 'Daa-vid'. Again by Michelangelo, you'll be amazed at the detailing to get this right. He spent hours in the morgue studying the human body. When you walk round the statue which he must have spent years making, you can see the veins and the sinews of the muscles which stand out. Another one of his works was Venus de Milo, which was taken by the French (not sure whether they took it or it was gifted) and is now in the Louvre. If only the roads, walls and churches in Florence could tell their stories, we would know much more of what happened during those times.

I also went to Venice, the city of canals where there a few roads, you have to travel by boat, usually gondolas though they do have motorboats and water-scooters as well now. Venice has 2 main water-bodies or canals - one is the Grand Canal and the other is the Judeca Canal...both merge into the sea.

Venice has a big square called St.Mark's Square where people gather together in the evenings to wile away time. The problem is when it starts to rain, the tide comes in and the whole square is flooded. So they've created a platform of wooden planks at a slight height, so that they can continue whatever they want to, while the water stays below.

The city of Venice also has a bridge called the 'bridge of Sighs'. It connects the courthouse to the jailhouse, where the convicts convicted to death...were kept in the old days. As the convicts crossed the bridge, they would sigh at their fortune or misfortune. That's why the name. (It's actually more of a small link than a bridge).

I did go to a few other cities like Assisi and even Pisa where I saw the Leaning Tower which you wonder when it's going to topple over, but it hasn't in all these centuries. The idea is to take a picture of yourself with your palm outstretched, as if holding up the structure. Everybody does that.

One place I'd like to mention which was of a lot of significance for me and you'll will understand why afterwards, was the Island of Capri - which is a short boat-ride away from Naples. I spent a day there and saw the Blue Grotto, a cave almost under the water. You sit in a tiny fishing boat, lie flat on your back and are sucked into the cave, which has blue stone that shimmers in the sunlight. You can only go in and out, with the tide going in and out...which the boatmen were quite adept at. While there isn't much to see, it is very scenic and beautiful. Some things happened at Capri which I will describe to you in the form of a song. So listen carefully to the words of this song (or you might miss the punchline)... "The Isle of Capri" by Bing Crosby ...which I will never forget... [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOEVeH8\\_W2I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOEVeH8_W2I)

So this was the gist of my trips to Italy over the years. I enjoyed every moment of it. There is lots more I could have told you about, but it would be too long, so I've stuck to the highlights. Read up more about Italy if you like, now while you have the time.

So bye from Italy. Arrivederci!

## 21: Travels & Travails Overseas - Two Nordic Countries [23rd May 2020]

### Finland

You might wonder how this fellow reached Finland. There was a gentleman from Helsinki who came to India to make a film on Indian food and culture. He was introduced to the college by the Government of India Tourist office and the principal in turn, forwarded him to me. He was very articulate and spoke good English, but had to translate everything back to Finnish...for the sake of the film. So I spent the next couple of days with him, showing him the markets, introducing him to people and even did a demonstration for him showing him how to make a basic curry.

Long and short of it, we became good friends and he told me that I should try and visit him in Finland. I shook my head thinking that was it, but kept in touch with him through email. This was back in the '90s and there were no mobile phones then. In one of those mails, I'd mentioned to him that I'd be travelling to London on a holiday. He immediately wrote back saying, why not make a trip to Helsinki. Since I'd planned my visit already, I told him there'd be no time and that my Schengen visa was not valid for Finland, which was not a part of EU at that time. "Don't worry about your visa", he said. "Just fit in 2 or 3 days to come here". He took all my details of passport etc and asked me to go to the Finnish Embassy in London when I was there. "Just tell them who you are". Now I thought that was crazy, but went to the Embassy anyway and after a half hour wait there, lo and behold...my visa was ready. I hadn't realized just how influential my Finnish friend Olli Lamppu, actually was.

I reached Helsinki late in the evening, not knowing what to expect. Olli met me at the airport and took me to his apartment in the city, where we stayed the night. Early the next morning, we drove an hour and a half to his beautiful summer cottage by the lake. I discovered that Finland is a country of more than 5,000 lakes and that every Fin has such a cottage by the lake-side, with forest nearby.

It was my first experience of fishing from a boat. I also tried my hand at rowing, but wasn't very successful and the boat kept going round and round in circles. Luckily, he was there to guide. He caught a few fish...which were our lunch. His house was very quaint and old-fashioned, with out-door toilets which I found a little disconcerting at night, but put it down to yet another experience. He even had a wood-fired stove, which was fueled by wood that he cut himself (must have been hard work) from the adjoining forest.

The flat-topped cast iron stove also channeled heat via a funnel through the entire house, which kept it adequately warm through the night. The charcoal grilled fish was very tasty and he served it along with some boiled potatoes and salad. There was also a dark brown bread, which his wife made once a month out of rye flour in a tub that was never washed. The leftover pieces of dough would serve as a starter for the next batch, and it was rather tasty. Whenever required, he would slice and toast it on the open fire of the stove. So a rustic, simple and delicious meal.

He then introduced me to the Sauna, in typical Finland tradition...although I think some of the other Nordic countries, have it as well. So they had a small room outside the house by the lake, which was heated by a mound of stones that gave out this intense heat which made you sweat profusely and you kept it going...by pouring some water on the stones which generated steam. In this out-house, they had small twigs with which they would lightly beat themselves on their backs to increase the blood-flow and they believed that you got rid of toxins in your body through Sauna. The trick is that once you've had enough of the heat, you need to come out of the sauna and either...jump into the ice cold water of the lake, so you got a sort of thermal shock...or...lie down on the snow if it was cold enough. So it's quite intense.

Now every sauna you sit in, is with no clothes on absolutely. I went to another Sauna in the city at the home of one of Olli's friends where everyone sat together quite un-inhibited... :-) no sniggering or giggling. I got used to it in a little while. BTW, I didn't roll in the snow...though there was some when I visited. Just had a really cold shower. Later, I casually mentioned to Olli that we also have Sauna back in India. After, his initial surprise I revealed :-)...that it was on our local buses and trains that I was speaking about..which he'd seen...sweat, sweat, sweat...till we got out.

We also went on a passenger cruise ship called the Silja Lines from a port called Turku an hour from Helsinki, where people came mainly for gambling. Besides the casino, it had a lot of shops and restaurants on-board. The next morning, it reached Stockholm and the following evening...headed back. At one of the popular buffet restaurants on the boat, I got talking to the Chef and told him that I too was from the same profession. When he asked me to teach him some Indian dishes, I said Ok...but what about the ingredients? While I didn't use their 'curry powder', they organized chilli powder, turmeric, and whole spices like cinnamon, cloves, etc with which I was able to show him a basic curry.

It was very cold when I visited, and luckily Olli had a large stock of jackets, boots, gloves, scarves and hats which he loaned me, without which I'd never have survived in that weather. If I had a picture of myself in those outfits, you wouldn't recognize me. It was so cold there that car had to be started about half an hour before you travelled. From his apartment on the 6th floor, Olli used a device that started his car engine early enough before we entered it, without having to go downstairs.

I discovered that the Fins have a good palate for spices and Olli told me that when I next returned to Finland, he'd arrange for me to cook Indian food on a television show. I learnt that he ran a company called Fine Foods OY, which imported Indian ingredients out of London. I found that while the quality of ingredients was good, it was meant for the western palette, not like our ingredients back home. He asked if I'd export some ingredients to him directly from India. I said I wasn't into such business myself. Instead, I put him in touch with some suppliers, but I don't think they could match the standards expected there and so he had to give up. I did do a breakfast show for Olli on television and he got a lot of inquiries for his business after that, though it was pro bono and purely on the basis of our friendship. I had no intentions of taking it further.

One of the unique restaurants we went to, served only Herring...a very popular fish in Finland. A counter with a buffet full of herring in various forms - smoked, grilled, pickled, in olive oil, tomato sauce, etc. To accompany this, all they had, was chunks of bread and boiled potato.

I must also mention my trip to Rovaniemi - the home of Santa Claus, a short flight North of Helsinki in Lapland. Here, I was introduced to Rudolph, but let me tell you...the reindeer in Lapland are nowhere as cute or cuddly as you see on Christmas cards...depicting Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. They are very big animals almost like mini-trucks and far from docile, can get quite aggressive with antlers that can cause a lot of damage. Like our cows in India, these bulky reindeer walk around very non-challantly on the roads and if you see a group of them, you just stopped and waited till they moved out of 'their road'. I was also introduced to reindeer meat which the Fins call 'Poro', from which they make a stew. It's much tougher than beef and more textured, usually served with herbed & spiced mashed potatoes and berries which are in plenty in Finland...from Lingonberry to Gooseberry.

When I returned to India, my nephew refused to speak with me. I realized that he had seen my pictures with "Santa Claus" (someone dresses up as him through the year) at "his house", with "Rudolph" and of the "Poro" that I ate. "You ate Rudolph!", he said accusingly. I didn't know what to say. He didn't speak with me for a while...until he wanted me to get something for him on my next trip.

On my subsequent visits to Finland, I spent many a weekend with Olli and his wife at their wonderful cottage...off the routine tourist path, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I haven't been there for a while now, though he keeps asking me to visit.

It might surprise you that I didn't use the word Scandinavian. That is because, Finland is not a part of Scandinavia. Scandinavia includes Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland which is what Scandinavian Airlines referred to; while Finland had it's own airline called FinAir...though now you can use a Schengen visa to travel to Finland.

I must tell you of a joke I heard in Lapland. As you might know, being so close to the North Pole, they have almost 6 months of darkness and 6 months of bright sunshine, 24 hours. The joke is, if you ask a Lapp what they do in the winter, they'd probably tell you "We make love"...and then what do you do in the summer? The answer comes - "We check out whom we made love to."

