

WINTER WARMERS IN SURAT

This Gujarati diamond-cutting hub is a gastronome's delight

Text and Photographs by RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

Every day, hundreds of *angadias* arrive in Mumbai carrying valuable diamonds from the gem-cutting city of Surat. Many members of this traditional courier service also bear with them a quota of culinary delights from the Gujarati city, which they deliver to a store called Chheda opposite Matunga Central Railway station. The delicacies sell out quicker than the tickets to a Falguni Pathak *dandiya* event.

One recent morning, I was part of a heaving mob mostly made up of housewives hankering for *undhiyu*, a rich dish made from winter vegetables, and *ponk*, a snack of winter millet. Just as the last grains of my *ponk* were being trickled on to the electronic weighing scale, I heard a commotion outside. A tow-truck was about to make off with my car. I pushed through the crowded store to fob off the crew and then darted back inside. But it was too late. In those 30 seconds, all the *ponk* had been sold out.

Mangeshkaka, the doorman, had observed the drama and volunteered some advice. "You should drive to Surat to sample the food firsthand rather than jostle for a few measly grams here," he said. "The road is a six-lane delight, the weather will stay wintry right till mid-March and the city's culinary variety will gratify the glutton in you."

I drove into Surat at 8.30 the next morning. My friend Dhruv Modi was waiting for me outside the railway station. He'd warned me not to snack along the way because Surat's best breakfast awaited me. This was at the Gopal Khaman House in Macharpura Kharadi Sheri, very near the station.

Dhokla is to Gujarat what butter chicken is to Punjab and *hilsa* is to Bengal. This little eatery creates a delicious variation of *dhokla* (steamed batter of rice and chickpeas) called *khaman*, which is prepared by soaking channa dal for several hours, grinding it into a paste and then letting it ferment. After mixing in spices and soda bicarbonate, the batter is steamed. The texture and taste depends on the duration and intensity of the steaming—a closely guarded secret.

Khaman is lighter coloured and fluffier than *dhokla* and comes with all sorts of garnishes. Gopal Khaman House, like a host of

similar eateries in Surat, offers *khaman dhokla* topped with cheese or butter or (my favourite) fried green garlic. *Locho*, which is also Gujarati slang for "botched up", is paste-like and denser than *khaman*. The proprietor, Gopalbhai says that it was created by accident when the steaming process went wrong. Since it is denser than the standard *khaman*, a bit like a collapsed cake, the flavour is more concentrated. It's now a standard on Surat menus.

Sufficiently nourished until lunch, we headed toward the *ponk* market at Adajan. This winter delight is made from roasting green winter millet (*jowar*). It's a crop that grows especially well on the fertile promontory called Hazira to the west of Surat, bounded by the Tapti delta and the Arabian Sea.

Bushels of fresh millet are transported to a processing area on the banks of the Tapti under the Sardar Bridge in Adajan. The sheaves are first lightly roasted in mud *bhattis* (ovens), then wrapped in coarse cloth and beaten with wooden sticks to coax the grain off the stalks. Next, the grain is separated from the chaff by groups of women sitting in front of the stalls where the *ponk* is sold. There were so many stalls and so much *ponk* and I didn't have to battle domestic divas and harried housewives for a few milligrams of the grain. Opposite the *ponk* sellers were *sev* stalls where variously flavoured thin noodles of gram flour (garlic, pepper, chilly) were being deep-fried in cottonseed oil. Stall owners on both sides plied us with free samples of *ponk* and *sev*, which are mixed together and eaten as a tasty snack.

The Tapti is Surat's ancient lifeline and the Dutch, French, Portuguese, English, and even the Swedes set up trading houses along its banks. The shores of the Tapti near Surat's Nanpura area was in-

Lashkari's chutney-smacked tomato bhajias are an able accompaniment to Dumas beach's gentle, humid, sea breeze.

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habited by the Dutch in the 1700s and their establishments stood on the spot that is today called Dutch Road. They employed five Parsi men to bake bread for them. When the Dutch packed up their East India operations, they handed over the ovens to Faramji Pestonji Dotivala, who continued to bake bread for expats. The leftover bread that turned crisp was sold to local people and gained immense popularity as biscuits. Later, shortening and ghee was added to the dough to create the famous Surti *batasa*. Dotivala Bakers and Confectioners has stood at the same spot since 1775 and is now run by the sixth generation of the family. Their cakes, pure ghee *nankhatais*, and butter *batasas* are culinary icons of Surat.

Due to the prohibition in Gujarat, nightlife in Surat means hopping from food stall to food stall, especially in the heart of the old city. Begumpura here is a peek into Surat's past, with majestic mosques, ornate temples and ancient Dutch and English cemeteries. Dhruv explained that most Surtis are "egg-itarians", so the street vendors have invented all sorts of dishes to cater to their predilection. The most popular item is *ghotalo*, a combination of boiled egg, scrambled egg and an omelette but the secret is in the masala. Every time I asked Kejuramkaka, the chef at Ganesh Egg Stall what the spice-blend was made of, he went blank and pretended that my Mumbai Gujarati dialect was foreign to his Surti ears.

