

# WESTERN FOODS, INDIAN AVATARS

Eating oats, prunes, extra virgin olive oil—all of which have some health benefits—our way

BY KAVITA DEVGAN

The fast-food chains that opened shop in India learnt their lesson fast enough: If you have to succeed here you have to Indianize your menus. Some of these chains turned to vegetarian options with a vengeance, *paneer* (cottage cheese) became a star, Indian spices found space on racks, condiments like chutney took their place alongside ketchup, and even the names had an Indian-sounding ring. McDonald's *aloo tikki* burger, Subway's chicken *tikka* sub, KFC's new fried chicken with curry leaves, etc... the list is long.

"The Indian palate is unique, and while we may love to experience everything, many of us will only regularly eat the food items that taste a certain way," explains Daljit Kaur, senior dietitian at the Fortis Escorts Heart Institute, New Delhi. "Messages about oats being high in fibre have been buzzing for years now. But while almost everyone agrees that consuming oats regularly can be an excellent way to keep our hearts ticking along nicely, it is difficult to find urban Indians who consume them regularly. Most people end up eating them only once in a while," says Sandhya Pandey, chief dietitian, nutrition and dietetics department, Columbia Asia, Palam Vihar, Gurgaon. "Frankly some spice has to be part of my breakfast; it has always been," is the answer I get when I recommend that people include oats in breakfast. Some people even told me: 'I can't become a cold cereal eater overnight, can I?' Indian tastes are certainly hard-wired!" Pandey adds.

Somebody out there has been listening and that is why they took this superfood, launched savoury varieties in convenient, single, easy-to-cook packaging (what every busy, working Indian needs now) and Indianized the taste (with onion, garlic, lemon, Indian spices, etc.). Whether or not they have a winner on their hands, time will tell, but as of now consuming oats at breakfast seems to be an easier option.

Taking over from oats, we have listed four other "Western" foods, now seen in our grocery stores too, but used infrequently, and worked out ways to eat them—the Indian way!

## Prunes (dried plums)

"Prunes are super healthy. There's no doubt about that. They are a great source of vitamin A and myriad antioxidants, keep the digestion humming along nicely and their mega dose of fibre is a godsend," says Pandey. The easiest way to consume them is to have about four prunes with breakfast daily, and recipes from the West and West Asian countries propagate their use as

puréed pancake toppings, chicken stuffing and lamb steak accompaniments.

Bishan Negi, chef de cuisine, The MoMo Café, Courtyard by Marriott, Gurgaon, has some suggestions. "For a breakfast dish, simply borrow from the Moroccans, substitute couscous with *dalia* (oats) and cook with onions, tomato, zucchini and prunes. A tasty, filling and healthy start to the day! Want it sweet? Don't add salt, skip the vegetables and add a bit of sugar and cinnamon instead," he adds. "Or try prune *koftas* (add some prunes to the *paneer*—1:5 ratio—and also to the curry)," he suggests.

## Extra virgin olive oil

"We all know by now how healthy this oil is. The list of its benefits is long: It helps keep the heart young, bad cholesterol down, blood pressure in control, prevents stroke, keeps diabetes at bay, and bones healthy. In fact, in the Mediterranean region people have been having 1-2 tbsp of the oil on an empty stomach to strengthen their heart for a while now," says Pandey. Researchers at the Mayo Clinic and College of Medicine, US, and the Dipartimento di Scienze Farmaceutiche of Florence, Italy, published a study, "Beneficial Effects of Polyphenol-rich Olive Oil in Patients With Early Atherosclerosis", in August in the *European Journal of Nutrition*, where they concluded that adding just 2 tbsp of olive oil each day can improve blood vessel function.

"Till some time back this oil was not considered a good match for Indian cooking (due to its slightly different taste and its low smoking point) but things are changing now," says Pandey.

Executive chef Naval Sharma of Cocoa House (a chain of lounge cafés with units in Gurgaon, Jaipur and Delhi) feels that this grade of olive oil can very easily be incorporated in dishes that don't need excessive cooking. "All you need to do is be creative while using extra virgin olive oil in Indian cooking. Try cooking succulent prawns with garlic and dry red chillies and coriander; or lightly sauté *paneer* in olive oil and add some roasted cumin seeds on top; or grill some eggplants drizzled with olive oil. When making foods in *tandoori* style (chicken, fish, *paneer*, potato, cauliflower), baste it while cooking and also finish with a mixture of olive oil (instead of the regular butter), lemon juice and *chaat* masala.