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## Sweden

My good friend and ex-student Monalisa, lives in Sweden. Every-time she heard I was visiting London or Finland, she asked me why I didn't make a trip to Sweden. I kept saying I would, until one day...I did.

At that time she lived in Gothenburg, but suggested that we meet at Stockholm instead. When I arrived in Stockholm, I saw Mona waiting there for me giggling away that I'd finally made it. In tow, was her husband Bjorn, who very graciously played guide and chauffeur. So off we went together all over the place... starting with the majestic and grand lake-side Drottningholm Palace which served as the residence of the royal family. It was a beautiful journey, one way by bus and the other way by boat. We spent quite a long time looking at the artworks there and also by the serene and vast lake. At the back of the palace, were wonderfully laid out gardens and beyond that...the forest where I can only assume the royal family went to indulge in their favourite pastime...hunting. Had a nice cup of tea, in the forest cafe.



Near Drottningholm, is a museum dedicated to Abba, the music group. Since I wasn't a big fan, I wasn't too keen to visit.

In Stockholm, the three of us stayed in a quaint hotel. Bjorn patiently took us around to all the places of interest including the city palace which is the official work area of the royal family and also has their administrative offices.

The food there was simple and rustic and I enjoyed it a lot. One restaurant we visited, had a fish market attached to it which had fresh fish cleaned, cut and placed on ice. You could either take the fish home to cook or have it cooked right there. I especially enjoyed the Gravalax which I'm sure you'll know is fillets of large fish including Salmon, cured in salt, sugar and dill (Dill being our local Suwa). Very tasty, though you can't have too much of it. I had enough to last me until I returned home.



Of-course I had to taste the Swedish meatballs, though nothing to write home about. Large balls of meat with not too much seasoning. I think our koftas taste better, but it was an experience. I'd rather order the fish again, than the meatballs.

So that was my brief visit to Stockholm, and it was soon time to say goodbye and go back to London.

On that trip back, the pilot announced a problem...though it wasn't with the aircraft, but the runway lights at Heathrow airport which weren't working. So we circled for a while and eventually landed at Stanstead Airport, fairly way out from the city...but made it back to London safely.

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Till next time then...

## 22: Travels & Travails Overseas - Two mighty cities at the Crossroads [6th Jun 2020]

### Istanbul

I had never thought of going to Turkey for a holiday, until my friend Owen Pereira suggested we go. I hardly knew anyone there except for Tarun Kalra, with whom I hadn't been in touch for many years. Luckily for me, he was still in Istanbul and very happy to know that I was visiting. At that time he worked with a hotel chain called Fraser International, and offered to make arrangements for our accommodation. So off we went to Istanbul...

We were met by the hotel car at the airport and taken to the hotel.

Istanbul is a very modern city now, but the old city was known as Constantinople. A riddle - "Constantinople is a long word. If you cannot spell it, you are the biggest fool in the world. Can you tell me the answer?"

Tarun had set an itinerary for us to follow and to visit the important parts of the city.

Now Constantinople, was ruled by the Ottoman Empire...one of the most powerful empires in the world at that time. It lay between Europe and Asia situated on the straits of the mighty Bosphorus river. Even today, Istanbul is made of two distinct parts - The western half and the Asian half. It's easy to tell the difference. The Western half is the administrative, clean and organized part; the Asian half has the hustle and bustle of trade...almost like they're not part of the same city.

The first place we visited on the first day itself was the Taksim Square, their equivalent of our India Gate, where everyone gathered together and it is lined with shops and cafes. Small lanes lead out from the Square towards different things to see. One lane leads to the Galata Tower, a conical structure from the top of which you can see the beauty of the city. There were a lot of curio shops on the way, claiming to have antiques for sale, but by then I'd become weary of buying the pretty stuff, knowing that when I reached home, I'd wonder what use it was. So I admired them only from afar.

Along the way there were these ice-cream vendors. You must see a Turkish Ice-cream vendor at work. It's magical for both children and for adults to watch this ice-cream suddenly disappear and then reappear. The child in me enjoyed it. We did stop for Turkish coffee at one of the cafes, but I didn't care much for it at all.

Over the days that followed, we visited many tourist sites - The Blue Mosque with blue mosaic tiling and blue lighting, was truly grand. It is still a very active mosque where one has to be very careful in maintaining the decorum. No western clothes like shorts allowed, though they'd give you a sarong to wear around your waist...so you went in properly covered. The Topkapi Palace Museum used to be a holy place at one time. Then there was the Basilica Cistern, a 6th Century water storage system for the city. The Grand palace was right on the banks of the Bosphorus river and is more of a museum now. The masterpiece I most remember, was this beautiful crystal staircase in the palace which you could only see from a distance, since weren't allowed to walk on it or even click photos.



Another tourist site which was originally a mosque, then a church and now a museum, is called the Hagia Sophia and you could spend almost a day inside there. One night we did a river cruise on the Bosphorus, where a lot of monuments were pointed out to us on either bank, but I didn't know much about them, so I can't mention each one of them. The cruise itself was good and we spent a leisurely evening on it.

In the old city was the Grand Bazaar, a covered market, much like our own Crawford market, though much, much, bigger. Listed as one of the most visited markets in the world, you could buy everything there - from a pin to an elephant. It had several entrances and one can really get lost over there. Right next door was the spice market, where you could get anything from peri-peri to garam masala.

A day's drive from Istanbul is the city of Cappadocia. Not only must you visit it, but not miss the sights on the way. While you can take a flight, it's not the same as taking in the journey by bus. We started out at night and in the morning they woke us up exclaiming - "Look, Look!" I looked out of the window and wondered how the sky in the horizon had turned pinkish-orange in colour. When I looked more closely however, I realized that it was in fact a sea of flamingos nesting or resting on the flat-lands. A truly amazing sight to see. Of-course we weren't allowed to go too close, lest we disturb them.



Now if you know flamingos, you know that they rest...standing on one leg, which reminds me of a story. A man once brought home a flamingo and asked his cook to cook it for him. As the cook began his work, his friend came over and asked him for a piece to eat. The cook declined saying it was for his master. The friend kept insisting till very grudgingly the cook gave him one leg. When the master sat down to eat, he noticed the missing leg and asked the cook. The cook very nonchalantly told him that the bird had only one leg. When the master took his cook to the place where the flamingos were, much to the relief of the cook...they saw that 'all the flamingos indeed had only one leg'. As the clever master shooed away the birds, they promptly put the other leg down. "look" said the master, "I told you there were two legs." The cook very matter of fact said to the master - "But did you say shoo, shoo to that bird before you shot it?" So cooks are smart...which you must know by now.

Cappadocia is a very old city full of wonderful things to see. We visited a monastery where we saw a dance of the Dervish, where men twirl round and round at a dizzying speed. We also visited a local winery though it wasn't very good. I was also introduced to Turkish Delight, a kind of jujube. Too sweet for my liking, though I did carry some back home. But the highlight of our trip to Cappadocia, was a ride in a hot air balloon at sunrise. The view was fascinating and though it was early morning, :- ) the glass of champagne that we had up there, also helped. On our return from Cappadocia, we passed the city of Ankara, which is the capital of Turkey...though we were in too much of a rush to get back and didn't spend time there.

There was another city Derinkuyu, not active now...mainly shown to tourists. It is subterranean...all underground two hundred feet, below...with chapels, air-vents and what have you.

We also stopped by at an archeological site which had these volcanic eruptions of different shapes and sizes. Our last stop on the way back, was a visit to a local pottery where they recreated these artifacts out of clay in front of you. They also invited you to try your hand at shaping pots on the wheel, besides showing you how the glazing was finally completed.



So that was my one and only trip to Turkey. I enjoyed the street food especially their Shish kebabs and their other tasty dry grills each with their own mixture of spices. Their fish was also nice especially their very popular and very tasty 'Hamour' which I think you also get in the Middle East...though I'm not quite sure.

But how could I forget the Baklava. I've eaten Baklava in different parts of the world including India, but they were nothing compared to the Baklava I ate in Turkey. Mouthwatering, flaky, sugary and nutty...all rolled into one, to make this delicious confection.

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## Dubai

Another city at the crossroad of east and west, a more modern one, is the city of Dubai, which I visited on several occasions, but mostly on work to visit Gulfood. Dubai doesn't have much to offer as far as the sights go, except for tall buildings and...very tall buildings, like the Burj Khalifa (named after the ruler of Abu Dhabi, who gave them the money to complete the tower) and the Burj Al Arab. I wasn't much interested in them or in shopping either, and so I concentrated mainly on eating well and first asked to be taken to a local eatery for local food.

My friend Basil Dias, took me to a restaurant called Automatic. Yeah you heard right, Automatic. When you went in, you were first given a basket of raw vegetables - from cobs of lettuce to whole tomatoes and even whole brinjals. I asked Basil, "What is this?" He said - "Eat what you can and the rest, they'll take away." That was the Salata or salad which you cut and ate at the beginning of the meal. He then ordered a platter of kebabs which included a range like Shish, Kifteh, Kibbeh, Lamb Chops and such. Very tasty, mostly grilled except for the Kifteh and Kibbeh which were seasoned meat balls...absolutely delicious. Each time I went back to Dubai, which was every two years or so...I insisted on visiting Automatic, often with someone from Dubai who had never heard of the place...and ordered the kebab platter. There are several branches of this restaurant across Dubai. Next time you visit, make sure to visit the one closest to you. You won't be disappointed...just order the kebab platter.

Basil also took me to a restaurant at the Radisson Hotel near the airport called the "Fish Market". People here go to a counter with fish on ice behind which there are tanks of live fish. So you choose your fish and pick what you want to eat. The waiter comes with you, takes what you've chosen and asks you how you'd like it...stir fried, in Chinese sauce or whatever else...and also whether you'd like it with rice, bread, grilled vegetables, noodles and so on. The waiter would then take it to the cook who would prepare it in front of you at a live counter. All the dishes might have been priced individually and how Basil paid for the meal...I'll have to check with him. Basil, are you listening?



