Soaking up my Bajra roti in the Laal Maas gravy, using my fingers to scoop it up, was the most glutinous pleasure I have experienced in recent times. The hotel: Laxmi Niwas Palace Bikaner, a residential palace turned into a luxury hotel.

The dining hall, aptly named Swarna Mahal (palace of gold), has walls painted with beautiful motifs, locally known as Usta art. The luxury lifestyle of the Rajasthani royals reflects on the grand palace’s painted walls. Yet, eating the rustic meal does not make me feel out of place in such a sumptuous setting. The experience feels perfect.

Laxmi Niwas Palace is among a slew of luxury hotels that are rediscovering the ambrosial pleasures of India’s many-hued regional cuisines.

It takes a chef of great sensitivity to realise the importance of serving beautiful ghee-soaked breads with hot red meat curry in an upscale hotel, where some guests may not be habituated to eating such raw, elemental dishes that define rural Rajasthani cooking.

The Bajra Khichdi, another recipe perfected over several generations in Rajasthan, is my particular favourite. The bajra, or pearl millet, is mildly pounded with a sprinkling of water and then cooked into a clarified butter or ghee-soaked khichdi. Modern research proves this technique to be the most effective way to cook bajra; else, it tends to play havoc with the thyroid hormone.

Guests of Jaisalmer’s leading luxury boutique hotel, Suryagarh, can enjoy the Bajre ki Khichdi with a generous dollop of ghee. The hotel, in fact, serves an array of Rajasthani fare at their breakfast buffet, which is also famous for a melodious live flute recital even as peacocks strut around the central courtyard. Suryagarh serves an excellent halwai breakfast; a local halwai (consider him India’s version of a pastry chef) cooks up more than 25 dishes that can be consumed for breakfast, including a really large quantity of mithai (desserts).

In my experience as a food writer and consultant, I have seen guests enjoy a Dal Pakwan (crisp fried Indian bread served with chickpeas) over Egg Benedict, and Jhangore ki Kheer (millet pudding) over Tiramisu. India has a vast variety of local grains, millets and beans that grow in different regions. Destination hotels, known for their extravagance, now incorporate local ingredients in their menu in a bid to offer their guests a culinary experience that defines the culture and history of the destination they are in.

The Oberoi Group has been hosting regional food festivals regularly under their flagship programme, Rivayat, which attempts to revive micro-regional cuisines such as Banarasi and Rampuri. Chef Tejas Sovani, the Executive Sous Chef at Amaranta, the coastal restaurant at The Oberoi Gurgaon uses the knowledge gained at Noma, during his three month stint—training in the art of fermentation, foraging, use of wild seasonal food and sustainable cooking—to effective use. His menu forages from the different regional cuisines of India. Sovani heads a team of six chefs from Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, and his menu features some of the best street foods from these regions. Among the dishes we highly recommend: Kolkata’s spicy street food served in a bento box, Khakhra Chips and Dhokla Pakodas from Gujarat, and the iconic Laal Maas and Kachoris from Rajasthan, all plated in contemporary style.

Ananda in the Himalayas serves a Garhwali thali with very unusual dishes, such as Jhikha Aloo (local black seeds that are cooked with potatoes) and Jhangore ki Kheer. Chef Sandip Biswas, the spa and hotel’s Executive Chef says the attempt is to keep the food served light, healthy and local.

India’s native cuisines take into account climatic conditions and the use of
seasonal ingredients. Chef Biswas says that all the ingredients for the Garhwali menu are sourced locally; the herbs are foraged and dried under the mountainous region's mellow sun in a traditional way, and several kinds of millets, vegetables and fruits are grown on the picturesque hill slopes in the most organic way possible.

JW Marriott Mussoorie Walnut Grove Resort & Spa also serves Garhwali cuisine but the emphasis, here, is on walnuts. Mussoorie and Landour have a wide spread of walnut groves. On the hotel's itinerary are journeys to homes of the locals, where guests can eat native food, like Walnut Chutney served with crispy Bajra rotis. The hotel also serves an excellent Kandali ki Bhurji (a vegetable made out of wild nettle) and Gahat ki Dal (a lentil soup made using horsegram). Marriott’s Director of F&B Sunil Kumar says that several local chefs, who had taken up jobs in other cities, are heading back to popularise their culinary heritage.

The chefs at Coriander Kitchen Buffet, the regional restaurant at Conrad Pune, cook up a host of Maharashtrian-Konkani dishes, such as Kombdi cha Rassa (mutton curry), Malwani Fish Curry, Bombil Fry and Gawarichi Bhaji (cluster beans). Mandar Madav, the hotel’s Executive Chef reveals that Amboli with Kalya Vatanyachi Usal (fluffy pancake served with black peas curry) is very popular. Chef Anirban Dasgupta, Executive Chef at Vivanta by Taj, Guwahati, contends that guests appreciate a simple meal of Sticky Rice cooked in bamboo cavity and served with a watery pork curry, infused with local herbs and Bhut Jolokia (world’s spiciest chilli).

It comes as no surprise when a hotel like Hyderbad Marriott invites a chef from Assam to curate a festival around Assamese cuisine, the locals dig into Maha Prosad, Khar and Khorika (the former is a dish cooked with alkaline banana stem ash, the latter is chicken or fish skewer with herbs-infused chutney).

The beauty of regional cuisines lies in their perfectly balanced nutrients and their rich taste; each recipe has been perfected down generations, with a single-minded preoccupation of mindful eating and use of local ingredients.

Till about 10 years ago, no one wanted to infuse a Lal Maas with French pastry. Such bizarre experimentation aside, the Lal Maas and Bajre ki roti combination continues to survive the vicissitudes of whimsical tastes.

From left to right: Ananda in the Himalayas serves Garhwali thali; Assamese spread at Vivanta by Taj Guwahati includes Maha Prosad and chicken or fish skewer with herbs-infused chutney.

On the following pages, we look at how some luxury hotels are reviving and revitalising our long lost culinary heritage.

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