



VIR SANGHVI



{ rude food }

Biryani to go!

Stage two of the delivery boom: fine dining pulaos and the big boys finally enter the market

And so, this week we are back to two of my hobby-horses. The first one is delivery. At the start of the lockdown I predicted that as time went on, delivery would assume a larger and larger chunk of what used to be called the "eating out" market. Restaurants, I predicted, would have to learn to adapt.

The second one is biryani. As you probably know, I am a bore on the subject of biryani. But for the last decade or so, my writing on the subject has had a narrower focus: regional biryanis.

Over 10 years ago, I wrote on those pages: "Let us not restrict ourselves to the old standbys. Let's explore the enormous regional variety of biryani and recognise that this is a symbol of India. Biryani is about more than just religion or region. It is a symbol of a country that takes differences and divergences, and then merges them into one India."

I am going to combine both my obsessions this week because ITC Hotels, long regarded as the Indian company with the best biryanis, has now done something unusual: it has taken delivery a step forward. And the vehicle it has used is biryani.

Though many of us have been warning about the rise of delivery, most restaurateurs and hotel chains have been slow to get the message. There have been some notable exceptions like Yum Yum Cha's Varun Tuli, who launched his delivery brand Noshi (with excellent packaging) while all the others slept. But mostly, top hotels and restaurants have taken the line that delivery means that they can just send dishes from their regular menus to guests. They have been consistently undercut by cloud kitchens, which have much lower costs and understand the delivery game far better.

Cloud kitchens are not haute cuisine/fine dining operations (you don't order from Biryani By Kilo and expect to get Dum Pukht quality food) but they are efficient, reasonably-priced and the food can be quite good. So, they are an attractive option for those of us who are not willing to pay restaurant prices for takeaway food while getting nothing like the restaurant experience.

So far, hotels have coped only cosmetically. Many have branded their delivery services or put their menus on apps. But they still treat delivery as an extension of their restaurants and expect to get the same high prices. It works if the food is



SOMETHING SPECIAL
Gosht Bohri Biryani from ITC's special only-for-delivery biryani and pulao range; (Right) Manisha Bhasin, the Corporate Chef

very good (in Delhi the Hyatt Regency has a loyal fan base, which will pay restaurant prices for delivery because of the high quality of the food).

But mostly, the big hotelier approach to delivery is marked by a staggering lack of imagination. These are people who have spent their lives making sure that the tablecloths are properly ironed and menu cards are well designed. The world of delivery is beyond their core competence. They cannot understand an environment where people eat their food at home.

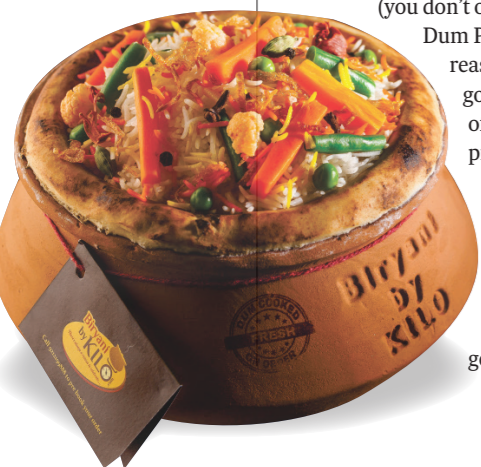
Meanwhile, cloud kitchen operations like Cross Border Kitchens have taken away a large chunk of their business and favourite dishes have emerged in the lockdown. For instance, biryani is now the most ordered delivery dish in the country. I can understand a foodie ordering biryani from Dum Pukht (if he or she is willing to pay ₹1,500 or so for a portion) but honestly,

P TOP HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS HAVE BEEN CONSISTENTLY UNDERCUT BY CLOUD KITCHENS, WHICH UNDERSTAND THE DELIVERY GAME FAR BETTER

Photos: Shutterstock



GOOD DEAL
Food from cloud kitchens like Biryani By Kilo is reasonably-priced and can be quite good



REGIONAL RELISH
Bombay Masala Biryani from Cross Border Kitchens' Biryani Central is another regional biryani that's worth a try

why you would order biryani from most other five-star hotels? They have no special expertise in biryani.