The third place I'd recommend eating at in Dubai, is a restaurant at the Four Seasons called Coya which served traditional Peruvian food, which I always wanted to eat. I'd predicted that the next big thing to hit the international market, was going to be Peruvian food. So I had to put my money where my mouth is and taste the food. Christopher Francis who many of you may remember from the '93-'94 batch, arranged for us to go there. The food was very good, one of the best I've had...I'd say not just in Dubai, but across the world.



So these three, Coya, Automatic and the Fish Market were my best experiences of food in Dubai. Of course there were many more, but too many to describe over here.

That was the second Arab state I visited. There were others, but either I was there for too short a time or nothing worth writing about.

So till we meet again...

P.S : The Answer to the riddle above is :- ) The spelling is "i...t..., it". How many of you got it right?

## 23: Travels & Travails Overseas - Konnichiwa Japan [20th Jun 2020]

I'd always wanted to visit Japan, but never had the opportunity... :-)) or the money to do so, until we had a Japanese food festival in the college along with a company called Maido, India, which was brought into Mumbai by Mr. Harry Chang. It was quite a successful festival which went on for almost 3 years and was looked forward to, by a lot of people including the Japanese consular staff. As part of our agreement with Maido, we were invited to go to Japan to conduct an Indian food festival there. So Supriya Agarwal, a student (who'd won a sushi-making competition held by Maido), Anuj Jodhani the event coordinator and I went to Tokyo.

We arrived there one morning after a long journey via Singapore, and stayed at the Presso Inn. It was a modern contemporary hotel, very functional and basic, but with all the elements of a good accommodation. The next morning we went with Harry Chang and another Chef Shinya Saito for a guided tour to the fish market. (We'd met both gentlemen in Mumbai at the festival).



Now when someone says fish market, my nose normally curls up because of the smells and odours I associate with it over the years. Believe you me, when I tell you that when we went into this fish market, there was no smell or odour you could detect. In fact if you went there blindfolded, you'd never know you were in a fish market. This was the Tsukiji (pronounced Sukiji) Market, probably one of the largest fish markets in the world, around 6 or 7 storeys high. One floor was dedicated only for tuna and it was amazing to see the frozen fish being brought out to cut. Normally, only genuine buyers were allowed there, but we had special permission and got a first-hand view of how they prep the fish before it goes out.

Later, we went to a market called Kappa Bashi which specialized only in kitchen equipment. It was spread over a huge area and you could wander from street to street & from shop to shop. I was amazed at the range of equipment available there from small piping bags to large machinery...it was all there. I

could have spent hours or maybe days there wandering around, but then there was so much more to do and we had to move on.

The next day was the day of the Indian food festival. It was a 1-day affair, where we did a demo followed by a buffet. People invited included the press, Indian consular officials, some people from high society and of-course the event sponsors. We made for them a range of all kinds of Indian snacks, street food including bhel puri, pani puri, batata puri, ragda pattice and many more. I'd managed to carry with me a big dabba of pani-puri puris and luckily most of them reached intact. The food was appreciated by everyone. One gentleman from one of the sponsoring companies asked me if we could use his product in any of the dishes. When I asked him what it was, he said Sake. While I pondered where to use sake in Indian food, he suggested in the pani-puri water. Now I thought I'd heard it all, but pani-puri and sake was new then, so I said Ok let's try it. As you can imagine, it was a big hit and they kept asking for more...so much so that he wanted to start a pani-puri kiosk in Tokyo. I did send him the contact of a Mumbai pani-puri vendor and he did actually go ahead with that kiosk, which I believe did quite well.

I'd also got in touch with a student of ours from our college Navin Bhatia (from the '95 batch) who lived and worked in Tokyo and was very fondly called 'baniya'. I hope he doesn't mind me letting out this nickname, but as I said, he was very "fondly" called so. He'd done an MBA in finance and went on to join the Hong Kong Bank there at a good position. We spent a day with him and he graciously invited us to his home and introduced us to his equally gracious Chinese wife and their two very Indian-looking children.

Navin first took us to a street called Harajuku. A very strange place full of young people just walking up and down the street with very heavily made-up faces and strange attire almost like a fancy dress. The men, I think they were men... pulled along strollers (suitcases) which I was told were empty, while the women carried handbags around their shoulders. They did nothing else, but walk up and down. They didn't like you taking pictures of them, but some surreptitiously did click. It was quite a sight to see them.

Navin then took us to the parks where the cherry blossom trees were featured, but at that time of the year there were not too many of them. In the park, they had very neatly laid out impressive Japanese gardens. They also had an area where Japanese couples who'd just got married that day would come to click their photographs. It was nice to see them in all their finery... and they, :- ) didn't mind their pictures being taken at all.

I believe the Japanese eat their meals very early, so in the evening Navin took us to a Japanese Sushi bar. Now that was something I'd seen in the college since they'd specially flown in and installed conveyor belts for our Japanese food festivals in Mumbai. A very novel concept back then. Customers sat around at the table-counter around the conveyor belt while chefs prepared the fresh sushi inside the contraption. The way it worked was that the chefs would make different types of sushi and place each type in a different colour-coded plate. Plates of each colour were priced differently. For example, a pink plate would have salmon, while a green one something like asparagus and so on. You kept all the plates you ate in, right next to you. When you had finished eating, the waiter would come up and count the total number of plates of each colour and total up your bill accordingly.



Another interesting restaurant we went to, was a Japanese Teppanyaki. The Chef cooked live in front of many his guests. He had all kinds of tricks up his sleeve, like tossing an egg up above his head and catching it as it came down on the edge of his knife thus breaking the egg onto a hot plate and cooking it right there. This was Chef Iwasaki, who we'd met back in Mumbai and so he was very happy to see us in Tokyo. We spent a nice evening with him. I think you paid a fixed amount for the entire meal and it was definitely the showmanship that caught your eye and made it so interesting. That meal got over quite late and though the hotel wasn't too far of a walk away, on the way back...I noticed something fascinating about the Japanese. At the traffic signal, cars actually stopped at the red lights even though there wasn't a soul in sight. They patiently waited until the lights turned green, before they moved on. The Japanese are so disciplined as a culture. It is said that you can set your watch by the arrival and departure of the trains there...and it was true.

My stay in Japan was very interesting, full of modern technology mixed with ancient culture and history. Though it is a very expensive country, I would love to go back again though I once again...don't know if I'll ever get the opportunity... :-) or the money.

So until we speak again, I'll say Sayonara and Arrigato!

## 24: Travels & Travails Overseas - The Land Down Under [4th Jul 2020]

Ever since I was very little, as I looked at the globe and where Australia was on it, I wondered how people there used to walk. Upside Down??? It didn't make sense to me, but after the geography classes in school that was all sorted out...and I know how things work over there.

Australia has been a land of migrants for generations. I did get an opportunity many years ago (in the 70's) to migrate there. That's the time when many people were moving to Australia, but I rejected the idea. Did I regret it? Never! Not for a moment! I had a good life after that.

I eventually got a chance to go to Australia and see what I probably may have missed and realized that I hadn't missed much. My younger sister migrated to Australia in the early 2000's and so the opportunity to go there, came up soon after. Most of my trips to Australia were not for work, but to visit my family - my sister Joanne, my brother-in-law Ramesh and my two nephews Tushar and Vishal. I spent many an enjoyable trip there over the years with them and with friends.

Actually my first trip to Australia was even before that. I was invited by TAFE (Technical & Further Education) to do a series of talks, demos and press meets at different institutes of theirs across the state of Queensland. I was based in Brisbane, but also went to the Gold Coast, Townsville and Cairns where I got to see the Great Barrier Reef from a glass-bottomed boat.

A few things struck me about Australia. One was the friendliness of the easy-going people there, whose company I very much enjoyed. The other, was that quite a few of my students (most of them doing well for themselves) had migrated there and I got a chance to catch up with many, many of them over my trips. Of-course they all offered to take me out and I said yes, but not for Indian meals. I wanted to experience the true Australian food, until I realized that there was no Australian food as such, but the food which was great there...was that of the migrants like the Japanese, Turks, Indians, Greeks, Chinese, all of whom fortunately retained their own culture and food. In Australia, you won't find a Bengali cooking Chinese food. He will cook his own food and be proud of it...so It's very difficult to describe "Australian food".

I had some great food in Australia and enjoyed eating out (as is the culture there) with my nephews and of-course many good meals at home there as well. While my sister lived in Melbourne, I did manage to travel to a few other cities as well, like Brisbane, Adelaide, Sydney, Cairns...and at each place I'd find someone I knew, so I had sort of local guides to show me around everywhere. Normally, one of my nephews would accompany me.

At Sydney, I met with a whole bunch of ex-students mainly from the '94 batch, if you recollect Devesh Sinha, Porus Govekar, Kiran Saldanha and the likes. They took me to a Brazilian restaurant called Braza and that cuisine was new to me. It had some spit-roasted barbecue where the entire skewer of the spit was brought to your table, with meat shards sliced off...much like Shawarma. There were a variety of meats from lamb to chicken to pork and what have you. I enjoyed that meal, but what I enjoyed even more was the Brazilian Samba dancers. They were something else...something to write home about. They really knew how to wriggle, or should I say wiggle! My nephew who was about 17 at the time, was very taken up with them and even got up to shake a leg...while Kiran encouragingly shouted out to him...wiggle man, wiggle your bottom. Of-course my nephew wasn't going to do all that, but I think he quite enjoyed himself.



