

# THE SUNDAY EXPRESS MAGAZINE

# eye



**PLUS:**  
**Feed the Cake**

Nothing can match a mother's discerning taste buds, when Christmas cakes must be dark, moist, spicy, fruity and boozy



**ALSO:**  
**'Tis the Season**

When unexpected culinary cheer arrives at the doorstep of a writer ahead of Christmas, there's always something simmering

## SUGAR & SPICE & ALL THINGS NICE

Christmas is incomplete without a laden table and the conviviality of family and friends. In this special issue that celebrates the upcoming festival, we bring together stories redolent of good times and the joy of shared meals. First up, how Landour has nurtured its legacy of community recipes through a bakery that feels like home

Ganesh Sali

**"WHERE'S THE Bacon House?"**

It does not matter where you happen to be. The aroma of their Christmas cake full of cinnamon, vanilla and nutmeg, wafting in the air, will drag you to the Landour Bakehouse that visitors refer to as the Bakery, the Bacon House or even the Bread House.

To those of us to whom Landour is home, we see it as our revenge upon our symbiotic twin Mussoorie's over-crowded Kempty Falls or the Mall Road.

"One cold winter's evening five years ago, Rakesh, who had a ration shop, called Munshi Mull Radhey Lal General & Provision Store (estd.1872), visited us," recalls entrepreneur Sanjay Narang, who along with his gifted sister Rachna, had once set up one of Asia's biggest on-flight catering businesses. "Could you rent our ration shop?" asked Rakesh.

"What on earth will we do with ration shop?" wondered the brother and sister, exchanging glances. "We could start a bakery. But there's a limit on how much flour, sugar, milk and baking powder one could sell!" Narang remembers thinking, and adds, with a laugh, "Or so I thought!" Rakesh agreed to lower the rent. In exchange, the siblings offered him a percentage of the profits.

"Who could have predicted what was waiting to happen?" reminisces Narang. Though restoration did take time, what with the ancient lime-coated hessian ceiling sagging under the weight of a hundred years of dust, cobwebs and rat-droppings, everything changed when Rachna waved her magic wand to create the Landour Bakehouse. The rest was a piece of cake.

Over a hundred years — from 1850 to 1950 — the missionary community in India loved the hills and enjoyed a great standard of living. They certainly did not undergo any culinary hardships, as anyone reading these recipes will realise. Landour had an incredible mix of military doctors, nursing sisters, Landour Language School students, and Woodstock School parents and staff, who met at the Landour Community Book Club and exchanged international recipes.

Who knew that their recipes when put together and spiral-bound would go on to bake Landour a better place? First published in 1930, the typescript of the recipes were up-



dated, revised and published as *The Landour Cookbook*, through five editions. Landour Bakehouse is a tribute to the ingenuity and effort of these pioneers. Many of its desserts and puddings have been borrowed from *The Landour Cookbook*. So what's

**VIEWS FROM THE TOP**  
(Clockwise from top) All set for good times; Nutty Himalayan Cookies at Landour Bakehouse; the old settlement of Landour; set for a silent night

Redburn Cottage in the 1960s, tells me: "My mother brought back a lactometer from America. The solid proof, shocked the milkmen though briefly. They soon learnt to add flour to increase the density of watered milk." Nevertheless, we are grateful to our *dood-*

*hwalas*, for their milk of varying textures. Without their contribution, half these dishes would not have been possible.

Our local bakers were a common sight up until the 1970s, carrying tin-trunks full of breads and confectionery; fudge, stick jaw, marzipan and meringues, on their heads. Most of them came from Ghogas, a tiny village 40 miles from Tehri; their ancestors arrived in Garhwal with the refugee prince, Sulaiman Shikoh, Dara Shikoh's son in the summer of 1658.

As I write, Abha, the lady-of-the-house, reminds me of the cookbook's mysterious powers, especially its tips on baking: "For leavening with baking powder or soda at 6,500 feet, reduce from four tablespoons to one at sea level. Never reduce the sugar. Use the maximum amount of eggs and increase flour by one tablespoon for every increase of 1,500 feet.

Like me, you too will learn that if you are downie, eat a brownie! For life is too short! Eat all the cake you want and wash it down with the special coffee brewed at the Landour Bakehouse.

**TIPS FOR LANDOUR'S CHRISTMAS CAKE:**

Ideally, the preparation for our traditional Christmas cakes start weeks before with cake mixing, where you soak plenty of finely-chopped dried fruits and spices in a variety of alcohol. For the less adventurous, you may substitute orange juice for a citrus flavour; pineapple for a tang of sunshine and apple juice for a tilt towards a neutral flavour. If you're using fruit juice, you will have to microwave the soaked dried fruit. Remember to add a little diced orange peel rind to avoid a bland cake. For a good batter, one must not use too much baking powder as a cake is no cake unless it's fluffy. To get that dark brown colour, use dark-brown sugar. For extra moistness, use both oil and butter. Beat it all up till it's smooth. Bake very slowly in a pre-heated oven. Usually, at 7,000 ft in the sky, this can take up to three-and-a-half hours but the result is worth waiting for.

