A Rule of Thumb for Eating with Your Hands

RIGHT ELBOW TILTED TO the ceiling, brows furrowed, the blue-eyed man next to me was singularly focused on scooping a few kernels of soupy, lentil-soaked rice into his mouth. The ceiling fan whirring at full speed couldn’t defeat the determination beading his forehead. He loosely constructed a mound of rice on his plate, coralling the bits with turmeric-tipped fingers, and tried to lob the ball into his maw before it fell apart. Much of it did, back on the plate.

Without the slightest sign of annoyance, the American started construction again of another rice ball. Around him, his new Indian family gobbled on in Bengali. Lunch is a leisurely affair in Kolkata, and long after everyone has finished, families sit around, their yellowed right hands resting over clean plates, and gossip. That late August afternoon, they were gossiping about him. My grandfather was proud of his new grandson-in-law’s efforts. He suggested we take a picture, “So his parents can see he is eating with his hands!” My grandmother jumped in, “No, no! Are you crazy? You want them to think we’ve turned their boy into one of us?”

Several months later, back in the US, this us-and-them division in mealtime etiquette was the subject of a live public radio show. During the event, the grand priestess of Indian cookbooks, Madhur Jaffrey, recounted a visit to Korea during which a fellow chef confessed she couldn’t bear eating with her hands when she went to India. She thought it was so “dirty and disgusting.” Jaffrey recalled: “I tried to explain to her why it wasn’t, and I said . . . if you make love, would you make love with these little metal chopsticks?” With a wave of her hands—the same god-given utensils she would later use to demonstrate the proper etiquette for an in-the-know audience of Indians and non-Indians—Jaffrey denied ever feeling discomfort or shame in eating as the natives do. “Nothing was going to change me,” said Jaffrey, who moved from India to the UK at the age of 19. “I was very stubborn.”

But the event, hosted by WNYC’s Arun Venugopal, was all about Indians’ complex feelings about eating with their hands before non-Indians. As a kid, Venugopal was embarrassed to bring a school chum home out of fear that he’d witness his family’s primal noshing habits. Rapper Himanshu Suri got teased for bringing curry for lunch as a kid. Now, as an adult, his Western compatriots with a taste for the ethnic are always asking him for Indian restaurant recommendations, he said, a bit snide.

By the time dinner was served, everyone put cultural reservations aside and got their fingers wet, as one panelist described it. There were a few dubious customers. An older woman had been invited to the event after a WNYC tour of donors, and she was bewildered that eating with one’s hands was even worth considering with all the infections going around. She folded over her banana leaf plate and left the Indian food undisturbed.

As an experiment, this exercise was tainted by what researchers call selection bias. Most of the attendees had paid forty dollars to attend, drawn in by celebrity guests, the promise of good eats, and the chance to “sense” food in a different way. “It’s sort of an agreement we had with white people that they would let us have this event but we’d have to reveal our secrets,” Venugopal said, doing a bit of stand-up before more serious discussions ensued. “This is a very elaborate intellectual exercise masquerading as just another excuse to stuff your mouth.”

But outside this self-selected cohort of trendy New Yorkers, eating with one’s hands isn’t exactly hip. In all my time eating at Indian restaurants in the US, I’ve never seen patrons, even the Indian ones, do it. Customers at Chinese restaurants have the choice to use chopsticks, however labored their technique. I’ve watched people of all nationalities use their fingers to tear off pieces of communal bread, injera, at Ethiopian establishments. There is no shortage of bowl tilting and broth slurping at Japanese ramen joints. So, why don’t people eat with their hands at Indian restaurants?

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There is the matter of hygiene. Indians don’t just roll up their sleeves and dig in. What are we—savages? We wash our hands with soap before meals, and scrub up with particular care afterwards and even flush our mouths with much exaggerated swishing. In South India, where locals use their whole hand and loud slurs to relish the sour and spicy lentil soup rasam, the washroom lines at office canteens and restaurants can get pretty long, recalled my cousin who worked in Chennai for a few years. Six Ballygunge Place, among the first high-end eateries in Kolkata to specialize in traditional Bengali cuisine, provides cutlery but also sanitizers at every table to encourage eating the traditional way.

“Bengali food is best relished when you have it with your hands,” Aninda Palit, my uncle and a shareholder in the restaurant, told me. At the New York event, we were warned that people would need multiple wet napkins to clean off at the end, but most Indian restaurants in the US don’t provide such amenities.

Then, there is history. “As an immigrant, you’re aware of everyone’s perceptions about you,” Krishnendu Ray, a food studies scholar at New York University, told me. “That can be an advantage, or given India’s insidious history with colonization, it can make you painfully self-conscious.” He believes a deep-seated self-consciousness is at work when Indians in the US quickly adapt to the fork and knife.