While in Sydney, I enjoyed a cruise on Kiran Saldanha's boat. We did a short trip around Darling Harbour and got different views of the harbour bridge. We followed up with a good lunch at Vikrant Kapoor's well known and popular restaurant Zaffran. Thank you Kiran and Vikrant!





One of the highlights of my trip to Sydney was a meet-up with my ex-professor Timmy Ayre who lives there. We were very happy to see each other and he even cooked a roast meal with all the accompaniments like roast gravy, potatoes and vegetables. Mr. Ayre was quite old and frail at that time and soon after, he passed away. I will cherish those moments I spent at his house. I must thank his son Jim who made this happen.



Another restaurant I must tell you about, was on the outskirts of Adelaide with Ashrat Mehta, who took me to this small town called Hansdorf in the middle of the Barossa Valley of South Australia's wine district. This was also called German town and was well known for its German food. We went down a road filled with German curio shops and restaurants. Among them was one restaurant called the Hansdorf Inn at which we ate. They brought you platters of German delicacies like meats, sausages, chops, fried onions and gravy which you could either have with mashed potatoes or french fries. No prizes for guessing what I choose. Your stomach would be full just looking at that platter and through I struggled with it at a point, I eventually did finish it all very manfully and enjoyed every minute of it. Thank you Ashrat! That was one great meal that I had with you! Looking forward to a few more...



I must tell you about a Chinese restaurant concept called Yum Cha, which served a variety of unlimited starters that they brought round to the tables. If you wanted to repeat something, you'd point out to it and they'd bring it to you. While the food was Chinese, I think the concept is Australian.

I also visited other ethnic restaurants with cuisines like Turkish, Lebanese and many others that I enjoyed, but where I enjoyed ethnic food the most, was at the Melbourne night market. This place as the name suggests, comes to life only in the night and it has stalls with all kinds of things from handicrafts to food. One area had exclusively street food from a variety of different cultures. Close by was the Victoria market, a huge covered market which had foods from fresh fruit & vegetables to meats & fish and cheese from different parts of the world. I spent an enjoyable and interesting afternoon wandering about the place.

All in all, it was the migrant food in Australia that was a revelation and because of my family being there, I could say it is almost a second home to me.

Many people would ask if I had kangaroo meat and crocodile meat which are very popular there. No, I didn't. I didn't have the liking for them and so I didn't even try them. Crocodile meat I believe, is very fishy while Kangaroo meat is gamey and has strong odours. The Kangaroo is one of their favourite animals, so I was wondering how the Australian's would eat Kangaroo which they are so fond of. Let me tell you, Kangaroos are quite ferocious if you catch them on a wrong day. A friend of mine there, was once watching them play in a park at quite a distance, until one of them came bounding towards him. My friend thought it was trying to be friendly, until it came close and he realized that it was not. So he scampered back into his car just in time, while the Kangaroo leapt over the fence and gave one hard kick to his vehicle. Seeing what a dent that kick made in his car, he realized he was lucky that he didn't get the end of the kick himself and scooted off immediately. So they can be rather nasty and ferocious. I did go to a petting zoo though with Ashrat where you could play with these baby marsupials, but I just wasn't in the mood.

So I'll say farewell from Australia and hope to catch you again...sometime soon.

## 25: Travels & Travails Overseas - Here and There... [18th Jul 2020]

Hello everybody, this week I thought I'd concentrate on a few places which I visited but very briefly, so I decided to join them all into one episode.

### New Zealand

I went to New Zealand several times because my sister lived there first, before she moved to Australia and I was always accompanied by my mother who wanted to see her grandsons. New Zealand is a beautiful country. With its greenery and open spaces, it is something else. I spent most of my time in Auckland and did a bit of sightseeing as well in the two islands that New Zealand is made up of. In the North of the North islands, we went to the Bay of Islands where we did some exciting jet skiing. In the South of the South islands, we went to Milford Sound which is a vast lake at the bottom end of the country.

New Zealand is also very well known for its bungee jumping and I believe the sport was invented in Arrowtown where I did a virtual bungee jump. I'm sure it was not the actual thing, but was close enough to give me a scare. Nikhil Yadav an ex-student used to work at a resort where they also had downhill go-karting. I did try it out but the karts were not mechanized. You just had to go down the slope and hopefully not crash anywhere. I must have looked quite ridiculous sitting in that kart, being the only adult to try it out. My nephews who were 8 and 10 years old at that time wanted to have a go at it, but would have reached the bottom of the slope on their own and it was quite a climb back to the top.

They have a big coffee culture in New Zealand and I visited the cafes and enjoyed their pies and quiches. Their seafood, especially their shellfish is very well known and I did try a lot of it out, though a large part of our eating there was with the family at home. Met a lot of ex-students there including Anand Erikson, Henrietta D'souza, Cathy Alvares, Sukumar Goswami and Abhay Khole. They'd organized a get together one day where I met up with them all. Once my sister moved to Australia, that is when I began my travels Down Under.

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### Thailand

Now I know all your eyebrows must be raised wanting to know what I did over there. I don't know how else to put it, but I had a good time. Bangkok is one of the most aptly named cities in the world (wink, wink) and it was fun to spend time there. I visited their floating market where all the vendors come up to you in their boats, which are like canoes so you can buy what they sell. I did a lot of sightseeing of temples and many variations of the Buddha from the sleeping Buddha to the sitting Buddha to the smiling Buddha...a lot of the sights on the Chao Phraya river.

One of my visits to Thailand was with my friend Olli Lamppu who's business included the import of Thai and Chinese ingredients. So for him it was more of a business trip and he asked me whether I'd like to join him. One day he suggested a massage and I said why not. To my disappointment, it was a foot massage...which was nothing great. I could spend an entire episode on massages, but maybe another time. Also went to Phuket where they had live shows, mostly cabaret style dance performances. I also went to a show of another kind which I can't describe...this being a public platform, but you get my drift. Phuket was nice with its many beaches. I also had the chance to go to Langkawi, a resort a little away from Bangkok and also enjoyed a few days in Krabi.

Although I did go to Bangkok 5 or 6 times, it was not always for the reasons you are thinking. I did a lot of transiting like from the cruise-liner back to Bangkok for the flight. So not always naughty times. A good holiday destination and if you get something extra thrown in, why not.

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## Sikkim

Sikkim is a serene and peaceful place. My trip there began with a flight from Mumbai to Kolkata and Kolkata to Bagdogra; from where we took a long road trip on bad roads under construction...all the way to Pelling, stopping at many times along the journey. I almost had to sneak into Sikkim since I was with my nephew Tushar who being a foreigner, required a permit which we didn't know about or have. Fortunately he looks very Indian and so we got in without too many questions. Spent a few days in Pelling enjoying their local food, particularly their momos. Very interesting, simple and healthy.

Came down the mountains from Pelling to Gangtok, picturesque scenery and you can see the Himalayas very clearly and on a clear night you could see the moon hanging in the sky in front of you. On the way back, we stopped at Kalimpong. Wanted to go to Bhutan which was on the way but they were quite strict about who was coming in and going out. I didn't think we would get away, the way we did in Sikkim.

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## Singapore

Every time I went to New Zealand and Australia, it was via Singapore. While I did go to the Sentosa Island and the Jurong Bird Park, I visited Singapore more as a transit country. One could go to Sentosa by the cable car which descends from a nearby mountain. I was not willing to try that since a few weeks earlier the cable car had got stuck, so I went by the ferry instead.

It was interesting to see these places, but more for kids than anyone else. I spent more time at the airport waiting for connecting flights than actually travelling in the country. Did see a few temples and the local prison, because from the airport if you got a long enough stopover, they'd organize a day trip for you.

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## China

Another place I visited was China. Shanghai to be more precise. I was doing a cruise from Shanghai back to Shanghai with a stop in Fukuoka, Japan and another place in Korea. So I didn't really see much of China, but one incident stayed with me. When I reached Shanghai, the port agent asked me for my visa for Japan and Korea. I said no one told me about getting these visas. He said, "Then you can't go." When I asked why, he explained that the ship would be docking in those two countries for which I needed a visa. Anyway, there was a pow-wow between the ship purser and the authorities. Finally it was decided that I could go but couldn't get off. I had to stay on-board all the time. If I got off, there'd be trouble for the ship, not so much for me. I agreed, though in once instance in Korea, I did sneak out and make a trip onto the shore. Managed to taste the local Kimchi which was their own version, different from the Korean other Kimchi. They also had a Korean barbeque where they bring a hot fire to a pit built in the center of the table and they serve you slivers of meat which you had to barbeque on skewers and eat with an array of dipping sauces.

So these are the places I visited briefly which I thought I'd club together. Unfortunately, no pictures. So take care until next time and do keep reading. Bye for now...

## 26: Travels & Travails Overseas - Inverness Revisited and The Last Hurrah! [2nd Aug 2020]

### Inverness Revisited

So this week I'm taking you back to Inverness in Scotland where as I'd mentioned, I'd worked very briefly with my old boss from the Middle East Ken Glass. Elliot, his wife Francine and I decided to make a holiday of it and flew down from London directly to Inverness.

At the airport, we were met by Saurav Kumar one of my star Chefs (if I can call him that) who was in the Chef Comp Team for the 2000 batch and won many medals for the college and for himself. There he was jumping up and down waving his hands at us wildly, as if we wouldn't recognize him.



Our goal was two-fold. One, to visit my old place of work The Old Foyers Bay House and second, to do a whisky trail. We first went to Foyers Bay a small hamlet on the banks of the Loch Ness which I'd spoken about in a previous episode. The Old Foyers Bay House still looked the same except that they'd added a conservatory in which they'd begun to serve breakfast. As you will see in the picture, the conservatory stands out like a sore thumb from the old architecture of the rest of the Inn. It brought back great memories as I described to Elliot and Francine, of how I'd enjoyed my time there.