Dhruv's wife, Amrita, explained that most of the egg dishes

concocted in Surat (with exotic names like Australian Fry and Afghani Fry) are generally prepared with green garlic (abundant only during winter), pungent green chillies, and lots of butter.

Before Surat's star faded away with the rise of Mumbai as the primary port on the western seaboard, the Gujarati city was the location from which pilgrims from all over India departed for Haj. This influx probably fuelled the meat food hawkers at Zampa Bazaar at Begumpura. Barbecue stalls crowd the narrow street, each lit by naked frosted bulbs and decorated with strings of chickens smeared with fiery orange marinade. Barrel-ovens exuded the aroma of roasting meat, baked rotis and hot coals. A speciality here is the mince-stuffed, deep-fried *Rangooni paratha*. The Rangoon connection comes from Rander, an area on the north bank of the Tapti. In the old days, many traders sailed from the port of Rander to distant shores, sometimes as far away as Burma. They returned with lots of teak to sell (Burma teak antiques sometimes still surface in Rander) and a fondness for the Rangooni paratha and *khowsuey*, a noodle dish from Burma's Shan state. During Ramzan, Rander is the place to visit for these delicacies.

We called it a night after a shot of speciality cocoa at the A-One Cold Drinks Centre at Chowk Bazaar, adjacent to Begumpura. The cocoa was thick, rich and silky. When asked how it was made, Abdulkaka, briskly mixing the cocoa said that it was a closely guarded secret.



Zampa Bazaar's meat-hawking street stalls come alive at dusk, especially during the month of Ramzan. Facing page: 1 Zampa Bazaar's stall owners attract customers with their loud calls and skewers of glistening, marinated meat. 2 Ponk, or tender, roasted millet, lasts for over a month when stored in cool, air-tight boxes. 3 Dhokla is generally served with a vibrant, sunshine-yellow chutney made of raw papaya mashed with turmeric, mustard and lime juice. 4 During winter, hundreds of kilos of Surti undhiyu are transported, daily, to Mumbai and Pune. 5 Two centuries after Dotivala opened, the Parsi bakery's bread still sells like hot cakes. 6 At Lashkari's food stall, unusual varieties of bhajia, made with seasonal produce like purple yam, are popular.

ABHIJEET HOJO (MEAT), VIKAS MANIPULLE (PONK), INPIX-REF/INDIAPICTURE (CHOKLA)





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Early next morning, we headed to Dumas, a port 21 kilometres from old Surat. It is revered for its Lashkari tomato *bhajiya* and feared for the supernatural forces that hover over the town. While the unique chutney-smearing, *besan*-coated and deep-fried tomato treats make it a popular breakfast haunt, few venture into Dumas after dark. Flicking the *bhajiyas* into the boiling oil, Manjarikaki told us that stray dogs howl their heads off at night, cowering with their tail between their legs. A camel herder swore he regularly hears voices in the night wind.

That afternoon, after having sampled street delicacies, I treated myself to the full-blown Surti whopper. The Gateway Hotel has a *thali* on offer for lunch from Monday to Saturday; it is prepared by Surti housewives who are invited to cook regional dishes. On the day I visited, the housewife-chef in charge was Sarojben, whose specialities included a lip-smacking *undhiyu*. This traditional winter delicacy is a mix of *papdi* (broad beans), potatoes, sweet potatoes, *kand* (purple yam), *ariya kakdi* (seedless cucumbers), brinjal, and unpeeled Raja-giri bananas. The spices include green garlic, chillies, coconut, and coriander. Sarojben told me that the dish has evolved from a preparation called *ubadiyu*, which was cooked in earthen pots and buried *undhu* (upside down) under a fire. “To sample *ubadiyu*, stop at Dungari about 70 kilometres from Surat on the road to Bombay,” she advised.

The last 36 hours had caused a considerable strain on my waist but I had an important errand to run before I left Surat. The Gujarati side of my family were anxiously awaiting my return bear-

ing *ghari*, created in the early 1900s by Shah Jamnadas Chauta Ghariwala using a base of *mawa* (reduced milk solids). His shop has stood in Chauta Bazaar since it was founded in 1899. The signature kesar-badam-pista *ghari*, is sweet, smothered with ghee, and bursting with flavour. The curse of coronary disease has thinned the layer of ghee and now ghee-less *ghari* is available. But Jamnadas’s owner firmly stands by the establishment’s 5mm layer of ghee. “Eat just one *ghari*, but eat it well,” he believes. The shop’s other specialities are the *kesar suttarfeni* (a shredded dough sweet also called *buddhi na bal*) and *doodhi halwa* made from a variety of gourd grown near Surat.

