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NOTO'S NATURAL  
FRUIT POPS

# An ice cream that cares

**TASTE TEST** Inspired by a Sicilian town famous for ice creams, a Mumbai couple launches tubs and sticks they claim are low in calories and high in nutrients. Is that even possible?

**CYNERA RODRICKS**

THIS sultry summer has us in the mood for one thing and one thing only: ice cream. It's a delicious, beat-the-heat staple for the season. Ashni and Varun Sheth, founders of NOTO, a homegrown ice cream brand, say it's fine to eat

ice cream often, if it's healthy. They claim theirs is. NOTO is a low-calorie ice cream with no added sugar or preservatives. The couple felt it was time to introduce healthy desserts to the Indian market.

Varun, who has a degree in cu-

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# A tale of many masalas

A restaurateur from New Hampshire, who first fell in love with bhindi sabzi after visiting a desi grocery store, has collaborated with a Mumbai chef for a podcast to rekindle his relationship with Indian cooking

**JANE BORGES**

IF someone were to ask you about your earliest memory of an Indian spice, you'd probably have to jog your mind to when. Like, the first time you tasted haldi in khichdi, or sipped on elaichi chai, or enjoyed dal drenched in an aromatic tadka of rai and curry leaves.

"It's not an easy memory to reclaim," admits Mumbai-based Ragini Kashyap, food researcher and founder of multinational supper club, Third Culture Cooks. So, when American cookbook author and chef Keith Sarasin told her about that time from his late teens, when he walked into an Indian "dukaan" located in a small strip mall, and was overcome by the "intoxicating smell of toasted jeera," Kashyap was more than amused.

"I grew up eating all these spices. But here was someone who hadn't, and yet, distinctly remembered the backstory to each and every Indian spice he had first tasted," she says. This was the ice-breaker to a foodie conversation that eventually translated into a new podcast

series, *More Than Masala* on Spotify, where the duo discuss the complex history of Indian spices, and the rich stories, folklore, warfare and cultural connections associated with them.

Sarasin met Kashyap almost serendipitously. The chef says that after 20 years of working nonstop in kitchens across the US, he decided to take a short break during the lockdown last year, selling his restaurant business to his partner. He used this time to turn his focus to Indian food. It's how he found himself in a food and politics course helmed by Mumbai-based archaeologist and food historian Kurush F Dalal, where Kashyap was doing a presentation. Both, Dalal and Kashyap, he says, have

helped him see Indian food with fresh eyes.

Growing up in a small city in New Hampshire, Sarasin had no exposure to Indian food. "But, I had an Indian friend whose family owned a restaurant there, and he'd always try to convince me to try a meal with him. I was a very picky eater, so I'd refuse point-blank." Once, after having lost a video game challenge with him, he agreed. "That moment changed my life," he recalls. The two went to a local restaurant, where

A Gujarati thali prepared by Sarasin, with daal, kadhi, undhiyu, aam shrikhand, batata nu shaak, paka kela ni bhaji, steamed rice and papad



Sarasin ordered a chicken tandoori gravy and garlic naan. "I ripped off a piece, dunked it into the sauce, and that first bite... it was like an explosion. I didn't know that food could ever taste like that."

Not too long after that, he visited an Indian grocery store and was surprised by what he saw on the racks. A Gujarati lady, named Indira, working in a kitchen at the back of the store, sensing his wonderment, got him to try what he describes as a "semolina sabzi". The two immediately hit it off, and Sarasin, who started cooking as early as 14, convinced Indira to teach him to make Indian meals. "The first day I walked in, she had

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Author-chef Keith Sarasin co-hosts *More than Masala* with Ragini Kashyap, where the two discuss the complex history of Indian spices



PIC COURTESY/  
ALISHA VASUDEVA

LISTEN  
*More than Masala*,  
Spotify

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linary arts from New York, says, "This generation is acutely aware of what is on its plate. Diets are no longer a passing fad, but rather a lifestyle. People want to eat well in order to feel well. We wish to give them that." The general perception, explains Ashni, who is a design graduate from Istituto Marangoni, Milan, is that what tastes delicious is also unhealthy. "Varun worked on the recipe for a year to produce flavours customers will crave for rather than settle for," she says.

The brand is named after a small town in Sicily, famous for its creamy ice creams. For now, they have rolled out classics like French vanilla, dark chocolate, mocha choco-chip and salted caramel, along with seasonal fruit specials like mango cream, spicy pink guava, malai kulfi and cereal milk. They also serve ice pop-



VARUN AND ASHNI SHETH

sicles in imli, jamun, pina colada, strawberry, raspberry, and mango coconut flavours.

A 125 ml tub of NOTO contains 75-95 calories, three grams of fat, 75 per cent less sugar, and more protein. The popsicles, they claim, contain no added sugar and are made with 40 per



HEALTHY NOTO TUBS

cent real unsweetened fruit, apple concentrate, vitamin C, and prebiotic fibre. This writer ordered the spicy pink guava and mango cream tub (₹95 for 125ml), and two popsicles (₹105 each), imli and jamun, and we were not let down. The claim of 'no compromise on sweetness and taste' is correct.