Saurav took the next day off from work and we went on a whisky trail to several distilleries including Talisker, Cardhu, Glenlivet and Aberlour...some of the names you will recognize from the F&B class. Each one had a tour explaining how the whisky was made. Since the process was the same, we visited just one or two. Many had a museum with artifacts which were quite interesting and informative. Although I'm an F&B person, there were a lot of things about whisky which I didn't know of because I'm not a whisky drinker generally. As you can imagine there was a lot of tasting, if not part of the tour, even otherwise. We just had to keep an eye on Saurav of-course, since he'd agreed to be the designated driver for our tour. We even got to see the Walkers shortbread factory and bought shortbread from there. Next door was the Johnny Walker distillery, but it was a bit too late to go inside. An exciting day for us...



Since it was only a three day trip, we made the most of it and the following day had to head back to London when we had an incident I must tell you about. Saurav had to work that day and asked whether it

would be alright if he dropped us off early to the airport. We said fine and having nothing else to do went early to the airport checked-in, sat down and began chatting...not realizing how much time had passed. I was expecting an announcement to warn us, but it happened to be a silent airport and a very small one at that. When we felt it was time, we began moving but didn't realize how much time would be spent going through security where everything from shoes to belts were being checked through the scanner that day. By the time we actually reached the gate, it'd closed. We were shocked, even more so to see our aircraft right in front of us with people still walking towards it, but the authorities said we were late and couldn't board that flight. With no other option, we returned to the airport lobby. Luckily there was another flight later that night, but we had to buy new tickets. With a few hours to wait, this time we were most alert and with one eye constantly on the clock, made it in time. So a very expensive trip, which in retrospect Elliot and I look back and laugh at sometimes.



On our arrival in London, one of our students Kuldeep Singh had agreed to pick us up from Gatwick airport. Now that we were late and he couldn't fetch us later, he offered to send his wife instead. His poor wife graciously agreed though unfortunately we didn't have her phone number and so we and she only knew what Kuldeep had told us. It was a royal mess trying to find her at the airport and she must

have been equally frustrated, but eventually we located each other and drove back to Redhill where Kuldeep's restaurant was and had an enjoyable meal there after which he drove us back to London.

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## **The Last Hurrah!**

This episode is about my last overseas trip. Many of you know by now that I've not been in the best of health and can't travel any-more...but when I went to Europe for the last time, I didn't know that I was not well, so I thoroughly enjoyed myself. In retrospect, it happened to be my last trip, so..."The last Hurrah!"

This was a road trip was with my friends Elliot & Francine and their daughter Eleanor. We left from London via Dover and landed first in Belgium in the town of Dunkirk. Some of you may have heard of Dunkirk because of the world war...of which there are many remnants and memorabilia. After a few hours in Dunkirk, we drove to a very historic town called Eep spelt Ypres. Strange, but must be the Belgian way of saying it. Ypres was very interesting with a lot of world war history because the Germans were advancing and people were running away from Europe to England...a mass evacuation and it had a lot of stories to tell. Once a week they have a memorial service for the people who gave their lives during that evacuation. Luckily I was there for this event. I have a picture of a plaque maybe 10 feet tall, which you will see. When I looked closely I found them all to be Indian names. They told me this was in memory of the Indian soldiers who fought in the war and died in the battle of Ypres which the Germans fought with the allied forces.





From Ypres, we drove to Luxembourg and met Saurabh Gairola. Saurabh used to run a nice small and successful Indian restaurant there called 'Gairolaz' known for its high quality food. Unfortunately, he had to eventually sell it off and doesn't have it in his possession any-more. Saurabh also played guide to us and we took two cars to accommodate everyone. The first place he took us to see was Schengen (as in the visa), which we all know about. The actual signing of the treaty was done on a big boat called the Marie Astrid (named after an Austrian Princess) on the river Moselle which runs through France, Germany and Luxembourg. It is on the border of these 3 countries that the treaty was signed with Luxembourg representing the Benelux Countries of Belgium, Netherlands and of course Luxembourg. There are two monuments to the Schengen treaty and also a museum which has a lot of titbits about Schengen and the visas.



From there we drove through Germany to a German town called Trieste where we had a good wholesome meal of German sausages and mashed potato at a covered roadside stall. We then returned to Luxembourg which is a very small country. It was said that Luxembourg is so small that while driving through it, you had to change the film in your camera well in advance or you'd miss it. It has a very interesting history, a strong economy and is the headquarters of many a large corporation. After a few nights there, we said bye to Saurabh and drove onward to the French city of Metz where we spent the day at many sites including a Cathedral.

Next we drove to Switzerland where I was to visit the Les Roches School in Montana nestled high above in the Swiss Alps. Montana could be reached via a picturesque road from Geneva. The other option was to take the funicular (a transport system which uses cable cars). It so happened that on that day, the school was celebrating their annual day, so I was invited to join it and got the shock of my life when they asked me to say a few words...for which I was not at all prepared. Anyway, I muttered something and they clapped hands, so I suppose it was OK...or were they just being polite?



Right next to the Les Roches School, there was a small Auberge (French word for a small inn) which had a few rooms and a dining area run by a husband and wife who made sure everyone was happy and comfortable. Here we ate snails and the famous cheese fondue which were both memorable, although sometimes I feel that the snails were too small a portion size (batches of six) since you hardly get any meat out of them and they're quite expensive, but worth a try as an experience. The fondue was of two types and we tasted both on subsequent days. The first was the popular cheese fondue which had a variety of alpine cheeses and Swiss wine which were melting away in the fondue pot. Chunks of bread had to be dipped into the cheese and swirled, so that it covered the entire chunk of bread. The next day which was our last in Montana, we tasted the fondue Bourguignonne which had the fondue pot with hot oil and slivers of meat had to be cooked in the oil and eaten with accompanying sauces....Delicious!!!



From there we went to some of the Swiss vineyards on the mountainsides. Montana is a very picturesque local and the scenery and views from the mountain tops is awesome. You are up in the clouds and you can see the clouds below you. It is so wonderful that you don't want to leave that place, but at some point, you have to.

The next day, we were going back to London, so we drove down the mountain to reach the ferry in time. We didn't account for a very heavy rain-storm which slowed us down completely. Coming down a mountain in bad weather, it not the safest thing you want to do. We came down slowly as a result of which we missed the ferry. I think I've made it a habit of missing deadlines. First the aircraft and now the ferry. Luckily the tickets to the ferry were transferable to the next one. With nothing to see at the ferry depot we just listened to music until it was time to drive onto the ferry.

So that was my last trip and soon after I learnt that I would not be able to travel any-more...so really the last hurrah as far as travel goes. I'm otherwise OK, not bed-ridden thankfully, but glad I made that trip.

I will continue to post because I'm fit enough to do that. But I have lots to tell you about going 'back to college days' so please keep reading, there is more to come.

## 27: Back to College, Part 1 [15th Aug 2020]

Enough of globe trotting now. Thought we'd go back to my college days when I was a student.

I'd told you the story of how I joined the college so I won't go over that again; but when I joined college, I had the impression that I was over and done with school days and now my time for freedom had come. I would now have a good time...watch movies, do this, that and the other. Imagine my shock when I joined catering college and found that it was as bad, if not worse than going to school. The discipline, grooming, attendance, punctuality was far more strict than we had in school, but I thought that now that I'd got myself into it, I must stick it out. If you thought we were strict with you'll in your time, it was ten or twenty times more strict in my days...I'm talking about the early 70's. I suppose one gets used to everything, but this took a lot of getting used to.

Back then we had four exams in the year, I mean proper exams with question papers and marksheets...the quarterly exam, the terminal, the preliminary and the final exam. We'd hardly got over one exam and the next one was staring at us in the face. The time tables were out and we had to get ready for the next exam.

Now the first exam I sat for was in F&B which in those years was called restaurant and counter service. The gentleman who taught us, Mr.Panicker was an ex-navy officer who thought we were all his cadets. He would bark instructions at us but we eventually got used to it. The first exam was his practical exam in counter service. In those years, the uniform was a white pant, white shirt, black belt, black shoes & socks and a bow tie. At the time we didn't think of this outfit as out of the ordinary.

On schedule around two in the afternoon we went into the restaurant and Mr.Panicker made us stand in a semi-circle around him and gave each of us a look-over. Then he pointed out to three of us, me included "You, you and you...get out!" I thought this was an exam, not a normal class that he'd throw us out. "Go cut your hair and come back!" I had cut my hair the previous day, but obviously not to his standard. The other two boys with me were Manoj Chopra and Val Braganza. Manoj said that he too had cut his hair the previous day. I thought Manoj would've known about this because his elder brother was in our college and had passed out the year we joined...but obviously he didn't. As we stared at Mr.Panicker blankly, he repeated "I told you'll to go." So with little choice, the three of us turned around and walked out. One of the seniors standing outside the restaurant clearly in the know...also told us to go outside and get it done. Where? we wondered...considering it was a Monday and barbers shops were closed. In those white outfits, the three of us must have looked like jokers roaming around Dadar market looking out for an open hair cutting saloon. We finally ended-up believe you me...sitting in turn one-by-one...on a wooden crate, outside Dadar railway station (West) while one of those hajjams (roadside barbers) cut our hair. He asked us whether we were in the navy... as I thought to myself, worse than that. It took thrice the time since there were three of us and no other barber in service at the time. Then we all walked back since there was no taxi or bus available.

