



The Taste of Andhra Pradesh

Why so spicy?

By Debashis Bhattacharyya

I love spicy Indian food and living in the United States, I am privy to a lot of Andhra-style restaurants which make food exactly that way, yes, spicy. I always say to my American friends that not all Indian food is spicy and there are cuisines which are mild and bland in India too. But most of the biriyani places in America serve Hyderabadi food and they end up saying “No man, we always find Indian food spicy”. Ever wondered why the food from the Southern regions of Andhra and Telangana are so spicy despite the area being one of the hottest parts of India? I have heard this question too, and inquisitive me has explored this topic for a while. In this article, let’s talk about the spicy food of Andhra Pradesh.

My first encounter with the cuisine of Andhra was during my college days. Back in that time, my parents were posted in the China border area, and it took a minimum of three days to go there. Hence, I used to travel around for most of my mini vacations. On one such Diwali holiday, the college was off for just a week, and it wasn’t feasible for me to travel home. My friend invited me to spend the holidays with his family in Warangal, Telangana (a part of Andhra at that time). I still cherish the memories of that small vacation I had there. They had a farmhouse and owned a school in their hometown, we stayed in his farmhouse for all those seven days, and it was so much fun. I also remember reading “The Hounds of Baskerville” by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, while being there.

The food I ate there was one of the best I had in my life, so flavourful and tasty but yes, it was equally spicy too. In fact, this was the most ‘hot and spicy’ food I had had till then. I still remember the first meal; it was Chicken curry with rice with a side of Chicken fry. I took a bite, and I was like “Dude, this is so spicy”. My friend said in one line “If we don’t shed tears while eating, we don’t feel the food to be tasty,

that is how it is here”. It was new for me; I had never heard of such a theory before. But as I said, it was so good, and I had more than a full meal. My lips were on fire, but I just couldn’t stop, such was the flavour of the food. It was sweet of uncle to get me some Bengali sweets as desserts, the Rosogollas at the end of the meal felt like ‘an oasis in a desert’! Uncle had lived in Bengal in his younger days and knew we Bengalis love our sweets at the end of our meals. It was a lovely vacation; I literally did not miss home and had so much fun watching Telugu movies like “Mass” and “Okadu” and playing in the fields of the farmhouse while feasting on some decadent Andhra style home cooked dishes.

Since then, I have had Andhra food all my life and I am a big paramour of ‘Hyderabadi Biryani’. I also adore delicacies like ‘Guntur Chicken’, ‘Gongura chicken’, ‘Spicy Meat Pickles’ and the ‘Vepudu’ to name a few.

So, I came back and did some research on the internet searching for reasons, while also asking my friends from Andhra on the choice of their palates. I found out that the use of spices in Andhra food can be attributed to several factors.

Climate:

Most interestingly, the climate in Andhra Pradesh is hot and humid. It can cause increased perspiration and hence a higher appetite for spicy food. Spicy food helps cool the body down and stimulates the appetite and it is said to be the most important reason for the choice of food habits there. Who would have thought spicy and hot go together, but it does.

Agriculture:

Andhra Pradesh is one of the largest producers of chilli peppers in India. Local cuisines are always influenced by the local

produce and the abundance of chilli peppers in this area was bound to make this impact on the style of cooking around here. The history of spice cultivation in this area can be traced back to the ancient civilisation of the Satavahanas. They were the rulers of Andhra between the 2nd century BC and the 3rd century AD and were known to have traded spices with ancient civilisations like the mighty Roman Empire. The tradition of spice trade and export continued during the reign of the Vijayanagar Empire. The empire is still known for its prosperity and agricultural prowess. Remember reading tales of “Tenali Raman” during your childhood? He was a courtier of King Krishnadevaraya of the same Vijayanagar Empire. Some of those stories do talk about foreign trade and visitors and spice was a major export commodity at that time. Later, the British founded many spice gardens growing cardamom and peppers in this region which continues till date.

The region and its adjoining states are also famous for the availability and cultivation of various spices. The use of such spices and herbs along with the use of chilli peppers owes to the spiciness of Andhra cuisine.

Invasions and Migrations –

Andhra has seen an influx of people from various parts of the country and the world for ages. You can see influences of Maratha, Mughal, British, Iranian cuisines in the local delicacies of Andhra. The British farms and gardens also led to the production of pepper using modern agricultural methods and enhanced spice exports within the country. The fusion of the culinary traditions of the world with the local cuisine also adds to the extensive use of ground spices in the food, making it spicy.

Local Customs & Traditions –

Andhra boasts of a rich cultural heritage and traditions and spicy food is a part of it.



Spicy food, including some snacks, are often prepared for special occasions and festivals like Ugadi and Vijayadashami, adding to the state's reputation for its spicy cuisine.

In modern times, Andhra Pradesh has continued to be a major producer of spices. The state has a diverse range of spices such as chilli, turmeric, coriander, cumin, pepper, and ginger. The state's agricultural sector is focused on increasing the productivity and quality of spices, and the state government has been promoting the use of modern technology to improve the yields.

Some of my favourite spicy dishes from Andhra which you should taste before you die are -

1. Andhra Chicken Curry: A spicy and tangy chicken curry that is made with a blend of chilli peppers, ginger, garlic, and other spices. It is typically served with steamed rice.

2. Gongura Mutton: A mutton dish that is made with a leafy green called gongura or red sorrel, which gives the dish its unique sour flavour. It is typically cooked with a variety of spices and chillies.

3. Royyala Vepudu: A spicy prawn dish that is made with a variety of spices, including chilli powder, mustard seeds, and curry leaves. It is typically served with steamed rice.

4. Andhra-style Fish Curry: A spicy fish curry that is made with a blend of chilli peppers, ginger, garlic, and other spices. Tastes best when paired with steamed rice.

5. Biryani: A popular dish that is made with long-grained rice, meat or vegetables, and a variety of spices. Hyderabadi biryani is world renowned for its spicy and flavourful taste.

6. Kodi Kura: It is a spicy Chicken curry which is a staple in Andhra Pradesh.

7. Pulihora: Tamarind-based rice dish that is a favourite in Andhra Pradesh. It is served with a variety of side dishes, including pickles and yogurt.

8. Bagara Baingan: It is a peanut-based, spicy eggplant curry, that works best when served with rice.

In conclusion, Andhra Pradesh has a rich history of spice cultivation that dates to ancient times. The state's diverse climate and soil conditions have made it ideal for growing a wide range of spices. Today, Andhra Pradesh remains one of the major producers of spices in India, and its cuisine is known for its unique blend of spices and red-hot flavours.



MOST INTERESTINGLY, THE CLIMATE IN ANDHRA PRADESH IS HOT AND HUMID. IT CAN CAUSE INCREASED PERSPIRATION AND HENCE A HIGHER APPETITE FOR SPICY FOOD.