

Okra, bhujia and masala tea. South Indian food at the Petersham domestic table.

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When can we say that a cuisine is now a standard part of the Australian table? We can look at the growth of cuisine specific high-end restaurants. We can gauge it by when recipes for it appear in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, that arbiter of domestic cookery for nearly a century. We can look at the growth of cookery books published on the cuisine. We can look for it on the shelves of Colesworth, the duopoly that dominates the Australian supermarket sector.

Or we can look for evidence of it in the corner shop, arguably the day-to-day groceries level closest to the Australian table.

My small goods/ delicatessen/ groceries shop at the top of the road was for many years of my shopping there owned and staffed by Italian brothers and sisters. On its shelves were fifteen different pastas, dozens of canned tomatoes in various modes – sugo, peeled whole, diced, paste (jar and tube), passata, sauce (Arabiata, Bolognese). It stocked Italian cuisine vegetables – tomatoes, eggplant, fennel, zucchini, artichokes – olive oils (and fresh olives once of which I grabbed a kilo or two and cured), arborio rice, ready-to-heat pizzas. Italian food has had a place at the Australian table for centuries.

The brothers fell out spectacularly. The last brother to own it sold it to an Armenian couple. It went for several years with small changes in the goods on sale - halwas, nougats, dolmades, basturma, green almonds once (soft skin, soft nut, slightly bitter). Shelves still groaned under the weight of tomato products.

Then about a month ago I went to do my daily shopping and there among the vegetables was okra. I did a double take. Okra is a much-used vegetable in South and South East Asian¹ cuisines. It makes an excellent curry; its sliminess thickens the curry well. Next to it was a small tray of long thin dark green chillies. I snuck one into my mouth. It was tantalizingly hot. I bought some of both.

Now, just to contextualise the next developments, the suburb I live in, Petersham, in the Inner West of Sydney doesn't have a critical mass of South Asian residents that would warrant lots of South Asian products in its grocery as there is in Sydney's Western suburbs. Like other generalist grocery stores it stocks packets of spices including those which are used in South Asian cuisines: turmeric, red chillies both dried and powdered, mustard seeds, powdered ginger, powdered cinnamon, flakes of garlic, and yes, virulently yellow curry powder. There have always been small jars of Masterfoods Mango Chutney on the shelf – the dreaded British/Aussie blend including sweet mango, apple and sultanas. They are also Red Split Lentils and Yellow Split Lentils both good for making dhal. There are mangoes and pawpaws in season. The shop has always stocked fresh garlic, ginger and limes. They had coconuts once, but they didn't sell except to me and there's only so much you can do with just one coconut. They've never been stocked again. The bulk of fruits and vegetables in the shop are fit for purpose in South Asian

¹ I use South Asian to mean India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. I use South East Asian to mean Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

cooking. These all have been there by accident and not intent. Sort of proto-South Asian cuisine. The okra and chillies, I thought, were a happy one-of.

Then last week my co-house-owner-friend having just been up the shop said, 'There are new owners. They're Indian.' My South Asian cuisine radar pinged. Could the okra and chillies be more than just a one-of?

I went to the shop to see whether there were other changes toward South Asian cuisines. I checked out the fruit and veg. The okra and chillie were there. Included now were trays of bird's eye chillies, which I bought for making a pickle, lemongrass, and fresh coriander these last used in South Asian cuisines, though not exclusively. There was nothing else particular to South Asian cuisines.

The shop layout took me next past the freezers. In among frozen pastizzi, pies, gozleme and pizzas was a big packet of frozen phulka (wheat) rotis, thin round flat breads for scooping up curries and the like. I grabbed a packet excitedly. Idling by the shelf of protein power drinks next to the freezers I noticed bottles of swollen basil seeds in blackberry and strawberry flavoured drink, common in India where it is called sabja and in Sri Lanka where it is called kasa kasa. But this one's a product of Vietnam. It was just serendipitous I came across it while scouting out South Asian foods.