It was 6 pm when we reached college as I wondered what I'd tell my parents about being thrown out of the examination hall. Everyone seemed to have gone home, the restaurant was dark but as we peered through the curtain we saw some lights at the far end and could see Mr.Panicker sitting there doing what I guess was post exam paper work. We knocked at the glass door but got no response, so we went through the open pantry and stood quietly near him. He ignored us till he finished his work. Then he looked up and enquired "Yes?" We told him we'd had a haircut. "Good" he said "Now your father will be proud to call you his son." I thought my father wouldn't be proud of anything once he heard the story. "Go home now", he said. What about the exam Sir? "It's over. Go home." So we changed our clothes and left. It was horrendous. No one in my family had ever been thrown out of an exam before and I was dreading my return home. On returning home, I decided to wait and watch and didn't say anything. Imagine my bewilderment when the results came and I found I had passed and so had Manoj Chopra...but Val Braganza had failed and was spluttering away. But Val was an obnoxious boy and must have rubbed

Mr. Panicker the wrong way. Why we passed and he didn't, didn't matter. From then on, we always had our haircuts in time for our classes.

That was my first experience with how strict discipline was in catering college...I think in the second month itself, but we got used to it over the three years.

I used to enjoy the cookery practical classes which in those years was twice a week and in the afternoon once a week was bakery practicals. I remember an incident when I cut my hand. I decided to sharpen my knives and didn't realize just how sharp I'd made them and the first thing I did after that was to slice off a part of my left little finger. Oh, it was so painful and I was holding this piece of flesh in my hand not knowing what to do with it. They put ice and took me to the hospital. The doctor said that it couldn't be stitched back. Just let it heal and the flesh will grow back and it did, though I still have of the mark of the wound. This was just at the beginning of the first year when we still hadn't developed any knife skills. Subsequently, I got the knack of using my fingers at the correct angles with my nails forming a kind of a shield. When I began teaching, I remember telling them that it didn't matter if they cut their hands. Students had this idea probably from home, that whenever you get a cut, just sprinkle some haldi powder and it did work since turmeric has many healing qualities, but one day I found a fellow in my class who didn't just sprinkle it but dipped his full finger into the turmeric bottle and Ms. Talati was yelling at the top of her lungs. "What are you doing!" and the whole spice bottle had to be discarded. We also learnt how so many spices were used for medicinal purposes, though we knew about a lot of them from home.

In the first year itself, we soon developed the fine art of bunking and used to go for movies, until one day we got caught by Mrs. Moraes (some of you may know her daughter Blasie who also worked in the same role after her) PA to the principal. Every Wednesday she used to come in a little late to college after attending the Novena at Mahim. Once the second bell rang, the gates were locked and no one was allowed to leave the campus in any circumstance, so we had to leave before the second bell rang. I remember one of our friends Rex Vegas who hadn't entered college that day and was standing on the pavement outside and signalling us to join him...as five or six of us stood inside on the first floor parapet. He was so engrossed in his actions calling us, that he didn't realize that Mrs. Moraes (who was also his aunt), was standing right behind him watching him. We could see her of-course, but what could we say. She slowly tapped him on the shoulder and he got the fright of his life. She trooped us all off to Ms. Philips office. That was the first time I went to Ms. Philips office. It was walking into the lion's den. She has a set of three lights outside her office door - one red, one yellow and one green. If you knocked at the door and it flashed red, it meant go, don't wait. Yellow meant wait while the green said come in. The protocol in her office was, you could walk in facing her, but could not turn your back to her and walk out, you had to walk backwards. We were threatened that our parents would be called and out it came that we were going for a movie. She did give us a punishment, though I don't remember what it was, but thank God she didn't call our parents...probably because she didn't have the time. I thought it unnecessary, but it was all a part of the discipline in those days.

In later years, I realized the value of good discipline in the hospitality industry. All those years of the faculty who grilled us (although we might have cursed them at that time)...Mr. Panicker, Mr. Shalia, Mrs. Bullen led to grooming us into thorough professionals. Even though it might be too late to tell them, I have to salute them for making us what we are.

So these are some of the memories of my early years as a student in Catering college. I grew to enjoy every one of them and looked forward to recollecting these incidents.

See you all soon. Take care.

## 28: Back to College, Part 2 [29th Aug 2020]

These incidents I'm going to tell you about are both as a faculty and as a student.

When I joined college as a student in '72, there used to be an 'inspection' every term. This inspection meant carrying our tool kit, books, journals, Modern Cooking Volume 1 & Volume 2, whatever we were supposed to have with us on a particular date and the counsellor would check whether everybody had everything, so there was no question of exchanging or using someone else's tool kit or books. Our counsellor was Ms. Talati. :-) I can see the smiles on your faces from last time...

She used to tell us "Tomorrow there's going to be inspection. I want you to bring all your tools and put them on the table and I will come around and inspect them". Of course everybody was sniggering away and as usual she was wondering what was wrong. Bless her soul, but she was really not aware of the wicked minds of some students.

There was a story about Anil Warner, a student in her class who left the course eventually. I don't blame him, because he was completely at sea with all the activities going on around him. When he was told to wash rice for instance, he began doing so with A1 powder and soap. Ms. Talati. shouted at him - "What are you doing???". "Washing the rice", he responded, "You told us to wash it well and I've washed it very well." She had a fit when she saw that and made him throw the whole lot out.

Then there was Pema Ladaki, a boy who must have come from the North East. My instructions were to strain the consommé very carefully. The next thing I know, he comes up with a soup strainer and in it was the 'raft' (drained out meat and vegetables). I said "OK, so where is the consommé?" He asked "The liquid?" I said "Yes, The liquid." "That I threw down the sink", he replied. "But that is what we required" I said. "You never told us," he said as he looked around at the others and found that everyone else had done it right; so he had to begin all over again. But that's alright. It's how everyone learns I guess.

As faculty, I once agreed (didn't know then, just what I had agreed to) to take the second year students, the C and D group of the '91 batch (they will remember) for a 'field trip' to Narayangaon to visit Champagne India. Vishwajit Negi, the Class Representative made all the arrangements with Champagne India and at Narayangaon. Around thirty of us in all, were staying overnight at the home of one of our students Hemavand, in Deolali and Vishwajit had organised a bus from Deolali to Narayangaon. We reached Deolali in the evening by train and found our way to Hemavand's house. I went a little later than the others and found that the party had already started. "What's going on here?" I asked. "Just a small party." Everyone was already in high spirits and they suggested that I go to sleep and not unnecessarily stay awake. I knew something fishy was going on and I decided to stay awake. "Please go to sleep now" they insisted. I didn't want to spoil their fun and so retired to my room. Didn't sleep of-course. The ruckus of music and laughing kept me awake and they were having a good time and watching 'movies'. Eventually in the early morning, I dropped off to sleep. The party was still on. When I woke up later that morning, some of them were still staggering about. "Didn't you'll sleep?" I asked. "Yes, now we will". "No, now we have to go and wait for the bus" I said. "OK, we'll come" they said. When it was time to go to the bus depot, they'd gone to sleep. I first woke up one lot "Come on, it's time to go." "Yes", they said. By the time I woke up the second lot, the first lot promptly went back to sleep. We had a tough time and in short we missed the bus. The bus left without us since they had to continue with their regular schedule, so we had to fend for ourselves. Poor Vishwajit was tearing his hair out because he'd organised it all. So we had to take a regular bus, in two or three lots because thirty of us just wouldn't fit in at one time. Before we left Deolali, they wanted to eat breakfast. So at a dhaba nearby, they were ordering omelette pao and other things you get usually at dhabas.

By the time we actually reached Narayangaon, it was afternoon. The Champagne India people were wondering where we'd been after waiting for us the entire morning and I had to apologize. Unlike a more

detailed tour with wine tasting that they had planned for us originally, they took us on a quick tour with no formal wine tasting. Though they said we could have a sip in the winery, from the big vats with small taps at the bottom. The next thing I knew some fellows were on the floor with their mouths below the open taps...guzzling away. They allowed us to wander about the vineyards and eat as many grapes as we liked, but they couldn't show us any-more since it was too late and their staff had already gone home. Parag Pareikh from the '91 batch who is no more, always one to have a lot of fun with all his activities...would remember this trip the most. I hope he's having fun now wherever he is...and smiling at all of us.

Another picnic I must tell you about was as a student in my first year. In those days, the whole college - the first years, second and third years would go together for a picnic. There was a whole line of ST buses outside the college. Food was packed & taken and we were looking forward to having a good time, which we did. Some of our seniors from the third year had carried alcohol with them, which was an absolute No No and we'd been warned not to bring alcohol with us. Now Timmy Ayre got wind of it. He sniffed out everyone's bags and pulled out four or five bottles from them, opened them and poured them out into the waterfalls of China Creek, the beautiful picnic spot we were in...where the fish must have had a good time. The boys were severely reprimanded and worse was to happen to them when they got back to college the next day.

Those picnics happened for three years, until one year we went to Aksa beach. We were told very clearly, "No going into the water." Three of the girls from the dieticians program said they'd like to go in only to wet their feet. Next, a very tragic thing happened. They somehow got pulled in and they didn't know how to swim. They were foundering with no one willing to go in after them because many didn't know how to swim themselves. Until Tan Soo Beng, a boy from Malaysia who had come to do the FSM course, a good swimmer...jumped in. He tried to save them but managed to pull only two of them out. One of the girls, Baljeet Ajmani got washed away and tragically drowned. Her family instituted a scholarship in her name for the best performing student in dietetics each year. From then on, no more picnics and even on field trips...no going anywhere near the water.

So some good things and some sad...all a part of my days in college. Maybe next time, I'll think of more episodes to relate to you, but that's it for now...



## 29: Back to College, Part 3 [19th Sep 2020]

So we're back in college again and I'd like to narrate a few incidents to you, that happened while I was both a student, and a faculty.