That evening as I headed back, about an hour out of Surat, I saw a sign for Dungari and turned into the village. It was lined with little bamboo shelters, with tables and chairs, and fire pits alongside, with *ubadiyu* cooking. A delicious aroma of vegetables and wood smoke permeated the air. I stopped at Babukaka’s stall. While *undhiyu* is cooked in oil, *ubadiyu* is mostly steamed with spices. With his spicy chutney, it was simply divine.

As I returned to Mumbai a little past midnight, my taste buds were still tripping on the treats I had sampled over 48 hours. The next morning I felt compelled to go to Matunga and shake Mangeshkaka by the hand. He had proffered very good advice indeed. ■

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In a predominantly vegetarian city, Ganesh’s imaginative egg preparations, hold a special place on Surat’s culinary map. Facing page: 1 Cooked by Surti housewives, The Gateway Hotel’s thali puts lesser-known, regional Gujarati dishes in the spotlight. 2 Legend has it that *ghari*, made with *mawa*, ghee and sugar, was created by the cooks of freedom fighter Tutya Tope, to fortify his soldiers. 3 A-One Cold Drinks Centre’s velvety cocoa drink offers cold comfort after a hot meal. 4 Ponk is served with plain, pepper and red chilli *sev*, lashings of lime juice, and a smidgen of crushed, sweetened cardamom seeds. 5 *Kesar suttarfeni* is a Parsi sweet made of delicate, flaky rice dough that melts in the mouth like cotton candy. 6 *Undhiyu*’s predecessor, *ubadiyu* is cooked in sealed, earthen pots, and served with turmeric-flavoured buttermilk.

VIKAS MANPULLE (COCOYA)

JOURNEYS

► Taste of Travel

THE GUIDE

ORIENTATION

Surat is in southwestern Gujarat, about 260 km south of Ahmedabad.

GETTING THERE

Surat is located 285 km/5 hours north of Mumbai. The six-lane road to Ahmedabad until Kadodra, where the left turn to Surat is, makes for smooth driving. There are more than 20 trains daily between Mumbai and Surat. Travel time varies from 4 to 6 hours.

SEASON

Many of the foods mentioned, like ponk and undhiyu, are winter specialities. The weather between November and March is very pleasant and ideal to go on this foodie road trip.

EATING OUT

Gopal Khaman and Locho House

The prices vary from ₹20 to 30

for a plate (100 grams) of the speciality khaman and locho. Try the version garnished with green garlic. The place is packed every morning from 7 to 8.30 a.m. and super packed on weekend mornings (98791 71928; Kharadi Sheri Naka, Hira Bazaar Main Road, Near Surat Railway Station).

Ponk Market

Kanchan Lal is just one of many ponk sellers. The price of ponk ranges from ₹300-400 per kg depending on the harvest and crop. Sev costs ₹200 per kg (98251 46241; Kanchan Lal Daruwala, Opposite Swami Narayan Mandir, Adajan).

Dotivala Bakers and Confectioners

Batasas cost ₹160 per kg and the pure ghee nankhatais are ₹400 per kg (Ardeshir Kotwal Road, Makkai Bridge, Nanpura; 0261-2475027; www.dotivala.com).

Ganesh Omelette Centre

They have a huge menu so take

your time and ask your waiter to explain the items you find interesting. The ghotalo (₹95) and Australian Fry (₹125) are best-sellers (98251 24515; Hathiwala Building, Near Moti Talkies, Begumpura).

A-One Cold Juice and Cold Drinks Centre

The signature drink is the cold cocoa for ₹40 (Opposite Silk House, Chowk Bazaar; 93772 37937).

Lashkari Bhajiya Centre

The shop is right at Dumas Circle with the huge commemorative anchor. They have plenty of bhajiyas—purple yam, onion, green chilly—but the tomato ones are the most popular and cost ₹150 per kg (Dumas Bundar, 14 km from Athwa Lines).

Spice at The Gateway Hotel

The home-cooked thali is served from 12.30-3 p.m., Monday to Saturday, for ₹75 per person (inclusive of taxes). (Athwa Lines;

0261-6697000; www.thegatewayhotels.com.)

Zampa Bazaar Meat Stalls

There are numerous stalls and dishes to choose from here. Some *bara handi* (12 vessels) stalls offer *paya*, *nalli nihari*, *bheja*, *zabaan* and *kaleji* that cost about ₹50-100 per plate containing 4-5 pieces (Turn off Station road at the Clock Tower near Mahidharpura police station and follow your nose to Zampa Bazaar).

Shah Jamnadas C Ghariwala

Their *kesar-badam-pista ghari* retails at ₹500 per kg, *doodhi halwa* for ₹360 per kg and the *suttarpheni* and *ghevar* at ₹400 per kg (0261-2424773; 11/47, Chauta Bazaar; www.jamnadasghariwala.com).

Babubhai nu Ubadiyu

Ask for the *ubadiyu*, which costs ₹120 per kg (98259 02015; Dunggari, Off NH8 just after Valsad on the way to Surat).



In the 1700s, the Tapti river was among the major ports of India, and an important pit stop for Muslim pilgrims travelling to Mecca.