Matters developed fast from there. I headed to the aisle with cooking basics. Among the flours was a large packet of besan flour – ground brown chickpeas. In India the batter made from it is used to make pakoras – vegetables dipped in batter and fried. It's also, like all flours, a thickening agent. It's used in Indian sweets – laddoo, Mysore pak. On the rice shelves were a big bag of basmati rice – so big I wondered who would buy such a quantity - and a smaller packet of ready to cook Saag Aloo Rice, basmati rice with spinach – saag - and potatoes – aloo- and spices. Also, big bags of grated coconut have appeared.

I wondered whether any other South Asian products were on the shelves. Bingo! Right there next to the spices, above packets of Party Size and Salt and Vinegar Chips were dazzlingly coloured packets of Bhujia, an Indian snack food. There was Aloo Bhujia made from spiced thin potato noodles, and All In One Bhujia with chickpea noodles, pulses, rice flakes and cashew nuts. I had been past the chip packets many times before, but this is the first time I noticed bhujia. Then my eyes fell upon packets of mini pappadums looking for all the world like chips with bubbles. I grabbed packets of bhujia and mini pappadums for snacking while watching the latest series on Netflix.

I continued sleuthing. I went next to the shelves with chutneys. The Masterfood chutney was there but next to it was something new. Bottles, not jars, of Green Chilli Chutney. I checked the ingredients - serrano pepper, coriander leaves and turmeric powder. It's approaching Indian freshly made side dishes accompanying curry. Overall, this was disappointing. And no pickles.

On another shelf were sauces - Korma, Tikka Masala, Rogahn Josh, and, inevitably, Butter Chicken - which I abhor as a jumped-up travesty of a curry. Above them were packets of a product line new to me, Indian simmer sauces - the big three - Korma, Tikka Masala, Rogahn Josh – and again Butter Chicken. There was also one for Sri Lankan Coconut and Cashew Nut. Now, sauces for simmering or otherwise are not really South Asian. I mean sure you might

reheat the left-over curry sauce from the night before and chuck in some fresh meat or vegetables. But to have a pre-made sauce to which meat or vegetables can be added is different. Still, I had to step back from my purism. If simmer sauces were a way to encourage folk to make South Asian dishes, who am I to say no.

Then I noticed a man on the floor checking some shelf items. I bowled up to him and asked him if he was one of the new owners. He was. I told him how excited I was to have South Asian foods in the shop. He thanked me and said they were trying to shake up the products. He said he and his business partner thought the former owners had not done much with the shop and that they were going to try new items including a good range of South Asian cuisine products. So, there is now intent. Having sussed me out as of South Asian heritage he asked if there were products that I would like. I told him of the disappointing dearth of South Asian chutneys and pickles. He gestured toward the Masterfoods Chutney and the new Green Chilli Chutney. I made a 'yes but' sound. I said I'd love to see an Indian date and lime chutney or a green mango pickle. He said they would see what was available at a good price. I have to do some homework on this. I didn't push it and ask about getting some frozen grated coconut instead of the bags – much handier, keep it in the freezer and break off only what you want at the time.

Pleased with all of this I went to the checkout counter. There, nuzzling up to the glass cold drinks fridges, on a small cupboard was an automatic chai machine much like those push-button tea or coffee machines we used to have before the coffee pod craze. It gave me four choices of chai – masala, cardamom, ginger, and kadak (star anise). I opted for masala. I got a paper cup, put it under the spigot, and pressed the masala chai button. A hot thin liquid dribbled into the cup the colour of light brown tea I recalled from chai stalls on my travels around India. And push-button chai has none of the theatre of preparing street chai – pouring the liquid from one container to another several times before serving it. I was asked if I wanted sugar which is pretty much in chais on the streets. I declined thinking of my diabetes. Though if they offered condensed milk, I would have avidly said yes. I left, cradling my chai, sipping it as I walked home. The taste was passably masala.

As I walked, I wondered where South Asian foods would go next at the corner store. Will a better range of chutneys be stocked? Will fresh curry leaves and pandanus snuggle up to the fresh lemongrass? They have frozen pastizzi will they introduce frozen samosas? Would Indian sweets like laddoo, rusgullas and gulab jamun join the halwa and nougat at the checkout counter?

On the shelves the fifteen different pastas, dozens of canned tomatoes, and tomato pastes remain. But there is a new cuisine - South Asian - looking for a seat at Petersham's domestic Australian tables and home cinemas through the shelves of the corner shop.