Despite the fact that the institute was so strict at my time, we had our share of fun and masti. I wonder whether students nowadays have enough time... :- ) to play the fool; because towards the end of my teaching, I found that students were only interested in going home at 5 o'clock. Nobody was keen on after-college activities. If there was a singing competition for example, hardly four or five people would attend. Everyone else had inevitably left and gone home, which is OK I suppose. Each one has their priorities.

When I was a student in college, smoking was strictly banned...as it is even now...as was sitting on the parapet.

One evening, we were standing around, as Diago D'souza, one-year my senior, was sitting on the parapet nearby and smoking. At that very moment, Ms. Philip happened to be walking past...going home from her office and looked up quite by chance; only to see Diago sitting on the parapet. She came marching up the front staircase, though she still hadn't realised that he was smoking as well. When she caught hold of him, he got the fright of his life. Diago held-in his breath and in a jiffy inverted his cigarette so that the lit-end faced his palm. In a few moments, it began burning his hand and his mouth was filled with smoke. As she was giving him a barging, he suddenly let go of the smoke straight into her face. Now she realised it was two offences, not one. He really had it that day. Poor fellow. I felt sorry for him then, though all of us wanted to vanish and didn't want anything to do with the incident, but we were stuck there.

Many years later when I was a faculty, Ayesha Miranda was sitting on the parapet close to the steps, playing the fool with the boys who must have been teasing her. Next thing we knew, she toppled over from the first floor to the ground. Luckily for her, there was some construction work going on and there happened to be a pile of reti (black gravel) lying just below...into which she fell. The boys must have been really frightened as they looked at her falling, until they saw her dusting herself off. So fortunately, she was able to save herself. If she was anywhere else, she'd surely have had a cracked skull or God knows what else. From then on, she was known as the 'parapet queen'.

Then there was Rajvir Mann, the tall good-looking Jat from the '88 batch. They were playing some kind of game where they had to catch one another. He came in running fast and crashed straight into that first floor skylight. (if you remember, it was surrounded with iron spikes to keep students from sitting on it). But this fellow crashed right through the glass and was saved only because his leg got stuck in one of the spikes. Some students came running to the ATK saying Rajvir has fallen. I rushed out to see him hanging by his leg through that skylight. We had to carefully extricate him from the glass first and pull him up. Rajvir was bravely laughing, thinking he'd done something very funny. If he'd gone through, it would've been a disaster. He joined Air India after college and I believe continues to fly with them even now.

As a faculty I knew that despite the ban, there were some students who smoked here and there and I tried to catch hold of them. I was once invigilating in a lecture room in the new building on the first floor and saw Rohit Bhat (in his first year then) standing on the steps of the old building puffing away. I recognised him from his paisley green shirt. He couldn't have known anyone would have seen him from the 'protected angle' at which he thought he was hidden. Obviously I couldn't start shouting at him across buildings while the examination was on. I didn't even know his name then; since at the time, I taught the third years. So off I went looking for him after the exam...on the terrace, in the passages and the canteen, and eventually found him. "Come here", I said, as he looked perplexed about what I could possibly want with him. "You were smoking over there, isn't it!". "No, no", he said. "Don't lie", I said..."...or it will get worse for you. Weren't you hiding in that corner and smoking! I was standing in

the classroom in the new building and I saw you from above.” Now he knew his game was up, his goose was cooked...so he admitted. Rohit Bhat went on to become a good friend of mine and his wife who was also my student used to say thank God I made him stop smoking, since she herself didn't know how to. I'm sure he will remember this incident and if no one else does, :- ) at least his wife...certainly will.

I want to mention my thoughts on smoking. I was very much against smoking, though in-between there were objections asking why not, and so they did allow smoking in certain parts...like the terrace. When I got my way however, in the last few years that I was in college, I banned it completely.

Smoking is one of the filthiest habits one can acquire, with absolutely no plus point that I can see. If one drinks at-least, I can still understand some value...say in appreciating certain foods better with certain drinks, or having some drinks which may have a medicinal value, etc...but not smoking.

Smoking is especially bad for someone who wants to become a chef, because all their senses go numb in no time. One can't taste or appreciate food with a numb palette. So whenever I chose my Chef-comp team, my first question was whether they smoked. If they did, I asked them to either stop it immediately (not “I will stop it soon” or “am working on it”)... or I didn't want them on my team. Many thought it was very unfair and cursed me for it, but I didn't care. You smoke and do what what you want, but stay out of the kitchen and don't hope to become a chef, at-least as long as I am around. At that time, none of the staff used to smoke either, so I had them on my side and they too didn't appreciate any smoking in college. I know some of you won't agree with me and must have been smoking on the side, but I strongly believe that you can't be a great chef if you smoke.

So keep this thought with you for the next two weeks. I'm sorry we missed the deadline last Saturday, but I was not well, in-fact I was hospitalized for two weeks... :- ) but am fit and fine again now...back to 'normal' so to speak...so I'm at it again with the posts.

Hope you enjoyed reading this? Until we meet again, bye-bye!

## 30: The Chef Competitions [17th Oct 2020]

One of the best parts of my time in Catering College was getting ready for the Chef Competitions. It was always an exciting time and I enjoyed the work we did. The students were fantastic and everybody put their best foot forward. I took charge of the competitions only in '87.

In the first four years, they weren't being taken seriously. They were mostly held in Bangalore and Bangalore inevitably won. Being the home team, they'd put two teams forward...normally coming in first and second or...first and third.

In '91, I happened to be going to Bangalore for a few days on a vacation with my friend Elliot and since I was there, I thought I'd drop by at the competition and see what was happening. I'd trained the team, prepared them well but left it to them to take it forward. So I went for the prize distribution and sat in the audience. I didn't know what to expect, because going by the past I thought it might be a foregone conclusion that Bangalore would win. Then they announced the winners. Third place to Bangalore, Second I think to Goa, then was the drum-roll for the Gold medal announcement with everyone waiting expectantly...and they announced the winners as...IHM Mumbai. I shot out my seat yelling in joy, then realised it was unbecoming of me and sat down quietly. I couldn't believe it! Bangalore had relinquished both first and second place.

It was most exciting, and I decided to take the team out for a celebratory dinner at the coffee shop of the Windsor Manor. As we were looking at the menu, who comes along...but my batch-mate Gave Desai, the Executive Chef there. When we told him what we were doing there, he very sweetly complimented the meal. This was the first time I got really excited about the competition and from then on, a lot of more serious work went into it.

I told the principal that we could win this repeatedly, if he'd leave the team selection to me. Earlier they'd have an internal competition among the third year students, where they got 3 good individuals, but not necessarily a good team. We needed one person good in Indian cuisine, one in continental and one in bakery...each good enough to also help one another.

The next year it was in Bangalore again, so I trained the team and packed them off. There was one girl and two boys and I don't know what happened, but they had a bitter fight amongst themselves. After the competition was over, the girl walked out of the hotel telling her team members that she would take the bus herself and not return with them on the train. They were stuck with having to carry the equipment and luggage. Anyway, when they manfully got into their compartment, the TC (Ticket Collector) told them that their ticket was for the previous day and pushed them off the train. They found themselves on the outskirts of Bangalore not knowing what to do. They managed to come back of-course, though I was furious with all three of them, not because they didn't win anything, but more because in their fight they forgot their purpose. The principal refused to pay them additional charges for transport since it was they who made the mistake on the date of travel and so it was they who had to learn to deal with it. I felt bad for them, but agreed that they had to be taught a lesson.

From '89 onwards we trained even harder, no holidays or weekend off's. If you wanted to be in the Chef Comp team, it had to be my way. Any arguments led to replacing the team members.

One year, we had a boy on the team missing in action. When I asked his girlfriend in class where he was, she feigned innocence. He was a very good looking boy, fair, light eyes and all that. Later, I discovered from another student that he'd gone for a modelling photo shoot. When he returned, I asked him to decide whether he wanted to be with his girlfriend, do his modelling...or be on the Chef Comp team. Can you believe it... :-)) He said that in that case, he wouldn't be on the team and wanted his life. I said absolutely alright...but not alright to put his other two team-mates at risk in this intense competition. So I had some people like that as well to deal with, but what to do.

Then one year, there was a bizarre incident. The team was ready to leave for Lucknow by the 8 am Pushpak Express on a Saturday. I wasn't travelling with them on that occasion and had asked them to go early. They were all packed with sandwiches for the journey. I'd even made a checklist of all the equipment of college they were taking with them in the metal trunks, so we could check it all when they returned.

About 7 am the same day, I got a call from the principal to come to college immediately since there was a big problem. It was a weekend and I was not scheduled to go. When I arrived at college, he handed me a telegram which had been received by the watchman the previous night, but not handed to him so as not to disturb him at night. The telegram said that the Chef Competition in Lucknow had been cancelled and not to send the team.

The principal asked me to bring back the team from the station, but since they would already be on the train at VT station (no mobile phones then), I asked a few hostelites to try and catch the team on the way...at Dadar station. That train never stopped at Dadar and as the hostelites signalled enthusiastically to the team (since they knew their bogey number), the team simply waved back at them thinking their friends had very thoughtfully come to bid them goodbye.

On reporting this back to the principal, he asked me to get in touch with the Lucknow college principal to appraise him of the situation and request him to keep our students there as per the original schedule...until they returned. Luckily one Mr. Rastogi, a Lucknow institute staff member who was doing his teacher's training with us in Mumbai, was able to help me connect with the Lucknow principal on that holiday.

I told the Lucknow principal that I knew that the competition was cancelled but our team was already on their way. He said "What are you talking about?". I said "You'll have cancelled the competition right?" He said "No, what gave you that idea?" "A telegram" I said. "Please send that telegram to me. I will investigate who sent it" said the Lucknow principal. It was then that I realised what lengths people will go through to get Mumbai out of the equation. I learnt from that incident not to take things for granted and to see things through till the end.