Author Ganesh Sali lives in Landour. Born and home-grown in the hills, he belongs to those select few whose words are illustrated by their own pictures. Author of two dozen books, some translated into 20 languages, his work has found recognition world-wide

## Table Talk

Economist and 2019 Nobel laureate Abhijit Banerjee, who recently released his cookbook, *Cooking to Save Your Life*, does a rapid-fire on all things food

Paromita Chakrabarti

**Buffet or sit-down dinner?**  
Sit-down dinner, absolutely!

**Favourite dinner guests?**  
People who like to eat well, laugh a lot, who are indulgent of silliness.

**A typical Christmas dinner would have?**  
Khurdi (or Kolhapuri Pandhra Rassa), Mutton biryani, beetroot pachadi, carrot koshimbir, palong saag (spinach) bhaja (stir-fried) with almonds and raisins, Bûches de Noël, Christmas fruit cake

**Finicky solitary cook or cook-along partner?**  
Never alone

**Favourite meal of the day?**  
Dinner

**Baked or fried?**  
Depends

**Sweet or spicy?**  
Savoury

**Shorshe ilish or kosha mangsho?**  
Shorshe ilish

**Patishapta or Madeleine?**  
Patishapta

**Champagne or tea before the Nobel dinner?**  
Champagne

**The ingredient that you are least comfortable with?**  
Pastry

**Favourite kitchen gadget?**  
Mortar and pestle

**Bengali food or French food?**  
Bengali food

**A hand-me-down advice that's stood you in good stead in the kitchen?**  
Fry peyaj bata (onion paste) well at medium low heat — till the oil leaks out from the edges — before adding water. Our cook Keshto, who lived with us for ever, taught me that.

**Favourite food writer?**  
I love Marcella Hazan's voice as a cookbook writer — both passionate and laconic.

**Favourite cook?**  
My *chhoto pishi* (my father's youngest sister), who passed on this year.

**Favourite street food?**  
Puchhka, the Kolkata-style golgappa, with not a hint of sweet

**A dish that you love and the rest of the family detests?**



**RECIPES FOR LIFE**  
Abhijit Banerjee

Various forms of *mukwaas* and *churan*. The intensity of the flavours seems to bother them.

**A recipe that you never get right?**  
Ambat waran Marathi style — I never quite manage get the balance of the flavours quite as perfect as my *maushis* and *mamis* used to.

**If you could prepare a meal for anyone, who would it be for and what would you make?**  
I can't answer that question — a meal is a narrative, and the guest is the central charac-

ter. For me, I would make a roasted mung dal khichri with cauliflower and peas with some fried baigan and onion fritters on the side, and eat it with a panoply of *achars*, from sweet chhundo to green chillies in mustard.

**Christmas cake**

This is my favourite kind of Christmas cake, a bunch of rum-soaked dried fruits barely held together by a few grains of almond flour. The downside is that it is a bit extravagant, but it is Christmas only once a year (though then there is Durga Puja and Diwali, and birthdays, and any number of other excuses to go wild).

**INGREDIENTS**

- 200 gm raisins
- 200 gm orange and lemon peel
- 200 gm dried figs
- 200 gm dried dates
- 100 gm glâçe cherries
- 100 gm pitted prunes
- 250 gm walnuts
- 1 cup of rum (or brandy)
- 1 ½ cups (roughly 175 gm) almond flour
- 3 tbs regular flour (*maida*)
- 1 tsp baking powder
- ¼ tsp ground nutmeg (be very careful, nutmeg can completely dominate the dish, so err on the side of less rather than more)
- ¼ tsp ground mace (*javitri*)
- ¼ tsp ground cloves
- 1 tsp ground dried ginger
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon (my wife doesn't love cinnamon in desserts, so I skip this one. In general, you should feel free to skip any or all of the spices. The rum and the fruits are enough by themselves)
- Pinch of salt



- 150 gm (three-quarters of 200 gm package) unsalted butter, softened by leaving outside the fridge
- ¾ cup (150 gm) dark-brown sugar (or the same amount of white or light-brown sugar)
- 5 eggs
- More rum (brandy) to "feed" the cake

**Method**

Start this about a week before you plan to eat it. The day before you plan to bake, chop the dried fruits and nuts into raisin-sized pieces (or close enough). Don't bother cutting the raisins, of course. Pour the rum over it, cover and leave for 12-24 hours.

Next morning, preheat the oven to 150 degrees Celsius and set the butter out to soften. Mix together the flours, the baking powder and the spices (including salt). Drain

the fruits and mix into the flour mixture. Cream the butter with the sugar till it's light enough to easily fall off a spoon (use a beater or give your arm a workout). Mix in the flour mixture, making sure that everything is smoothly integrated (but no further). Pour in to 8x8 inch baking tin (or a 9x5 inch loaf pan) that you have buttered and lined with parchment paper (or substitute). Bake for two hours (or until a toothpick stuck into it comes out clean.

Let cool and invert pan to get it out. Peel off the parchment, and invert on to a sheet of foil. Make holes on the surface of the cake with a toothpick and pour 2-3 tbs of rum over it, making sure it gets everywhere. Cover tightly with foil and leave in a cool place (but unless it is very hot, not the fridge). Repeat the "feeding" with rum, every day until the day before you will serve it.