The spicy pink guava, made using guava pulp with a sprinkle of chilli powder, was a hit. The little burst of chilli elevated the flavour. The mango's texture was soft and smooth. That said, the sweetness was understated compared to the spicy guava, and since it's a mango ice cream, we expected to see more

## THE REAL DEAL

According to Carlyne Remedios, a clinical nutritionist, most regular ice creams come with a minimum of 12 gm of sugar per serve. "This is about 50 per cent of the recommended amount of sugar intake in the entire day. NOTO's nutritional values label indicates that it comes with less than half. Their ice creams are low in fat, bringing the overall calorie count down to not more than 100 calories per serve. Added to that is the protein and fibre, which help prevent spikes in the form of fructo-oligosaccharides, which is great for gut bacteria."

of the fruit. We think it's ideal for those battling sugar cravings, but watching sugar intake. The imli popsicle was like chewing the tangy fruit. We sprinkled a pinch of salt and chilli powder over it, before taking the slurp. The jamun flavour was a standout, tasting fresh tiny bits of the fruit. It tasted like pure fruit on a stick.

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me make her rice, and halfway through it, she told me I was doing it all wrong. Indira's food was very simple, but absolutely delicious. It was the soul that she put into it I think, that made it special. Her bhindi [sabzi] and masoor dal were to die for," remembers Sarasin. He eventually began helping her out in her catering business, handling all the meat preparations. "I also started developing my Indian vocabulary, making sure that when I was in the kitchen with her, I only used the Hindi names of spices."

During the lockdown, voraciously listening to Vikram Doctor's The Real Food Podcast, he was led to one of the show's guests, Dalal, who he says has now become his "guru" on all things food. His plans to visit India this year were cut short due to the pandemic. But, his new podcast show, he feels, is a good excuse to think about Indian cuisine differently. "Ragini is academic when it comes to her approach to food. We thought



A farmers' dinner hosted by Sarasin at a farm in New England

what if a fine-dining chef [like myself] collaborated on a project with her, where we could do a deep-dive into spices," he says.

Each monthly episode addresses a different spice. At the end of it, Kashyap throws in a challenge for Sarasin, who has to prepare a dish using the spice as a key ingredient. One

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of his first challenges was to prepare sheermal, a mildly-sweet, saffron-flavoured naan. Recently, he made mooriyerachi curry, a Kerala-inspired Syrian Christian dish, using elaichi.

Meanwhile, Sarasin is hoping to use his learnings to introduce the diverse regional Indian food to Americans, whose knowledge of the cuisine, he says, is limited to butter chicken-naan. This month, along with chef Tarun Bangalore, he hosted a nine-course pop-up dinner called Aatma, inspired by Indian states, using fresh local ingredients from New England farms, at the restaurant Stages in Dover, New Hampshire. "I call it aatma [soul], because for me, this [Indian cooking] is my truest form of expression... it's my true self."

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A tamarind glaze vada-poha sabzi with beetroot dahi

# Out of handi and onto a slice

**REVIEW** Can butter chicken, traditionally married to tandoori naan, taste good between slices of multigrain bread?



Luscious' official website claims that the spreads are preservative-free and best eaten within 30 days

SOME culinary searches last a lifetime and end nowhere. My sandwich spread hunt would've gone the same way. For me, the defining readymade sandwich memory dates back to when I was 12. My aunt, now in Bengaluru, held a power job in Abu Dhabi. Generous of heart, she'd come back with Duty-Free bags, holding among other goodies, the precious Kraft cheese and a tinned sandwich spread with a hint of herb and tiny chunks of chicken. Not too mayonnaise-y, not too bland. For the next few weeks, my frugal lunch box would carry

"Gulf" sandwiches, not Venky's chicken nuggets.

A chance decision to pick up a bottle each of Chunky Continental Chicken Spread and Creamy Butter Chicken Spread (₹199 for 200gm) from meat ecommerce startup Licious, took me back to that lunchtime. The cracked pepper and hint of garlic, I liked, and although it came in a bottle, it didn't taste "packaged". The other varieties, which I haven't tried, include Honey mustard chicken, Butter garlic prawns and Shawarma chicken, and the brand's official website claims that the spreads are preservative-free and best eaten within 30 days. I thought the single-serve peel back packs were convenient (₹29). Adding a few spoonfuls of the Continental Chicken Spread to penne may make a jhat pat alfredo pasta of sorts, I think. The butter chicken variant may sit better with the Indian palate given our love for the North Indian dish. The most obvious snack to rustle up with it is the kathi roll with leftover chapatis, but I am going to try spreading it on pita and adding a few slices of caramelised white onion and make it a pizza night.

AT: Licious.in, and other grocery aggregator sites

RATING: **GOOD**

Sunday Mid-day reviews restaurants anonymously and pays for meals and products.