Then in the year 2000, the competition was in Trivandram. Our team was outstanding, so much so that they won every award that was available. They came back with 9 trophies. They'd created such fabulous dishes, that even the judges asked them more about the secrets in their recipes. It was one of the best teams I had. I hadn't gone on the train with them, but intended joining them later by flight accompanied by our principal. To make things even better on that occasion Ms. Thangam Philip who was very closely associated with the Trivandrum college, was there as the chief guest. Now the team told me that since they'd won so many awards...we should send them back by flight. It had been an uncomfortable journey for them by train. It was winter and in the absence of warm wear, they woke up on their 2 night-long train journey there...shivering and being forced to put on their chef coats as protection from the bitter cold. I knew what they meant, but though I'd asked them to take sweaters, they hadn't listened. Their train journey back was already pre-booked by college and I declined sending them by flight telling them that part of being a student was not having the comforts of flying about.

In 2001, it so happened that the three team members were all girls. I didn't think much of it, till the principal called me to his office, probably provoked by someone who I guessed might have highlighted this. The principal asked me to have at-least one boy on this team that was travelling to Chandigarh. I said "Nothing doing. This team is the best and is already announced. Do you want to win the gold medal or not?" "Yes" he replied. "Then leave this to me." I said. "OK" he said "But bring back the gold." We won that year too, because as I said, they were not just good individually, but would cover each other if something went wrong.

By now however, the competition became tougher and tougher. In '95 when the competition was held in Mumbai I remember Goa put up a very good show, performed outstandingly well and won the best student-chef of the year award then with a prize of a free trip to Singapore for the Food & Hotel Asia

show...all expenses covered. This award was instituted by the daughter of a late philanthropist Charanjit Rai. We began noticing Goa as a strong contender.

Once we'd gone to Bhubaneswar and the team was making this cigar-shaped garnish called Tuille. I remember this boy Ripu Daman Singh who I'd taught to make it and he could do it with his eyes closed. When I saw them taking the plated food out from the kitchen to the service area however, I saw some horrible-looking fat tuille. I called one of the team members and asked what had happened. I was told that Ripu couldn't make it at the last minute. I learnt that he'd made very good ones, but then ate them up and when the time came to actually make them, the batter was too old and this was the outcome. He was tearing his hair out in the kitchen, crying and wouldn't come out. I told him it was alright, though it cost us the gold. So we had our 'so good days' and bad days as well.

When the students won Chef Competitions, the whole college would get involved. They'd put up banners outside the college to proclaim their victory and we all felt good about it, but also learnt to accept the bad times with the good and soldier on even when things went wrong.

I've put below a chart of every team member (which I sat one day and recalled)...that I'm calling the roll of honour of the Chef Competitions. I would like to thank Swayam Torve for helping me to compile the list after many many phone calls to the different team members to confirm the composition of the teams.

<b>CHEF'S COMPETITION.</b>		
<b>YEAR-</b>	<b>NAMES</b>	<b>VENUE</b>
<b>1987</b>	Tanya Khan, Henrietta D'souza, Lester Heredia	<b>IHM, Bangalore</b>
<b>1988</b>	Uday Mani, Anthony Paul, Veronica Rodrigues	<b>IHM, Bangalore</b>
<b>1989</b>	Zubin Songadwalla, Vinita Vaidyanathan, Ajay Hinaria	<b>IHM, Bangalore</b>
<b>1990</b>	Ali Hussain, Sudhir Ferris	<b>IHM, Bangalore</b>
<b>1991</b>	Tushar Bhandari, Farrokh Khambatta, Vijendra Singh Kumpawat	<b>IHM, Bangalore</b>
<b>1992</b>	Pravin Chilkuri, Souymen Chakravorty, Brian Lewis	<b>IHM, Mumbai</b>
<b>1993</b>	Adish Gogvekar, Sameer Sadekar, Arun Sundaraj	<b>IHM, Mumbai</b>
<b>1994</b>	Yash Amin, Mark D'Souza, Pradeep Tejwani	<b>IHM, Chennai</b>
<b>1995</b>	Nitin Minocha, Pallavi Gupte, Sanjeev Sarkar	<b>IHM, Mumbai</b>
<b>1996</b>	Sunera Balla, Rohit Toki, Nitin Bhatnagar	<b>IHM, Mumbai</b>
<b>1997</b>	Jyoti Shroff, Siddharth Mohan, Pankaj Jain	<b>IHM, Goa</b>
<b>1998</b>	Shirish Bhatsavle, Vivek Dayal, Amrinder Singh	<b>IHM, Jaipur</b>
<b>1999</b>	Anshul Dhyani, Ripudaman Singh Randhawa, Amit Sethi	<b>IHM, Bhubaneswar</b>
<b>2000</b>	Burgess Chinoy, Saurav Kumar, Akshraj Jodha	<b>IHM, Trivandrum</b>
<b>2001</b>	Suniti Mittal, Jasleen Kaur, Kainaz Missman	<b>IHM, Chandigarh</b>
<b>2002</b>	Abhijeet Prasad, Shahid Latif, Shaleen Gambhir	<b>IHM, Hyderabad</b>
<b>2004</b>	Sidney Dacunha, Gurmeet Singh, Siddesh Sukhatankar	<b>IHM, Kolkata</b>

Now I'm coming to the end of my memoirs...maybe time for one more; but by and large I've related my whole life to you'll and will come back to you with one more after two weeks. For those of you who've asked for this to be made into a book, I will collate everything in a pdf format and will share it two weeks after the last episode.

So till we talk again, bye-bye...

## 31: Post Retirement [31st Oct 2020]

I'd always wondered what I'd do after I retired from IHM and often mulled over the options. Writing never came to mind, but now I know, that I do have that option.

Around a month before I retired, I got a call from the Symbiosis University in Pune who had all kinds of educational disciplines from medicine to nursing...to what have you. They wanted to start a hotel management course.

I asked them to consider a specialized culinary program, rather than one in hotel management which was available dime a dozen across the country. They said they'd consider it and get back to me. They must have done their research on it and on me as well. In the meantime, I went off to Australia for what I didn't know then...would be my last trip there.

When I returned, they said that they'd like to go ahead with my suggestion and that they'd also like me to take charge of it entirely. Since 31st of January was my last day at IHM, they wanted me to join from 1st February. I wasn't keen on moving to Pune and doing a full-time job and thought, What ? not a single day off? I just wanted to be a sort of consultant.

Anyway, we agreed that I'd work three days a week, travelling to Pune each time and then back to Mumbai. Over the first four or five months, I helped them to develop the syllabus from scratch. Luckily I was given a free hand to implement what I wanted and they were quite happy to go with it. They'd wanted me to take over as the principal, but I declined. So they appointed someone else as the principal with whom I worked very closely, to develop their syllabus.

This went on nicely for a year or so, well into the second year, when my I had a serious renal problem where I had to be in constant touch with my doctors. Still managed for while until it became too much to handle and slowly took a back seat. I felt bad because I was enjoying my work, but eventually it prevented me from working with Symbiosis any further.

So that was the first and only job I did after retiring from IHM though both pre and post retirement, there were some other interesting things I did.

When IHM celebrated 60 years of existence, to mark the occasion I decided to bring out a coffee table book which I titled "60 years, 60 Chefs". I reached out to over 90 chefs for it, whom I asked whether they'd like to be part of the book. I required their profiles, pictures and recipes soon enough to edit, before they could be published.

I made a lot of enemies on this account..."Why was MY name not there?" they asked. Those chefs who didn't respond or took their own time, I reminded a few times or let them go. So unfortunately, some prominent names are missing in this book and they were very offended, but I couldn't run after 90 people asking each of them for their details especially since the publication had a deadline to be launched.

One boy told me, "I have no time, so I'll put my wife on to you". I did contact his wife who mentioned that they were very busy those days, understandably. As the deadline drew near and I didn't get a response, I sadly had to drop his name from the list...as I had to... many others as well. I tried to spread out the names as evenly as possible over the years from the first batch till the last, so as to have a fair representation.

Another book I did, was for MTDC who wanted to bring out a book on Maharashtrian cuisine. The dishes had to be local and vegetarian and in this one, we got our recipes on time. That book also went off well and I think the chief minister then, inaugurated it.

Our chef's association WICA (Western India Culinary Association), also wanted to bring out a coffee table book. One of the chef's came up with the idea of a theme of "My Mother's Recipes" but before I could get down to working on it, my health took a turn for the worse and I had to go onto dialysis, which put a stop to everything for me at that time.

I enjoyed working with several chefs over the years, in my role as president of WICA. At one time, I told them now it's enough, 5 years, 10 years, how much more do you want me to carry on being president?...but they asked me to carry on. No one else wanted to take up that mantle. In Mumbai especially, the chef's do not have too much of continuity and are always moving to other cities, not knowing whether they'll be transferred the next day, so they were reluctant to take up the post. In a sense, I guess I was happy to be stuck with the role.

When I cited my ill-health as a reason to give up the position, they chefs understood and thoughtfully helped me continue. So here I am, can't see, can't move about much...but still the president of the association, managing to do events like the annual chef's competition This year we can't have a live event, so we're hoping to do an online version. Let's see how it goes. Very difficult these days to get sponsors, without which we can't do much. Those of you who are chefs will be kept posted on it of-course. (Pics below of WICA 2019)





In response to my last post, I got many messages and calls from you to continue writing and not to give up. Let's see how much further it is possible, but as of now this is it. As I'd mentioned, I'll put up this entire series in a pdf file and share the link on my Face Book page, so there'll be some longevity to these posts.

Hopefully we'll talk again soon. If not in this format, in another ...which I am exploring.

So, thank you for all...for all your phone calls, likes, comments and shares. It's been wonderful sharing my experiences with all of you here. Take Care, all of you!