As the biryani boom raged, I wondered how India's biryani champion, ITC, would respond. Two weeks ago, it finally unveiled its offering.

Like some sleeping tiger that had suddenly woken up and pounced, ITC announced a special only-for-delivery biryani and pulao range. There are 10 items, four of them mutton, two chicken and four vegetarian.

They are made in the hotel kitchens by their top chefs to hotel standards. Unlike, say, the cloud kitchen biryanis which can involve commissaries, non-specialist (or untrained, even) chefs and classic fast food shortcuts in techniques, this is food made to ITC Hotels-quality standards.

But the key difference is price. While a Dum Pukht biryani can cost ₹1500, the most expensive biryani in the delivery range is ₹825. And for that you get a biryani made from top-quality ingredients (meat, or chicken or vegetables), a salan or a raita and one of ITC's signature giant gulab jamuns. (At Dum Pukht, a portion of two gulab jamuns costs ₹525 so I guess one gulab jamun would be ₹262. Here, it comes free with the pulao/biryani.)

The packaging is slick and easily disposable and you can order from any ITC Hotel or through Zomato or Swiggy. At the ₹700-800 mark, it is still more expensive than say, Behrouz or Biryani By Kilo (and the ITC portion is smaller), but not by that much. And these are fine dining biryanis, prepared in a five-star hotel's kitchen, to exacting hygiene standards, which can be ready around 25 minutes after your order comes in.

It is, as far as I know, the first serious attempt by any Indian hotel chain to create a product solely for the delivery market. And the best part, for me, at least, is that the range includes regional biryanis from Kolkata, Chennai, Andhra, etc.

There is no clarity over whose idea this initiative was. I asked Anil Chadha, the COO and Manisha Bhasin, the Corporate Chef, and they both credited it to Nakul Anand, the head of the chain. But Anand said that he was only a part of the creative team and



GREEN STUFF
ITC's Hyderabad Subz Tahri is a good option for vegetarians

gave the credit to Chadha and praised Manisha and Chef Madhu Krishnan for perfecting the recipes.

Manisha explained that ITC has a built-in advantage because the regional biryanis have long been available at its hotels in each region. I first had the Bohra biryani a dozen years ago at Mumbai's Grand Central, the Metiabruz biryani (a courtly spin on the biryanis of Kolkata's Park Circus) at the Royal Bengal and so on.

P YOU CAN GET GREAT CAL BIRYANIS ALL OVER INDIA. AND GREAT CHENNAI-STYLE KEEMA PULAOS IN DELHI. FINALLY, REGIONAL BIRYANIS HAVE HIT THE NATIONAL MAINSTREAM

All she had to do was to get the chefs at each hotel to perfect the recipes and to then work on standardising them for an all-India delivery model. Anand tasted every biryani himself several times before it went on the menu and insisted on regional varieties that were cooked to authentic recipes.

Though nobody at ITC will say so in so many words, my guess is that this is Anand's strategy to create a new revenue stream at a time when hotels have been badly hit by the Pandemic. He has taken the Indian food, for which ITC has always been the gold standard in the hotel sector, out of the five-star restaurant and made it accessible to people who were scared away by prices at say, the Maurya. I am sure this model will now be embraced by other hotel companies and could eventually offer a way out for the beleaguered hotel industry.

And for me, the best part is that suddenly you can get great Cal biryanis all over India. And great Chennai-style Keema pulaos in Delhi. Finally, regional biryanis have hit the national mainstream.

It's a fitting tribute to a pluralistic biryani-loving nation because it reminds us that though we are one, we can also be different.

The views expressed by the columnist are personal



For more columns by Vir Sanghvi, scan the QR code. Follow Vir on Twitter @virsanghvi



I Olives FROM SPAIN
It's Olive o'clock