

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

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## How one chef became an evangelist for India's glorious regional food

At Besharam in San Francisco, Heena Patel focuses on Gujarati cuisine, but her interests keep expanding

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By Leena Trivedi-Grenier

Photos by Celeste Noche

SAN FRANCISCO — It was my “Ratatouille” moment. On my third trip to Besharam, a waiter set a plate in front of me. “Khaman dhokla, based on chef Heena Patel’s favorite version from Surat, a city in southern Gujarat,” he said, referring to India’s westernmost state.

Suddenly, it was the late 1980s, my unibrow was back, and I was chilling with my Gujarati family on plastic-covered couches. My aunties’ khaman dhokla, a vibrant yellow steamed chickpea cake, was always soft and comforting, an edible hug with a side of cilantro chutney.



Then I was back at Besharam, and its khaman hit me in three chews. Patel had taken a few typical toppings (the ones my aunties used) and turned them into a coconut cilantro chutney, pushing my favorite flavors to the forefront. It was both familiar and completely new.

It's hard to find a place where the food reminds me of family, and that's especially true at U.S. Indian restaurants, where Mughlai cuisine from north Indian states is ubiquitous. Think decadent stews such as chicken tikka masala and chana masala along with naan. Patel's Gujarati food tastes like vegetarian home cooking, modern and infused with California produce. Her approach is autobiographical and hyper-regional, linking dishes on her menu to cities in Gujarat, such as Ahmedabad, Rajkot, Surat and Vadodara.



Besharam was an unexpected homecoming for me, like finding a good place to rest right before realizing that you're exhausted. Patel understands that feeling. "Representation is so important to me as a minority," she said. "Not having that representation of our food makes me want to shout out a little more through this menu. ... Our cuisine is so varied and innovative."

What is Gujarati cuisine? A large portion is lacto-vegetarian because about 88 percent of residents are Hindu, which promotes vegetarianism. “So Gujarat is full of farms, right?” Patel said. “And we ate what we grew. Lots of vegetables and pulses and wheat, lots of bread. Very seasonal eating.” She says most Gujarati food includes the four S’s: sweet, sour, salty and spicy.



Hetal Vasavada, a Gujarati American cookbook author and pastry chef in the Bay Area, said the cuisine is marked by an incredible variety because different households use different spices and techniques. Patel and Vasavada said Gujaratis can get worked up when a restaurant’s food isn’t like their mom’s. “But what they don’t see is the beauty in it, because there’s never been a standard, right?” Vasavada said. “So all these recipes have changed individually throughout, you know, generations.”

When chef Preeti Mistry thinks of Gujarati food, they think of “a gazillion snacks,” salty ones called farsan in Gujarat, often made from gram flour (a.k.a. besan, made from kala chana, different from American chickpeas). The cuisine is “almost vegan, aside from ghee and yogurt, and balanced,” they said.

Born in Balasinor in eastern Gujarat, Patel spent the school year in Mumbai and all school breaks in Gujarat on her family’s farms with her parents and three younger sisters. She’s soft-spoken, a trait praised in India’s patriarchal society. But her fierce independence was self-taught. In her late 40s, after raising two children and running two businesses, she followed her passion and attended La Cocina, a food business incubator program, opening a pop-up in 2014 called Rasoi.





In 2018, Patel, in her early 50s, partnered with chef Daniel Patterson’s Alta restaurant group to open Besharam. She also had the full support of her husband, Paresh (who works front of house), and her two adult children, Vishakha and Ankoor. A year later, Patel, along with two other chefs of color, stopped working with Patterson, citing a lack of control of their restaurants, among other issues. For Patel, that had meant adding dishes that weren’t native to Gujarat but were popular in U.S.-based Indian restaurants. That would never work for her: Patel is a disrupter, and her passion lies in challenging Americans’ perception of what Indian food can be.

Besharam means “shameless,” and one of its uses is as an insult against women in India who don’t adhere to patriarchal norms. Patel is proudly besharam, and it has paid off: She won Eater’s Restaurant of the Year in 2019. After revamping the restaurant to focus on vegetarian hyper-regional Gujarati foods, she was a semifinalist in 2022 for the James Beard Foundation Award for best chef in California. Last year, Patel cooked a Diwali meal for actress Poorna Jagganathan from Netflix’s “Never Have I Ever.”



Patel's food memories propel her and Besharam forward. For example, Vadodara is a street food city, and her family would walk to the Kamati Baug park to eat endless shrikhand, a sweet yogurt dessert that Patel could never binge at home. It influenced her shrikhand cheesecake with blueberry saffron compote. It's also where she tried kala khatta soda, a lesser-known sweet, sour and funky soda with spices and jamun (java plum) syrup. At Besharam, blackberries, pomegranate juice and tamarind replace the hard-to-source jamun.

Memories drive her home cooking, too. She grew up "starting the day with puja [Hindu prayers] and a sweet bite of prasad [food blessed by gods] like burfi," she says. It's a stovetop dessert bar that's made from various flours, dairy, or shredded fruits or vegetables. Her mom made burfi from besan, while she prefers ricotta, which creates a creamy, fudge-like texture with tang.

Why isn't Gujarati cuisine more popular in the United States?

Krishnendu Ray, a professor of food studies at New York University, cites demographics and Eurocentrism. For example, India is 11 times bigger than Italy in size, but there are 15 million people of Italian descent in the United States versus 4.7 million people of Indian descent (and only 1 million of those are Gujarati). Also, regional Italian cuisine is unfairly considered more prestigious. "If an American does not know about regional Italian food, that is a lot more embarrassing than if they do not know about regional Indian food," Ray said by email.