Back in India, people freely use their hands to eat a meal at home, gobble up street cart snacks, or have a bite at a roadside diner. But people don’t act so freely at formal restaurants. I recall in the ’80s, when the city was still “Calcutta,” eating out meant either Indo-Chinese restaurants or hotels and British-era clubs that served “continental” (a.k.a. European) food. These were spoon-and-fork establishments where people were expected to practice the British method for scooping up the rice or noodle-based brothy cuisine of the colonies. Also, because middle-class Indian folk didn’t frequent restaurants much back then, using cutlery was an insecure spot for people of a certain generation unaccustomed to them. I remember embarrassing clanks of metal against china and slippery prawn balls flying out from under unsteady forks. When a colleague confided to my cousin that she could never remember which hand to hold the fork with, my cousin quipped, “The hand you wash your bum with.” The colleague never forgot it. (Needless to say, Indians, even left-handed ones, are taught to eat with their right hand, and reserve the left for “dirty” business.)

When my family moved to the US in 1989, we continued in the same tradition. We ate Indian food with our hands every night at home, and when we went out, regardless of whether it was steak or chicken tikka masala, we employed the fork-and-knife American method. When my family hosted American guests for dinner, I remember we all ate Indian food with silverware, and wiped our mouths with cloth napkins. I thought we did it to make them feel comfortable, but were we more comfortable that way, too?

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It didn’t take long for the eight-year-old me to learn English, but it would be years before I was comfortable in the suburbs of Virginia. I didn’t like how it felt like winter inside every grocery store, how McDonald’s double cheeseburgers...
were as big as my head, and how milk was sold by the gallon. I didn’t like seeing my mother cry after her job at the grocery store, sensing my dad’s repressed anger, or understanding without knowing English that everyone at school thought I was a boy. Cars whizzed along never-ending asphalt highways connecting communities that looked indistinguishable to me. You could walk for miles and never bump into a soul. All was unsettled, nothing felt right, and everything tasted bland.

But some nights at dinner, my mom would feed me our elaborate Indian meals with her hands. There was familiarity and safety in that. This is something Indian mothers do for their children from the time they have a rice ceremony marking their graduation to solid food. It’s common to hear adults talk wistfully about such and such dish and how it tasted the best from their mother’s hand. They mean not only that their moms prepared the food, but that they also fed them by hand.

My mother had soft hands and lithe fingers that danced over every task, however mundane. One night she cooked rice and goat curry and insisted on feeding it to me, even though I was 13 and capable of doing it myself. She died the next day. Had I known that was the moment after which my life would forever splinter from hers, I would have lingered at her fingers a bit longer. I would have chewed more slowly.

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My grandmother swears my husband must have been Indian in another life. But he isn’t in this life. Perhaps it was important that my husband eat with his hands because this whole business is so entwined with our national, familial, and personal identities. By eating like we do, we didn’t want him to be like us, but we hoped he could know us, understand us, love us a little more.

He’s too much of a gentleman to admit it, but I’m pretty sure he didn’t like doing it at first. Westerners have been putting distance between them and their food since the fork became commonplace in Europe in the seventeenth century. The spoon and knife have been in use much longer. These utensils are such an innate part of their socialized identity that a strong feeling of “disgust” in touching food has become natural, Krishnendu reflected. “The fork has so changed the body technique of Westerners that they can no longer use their fingers directly and expertly on food.” Pawing around a plate of rice would feel alien, squishy and wet between the fingers, the mechanics unintuitive.

Not that there is any one codified method. Ask five people in India how they eat with their hands, and they’ll each describe a slightly different way, in terms of the progression of courses, how much rice to take on your plate, how to mix the food, how large a mound to make, how much of the hand to get messy and how much to keep clean. Is it okay to lick the fingers? How about the whole hand? It’s all up to individual preference, family traditions, and regional customs.

The way my mother taught me was to start with the lentils, progress to vegetarian dishes, then on to the meat or fish, and finally end with sweets or a savory chutney. Each course gets its own time on the plate. Crowding the plate with multiple courses doesn’t allow you to truly taste any dish, she would say. She would take a long time to mix the rice with each preparation, form a tight mound of food, and place it into her mouth. Most importantly, only the tips of her fingers to her second joint would make contact with the food. This is how I cat and this is the way I tried to teach my husband to do it.

At first, as if moving quickly through a buffet at an Indian restaurant, he piled everything on his plate at once. After much insisting, we got him to slow down Kolkata style, and give each course individual attention. With every meal over the two weeks we were there, his technique improved. My grandfather still brags about how well my husband tackled Kolkata’s most sought after river fish, the hilsa, famous for its delicate flavor and microscopic bones. But he still seemed to be struggling to get the food into his mouth. He was trying to toss it all in there with inconsistent results and far too many casualties on his plate.

Two days before we were slated to return to New York, he had a eureka moment. While we were pretending not to watch the American eat with his hands, it seems the American was carefully studying us. As he described it to me later, he figured out he had to create the mound of food, use his fingers to make a shovel of sorts, and then use the thumbs to gently push the parcel into his mouth. “You’re a terrible teacher,” he accused. “Why didn’t you tell me about the retractable thumb?”

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