

FOOD & WINE

An Elegy for Dallas Strip Mall Restaurants

Charles Rotkin / Getty Images

Spiky sweets from Gujarat. Accidental vegan from Karnataka. A strip mall restaurant can take you very far. Or back home, depending on what that means.

MALLIKA RAO December 01, 2017

We loved **Gopal** the way other teenage girls loved boys. (Not that we didn't love boys, too.) The Texas restaurant served food from Gujarat, the leaf-shaped state on India's west coast, fed by the Arabian Sea. Gopal sat on a plot of Dallas concrete. To get to it from anywhere meant threading a highway and access road to a parking lot where, in my memory, Gopal stood alone. The walk to its door passed as if to another time and space. Not waves, but car hum moved the air, from a belt of highway above trees.

A friend and I drove to Gopal on our own, a rebellion. Its food was typically brought to us, the catering choice of the hour for our parents and their friends. We were spoiled for choice, in strip mall central; Dallas is a city of highways. First **Madras Pavilion**, now closed, stoked excitement, serving southie home food from a strip with a beloved ice cream store: *dosa*, *idlis*, thin *rasam*, piquant *daal*. Then **Udipi Cafe** sprung close to a Bollywood rental place—"too oily now," said all the aunties and uncles on my last trip back, healthy in their later decades. The angle of its title thrilled me no matter the success in carrying it off: a promise of food cooked in the style of those who worship the version of Krishna who presides over the Udupi region of the state of Karnataka. Thick in grains, fruits and vegetables—tastier, at its best, than California vegan.

That day, we smiled across a Gopal table as if doing something bad. We'd come at the end of lunch, the only diners in the room. We ate fresh *phulkas* off the *tawa*, puffed and warm, made last minute by the owner. Gorged on *dhokla* and *kandvi*,

yellow snacks of chickpea flour flaked in coconut, chili, cilantro and poppy seeds—one cake-like, the other a tube, slick in a new way, neither pasta nor the bottom of a pie. Everything held the tilt of sweet that sets Guju food apart even in India, thanks to *bela*, the block of brown sugar cane derivative, known also as jaggery. To eat was to fantasize, as if watching a movie about teens in India; we tapped the live heart of a country where we looked like everyone else, where we could be part of instead of standing outside.

Dallas' regional richness is an accident of time and place. When I moved to New York City in 2009, I thought I'd find that here, too. But Manhattan has no strip malls, the bounty of which was becoming widely known. In 2008, the writer Jonathan Gold became the first food critic to win a Pulitzer, for reviews set in the Gopals of Los Angeles. He made a name for himself reviewing no-frills eateries off highways and outside of city borders, where lived people from the same country as the food.

Exurbia inspired anthropological writing of the early 2000s, as our communities hit depth after quick growth in the 1990s. In 2006, the D.C.-based economist Tyler Cowen wrote an expose on "ethnic eating," as he termed it, for the *Washington Post*. The subjects and settings read to me of the country where I grew up, a stealth network of strip malls, blood coursing off highways. Cowen would go on to write an entire book on the economics of food centered on his pursuit of cuisine from other countries. In the *Post* article, he named three factors as common to the areas he came to recognize as central: "a concentration of people from the ethnic community, space at low rents, and a cuisine with potential to appeal to mainstream America." (I question that last point, recalling my friend and myself alone in ecstasy at Gopal. So does an immigrant restaurateur seem to at the end of Cowen's story, citing months of trying to "cook to American tastes" until nearly going broke. "Then we switched to spicy and traditional to target local Indians, and all of a sudden lines were out the door.") As Gold stepped into the strip malls of the west, the D.C. ones laid cracked open. A 2008 article in the conservative publication *American Interest* extolled the strip mall with the pro-immigrant energy of a lefty Yelper. "For good economic reasons, the best most authentic ethnic restaurants increasingly end up in strip malls," wrote the writer of the piece, titled "Adventures of a Strip Mall Gourmet." "Because today's immigrants are sprawl people like the rest of us."

A hole in Dallas changes the story. **Taj Imports**, our vast grocery store, vanished a few years ago, once a symbol of the rightness of the choice of a state whose name invariably evokes a variation on “they shoot horses”: *they shoot brown people there, don't they?* We who knew its secrets could argue the case for our adopted home: space, affordability, freedom to live on our own terms, to build a temple off a highway and gather for *pujas* in houses. Visiting relatives made regular trips to Taj to taste the bowls of *chaat* sold from a counter at its rear, so true in flavor even Bombay visitors admired it. *Pani puri*, *bhel puri*—yogurt, lentil, tamarind, mint, cilantro, onions, potatoes—sold with the speed of street food. Payment rode on the honor system at the close of eating a number of items ordered by shouting whatever felt right.

Now I hear stories of my generation returning after time in other cities. Opening restaurants using Texas flavors and American marketing—no sudden *phulkas* or honor payments. Jonathan Gold probably wouldn't go, nor Tyler Cowen, but if either visited the exurbs today, he might be let down, too, by the psychic shift changing the country's sprawl. The local university faces money problems, goes the talk, the first time in decades; foreign students aren't coming. Friends moving back talk of patients asking where they're from (as white supremacists will tell you, even second-generation Indians “take all the doctor jobs”); of anger on the roads delivered in a tone they feel turned rawer last November. Our parents faced hostility, too: our first temple inspired protests, and so they built elsewhere, off a long highway in a town where the mayor saw the presence of wealthy immigrants as a ward against the effects of poverty. Now the city is where we talk about freedom, though the rents aren't cheap. Taj Imports closed as the center grew to include it, ceding to a hipster movie chain and burger joint. Gopal reopened with the same name and broader menu. My last trip home we went to the next in line, everyone said, a place with all-you-can-eat *appam* and curry, the dish of Kerala that makes you want seconds. Indian-owned, and Indian-trafficked. Looking around I felt the thrill of being bad all over again, only the rebellion was the act of living here.