He suggested comparing Gujarati food to Korean food, whose community has similar demographics (around 1 million descendants in America) but much more visibility. That's because, during the Korean War, some American soldiers married Korean women, brought home a taste for Korean food, and it spread. "So Americans are a lot more familiar with Korean culture and food than they will ever be with Gujarati culture and food," he said.



But hope is not lost. "The world is also moving away from a U.S.-centered world to a Sino-centric one," Ray said, meaning that it revolves around China and Asian countries. "Our global cultural idioms will follow, including palatal ones." Restaurants such as Besharam, he said, open our minds to non-Eurocentric ways to eat.

Patel's mind is already open. Her menu covers four cities at a time, so she added Mumbai in place of Rajkot last year, including such dishes as a pav bhaji puff and drunken pani puri. This year, she tested out Jaipur, Rajasthan, in place of Vadodara. She's also interested in covering more rural hyper-regional Gujarati cuisine.



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She doesn't know whether Besharam will go back to an all-Gujarati menu or shift further away, and she likes that. Her restaurant is a living, changing reflection of herself.

"Sometimes we get stagnant ... we limit ourselves," she said. "I don't want to limit myself because there's inspiration to be found in every experience I've had in my life. To me, that's exciting."

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# Walnut Ricotta Burfi

20 mins   course: Dessert

By Leena Trivedi-Grenier

Burfi (or barfi) is a type of South Asian mithai, or sweet. Most have a rich, milky flavor with a fudge-like texture, sweet but not cloying. This recipe includes a form of mawa (or mava, khoya, khoa), a quintessential ingredient in most mithai — the milk solids left after hours of simmering full-fat milk to yield what looks like low-moisture fresh cheese. It's possible to find frozen mawa, but a common shortcut exists — mawa powder, made from full-fat milk; it can be substituted with whole-milk powder.

Expect a lot of stirring with this recipe, but once you taste this tender, crunchy cardamom- and saffron-scented treat, you'll agree that the effort is worthwhile. Serve with your favorite black tea, coffee or masala chai.

**Storage:** Store in an airtight container either at room temperature for up to 3 days, or refrigerate for up to 2 weeks.

**Where to buy:** Mawa powder can be found at Indian markets and online. Whole-milk powder and ghee can be found at well-stocked supermarkets, Indian markets and online. Use a quality, smooth whole-milk ricotta from brands such as Galbani or BelGioioso, available in well-stocked supermarkets.

Adapted from Heena Patel, chef of Besharam restaurant in San Francisco.

## Ingredients

2 1/2 tablespoons (35 grams) ghee or unsalted butter, plus more for the pan  
1 1/3 cups (127 grams) walnut halves, divided  
1 cup (235 grams) whole-milk ricotta cheese, preferably Bel Gioioso brand (see Notes)  
3 cups plus 2 1/2 tablespoons (256 grams) mawa powder or full-fat milk powder  
1 cup (200 grams) cane sugar or granulated sugar  
1 1/4 teaspoons ground cardamom (see Notes)  
1/4 teaspoon plus 1/8 teaspoon fine salt, divided  
1 generous pinch saffron threads

## Directions

*20 minutes plus 1 hour chilling time*

### Step 1

Grease the bottom and sides of an 8-inch square baking pan. Line the pan with a piece of parchment paper long enough to have a generous overhang on two sides.

### Step 2

Finely chop about 1 cup (100 grams) of the walnuts; and chop the remaining 1/3 cup (27 grams) into medium-size pieces, for the garnish.



**Step 3**

In a 10- to 12-inch nonstick skillet with tall sides over medium heat, melt the 2 1/2 tablespoons (35 grams) of ghee or butter. Add the ricotta and cook, stirring carefully, until thoroughly combined, 1 to 2 minutes. Continue cooking, stirring continuously, scraping the sides and bottom of the pan until the mixture thickens to the consistency of custard and coats the back of a spoon or flexible spatula, 4 to 6 minutes. (A trail left by your finger on the spoon or spatula should stay separated.) You may see some fat pooling on the sides and top of the mixture.

**Step 4**

Decrease the heat to low, add the mawa powder, sugar, the finely chopped walnuts, the cardamom, 1/4 teaspoon of the salt and the saffron and thoroughly mix to combine. Increase the heat to medium or medium-low and continue cooking, stirring constantly until the sugar starts to melt and the dough becomes cohesive. Keep stirring until the mixture resembles a soft dough and leaves the sides of the pan or can be all pushed to one side of the pan without sliding back to the other, about 4 minutes.

**Step 5**

Transfer the mixture to the prepared pan and smooth it out by gently tapping the pan on the counter and using a flat bottom of a measuring cup to smooth the surface. Sprinkle with the reserved medium-chopped walnuts and the remaining 1/8 teaspoon of the salt, gently pressing the garnishes into the dough with the bottom of the cup.

**Step 6**

Let the burfi cool completely uncovered on the counter, about 3 hours, or refrigerate it to speed up the process, about 1 hour. Using the parchment overhang, transfer the slab to a cutting board and cut into 1-inch squares. Serve at room temperature.

**Variations**

If you can't find mawa powder or powdered whole milk, combine 3 cups (207 grams) dry nonfat powdered milk and whisk it with generous 3/4 cup (200 grams) whole milk until smooth (it will thicken a little as it sits). Add it in place of the mawa powder, after you cook the ricotta with ghee. With the extra liquid, you may need to add 1 to 2 minutes to the cooking time in Step 3.

**Notes**

If grinding your own cardamom, use 1 teaspoon, as it will be more potent.

Adapted from Heena Patel, chef of Besharam restaurant in San Francisco.

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