Want something light and quick? Just toss together boiled *rajma* (kidney beans) or even black *chana* (chickpea) or *lobia* (black-

eyed beans) with some bell peppers and *paneer* in Indian-style vinaigrette dressing—olive oil and lemon juice, seasoned with *chaat* masala," he says.

## Peanut butter

"Peanut butter is hugely fibrous, loaded with the antioxidant vitamin E, and has a good saturated to unsaturated fats balance (like olive oil). Plus it is rich in zinc, potassium, has some iron and is super rich in protein," says Daljit Kaur. Now if peanut butter and banana sandwiches don't cut it for you, do not fret as there are ways to adapt this too to your taste. "I like to mix peanut butter with some jaggery when making Indian sweets like *gajak*, peanut butter adds a different flavour and makes it soft too. Peanut butter also makes a good stuffing for *khoya peda* (Indian sweet)," says Sid Khullar, editor of the food website [www.chefatlarge.in](http://www.chefatlarge.in)

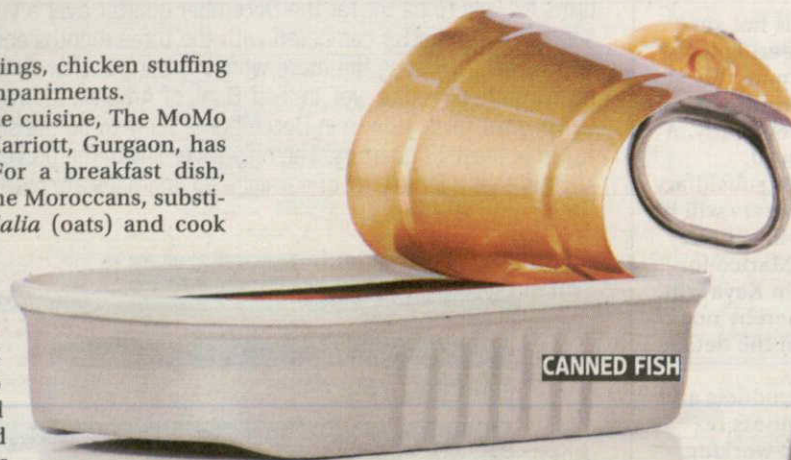
## Canned fish

"The Omega-3 content of fatty fishes (tuna, mackerel, salmon, sardines) have made them the stuff health legends are made of. Omega-3 fats can give you a facelift, slash your risk of heart disease, keep breast cancer away, calm you down and even help prevent asthma, arthritis and depression," says Daljit Kaur. "It is best to skip fish canned in brine and opt for fish canned in oil, ideally olive oil", she adds. If you don't really like to eat canned fish in its packaged form, there are ways you can Indianize it. "Make a regular curry with onions, tomatoes, add some boiled peas, open a can and add the fish (this way you can serve two people from one can) to make an impromptu fish curry, which tastes delicious with *roti*. Or add to some mashed potato and make fish *tikkis*," says Khullar.

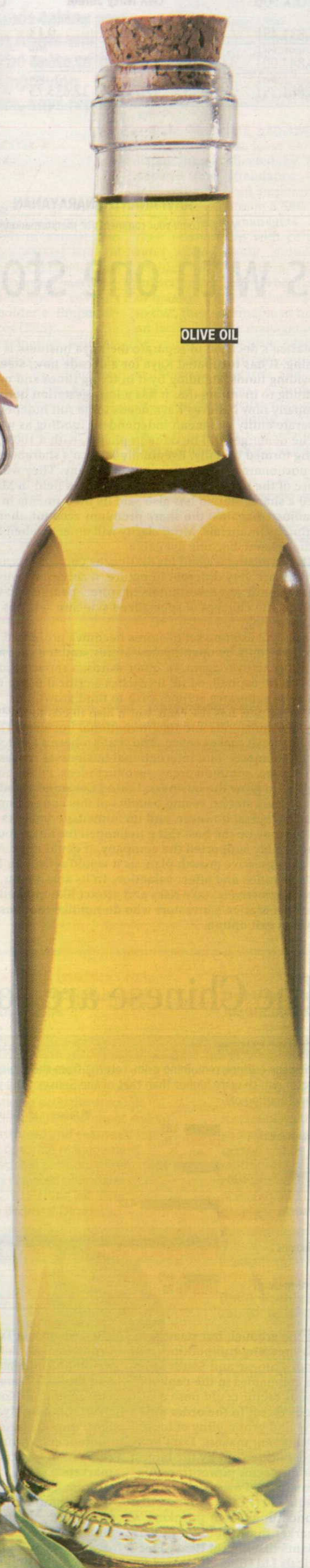
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PEANUT BUTTER



CANNED FISH



OLIVE OIL



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