

INDIAN

Homeward Bound: Chef Floyd Cardoz Returns to India

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*When we eat a meal in a restaurant, what's presented before us is often the result of the experiences that have shaped a chef's life. When that chef has traveled very far from their homeland, those experiences become exponentially more complex. Such is the case with Chef **Floyd Cardoz**, whom you may recognize from his big win on *Top Chef Masters'* third season or from the kitchen at New York's **North End Grill**. Cardoz creates dishes that are so focused on the innate potential of high-quality ingredients that it can be hard to peg a certain style to his work—sometimes, his plates seem very American; other times, they're almost Mediterranean. Yet throughout them all, a warmth and spice permeates, often hinting gently at Cardoz's childhood in India.*

Cardoz immigrated to the U.S. almost 25 years ago from his native Bombay. He's gone back a handful of times over the years, most recently to see family and participate in an arts festival in neighboring Goa, where he spent summers as a child. While there, he visited his old haunts, scoped the fresh produce and fish pulled from the Arabian Sea, and spoke with young Indian chefs on how their cuisine is progressing on a global level, in turn imparting his hopes for their future. Here, Cardoz tells us about what he'll take with him from his trip home.

By Chef Floyd Cardoz, as told to Jacqueline Raposo

I came to the United States in 1987, when I was 27. I've been to India maybe six times since then, and I hadn't been back in three years by the time I went on this trip.

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Growing up, every year the whole family would pack up in a car—six kids, mom, driver, and maid—and we'd travel about 600 kilometers from Bombay to Goa for a month-long vacation. Going to Goa was always about connecting with my older family, especially my great-grandmother on my mother's side. She had this ancient kitchen where everything was cooked around a wood fire. There was no gas, no running water, and no electricity, so we lit lamps at night, and the wood fire in the kitchen ran 24 hours a day. And because there was no refrigeration, we'd go to the market every single day—there was no menu planning, we'd just see what they had and then cook it.

My great-grandmother had coconut plantations and rice paddies, so she would cook in earthen pots over the coconut husks, wood and shells, and all the food had a very strong, woody smell. She had her own chickens and pigs, too, so pretty much everything she grew we ate. Her home was less than four miles from the Arabian Sea, so seafood was a big thing; in the morning the guys on the beach would throw out their nets and catch little gold fish. I loved seafood, so for me it was a joy: shrimp, clams, crab, mussels, tons of fish. I'd go to the beaches in the morning and collect small clams, and my grandmother would make *palao* [a spiced rice dish] with cockles. As a kid that was pretty damn cool.

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Normally the second or third day we were there the fatted pig would get killed, and that's what we ate for the week. We wasted nothing. We'd save the blood and make sausage meat, cure and salt some, and make stews out of the salted pork in earthen pots. The innards—the lungs and the intestines and the kidneys—would go into one stew, and the liver and the belly meat would go into a stew called *sorpotel*. When I go back to India it's the first thing I want; when I got off the flight in Bombay and went home, my mom gave it to me

at three o'clock in the morning.

Eating all those things again takes me back to why I love food. My philosophy is "cook everything, waste nothing." If you go back three or four generations in nearly any culture, no one ever only used tenderloin, or strip loin, or ribeye. My great-grandmother taught me the value of using everything. She was 96 when she passed away, about 30 years ago, when I was still in Bombay.

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On this trip, I went to the markets just to see everything: radishes, amaranth, sweet potato, baby jackfruit, plantains, cucumbers, cluster beans, Chinese okra, Indian carrots, and elephant foot yams. That's the way they sell things—in the street, just piles of vegetables and live chickens that they kill right there for you. I saw new things I'd like to try and use here: a grain called *jowar* that I'd only ever seen dried, not green; rat-tailed radishes that taste so much like radish; a crepe that was made with rice flour and toddy palm sap—I had it for breakfast with coconut chutney. I was very surprised by all the different types of rice in India. There are so many! Why are we only eating basmati? I couldn't believe how many varieties they have.

There is something I'd die for; a fish called Bombay Duck. It's a lizardfish, and extremely soft when you catch it, almost like a jellyfish. It has bones in it you can eat, but the way they figured out how to eat it is to crust it with semolina, so it's crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside. It's a sweet fish, almost like hake. In the north they grill whole fish on skewers or batter and deep-fry, but in Goa it's not the culture to deep-fry, so most of the fish is pan-fried, or sometimes dried and used in stews.

One particular palm tree makes toddy sap that you get by "toddy tapping," which is when you go up the tree and pull the sap out. You make a liquor out of it: the first distillate, which is not that potent, makes *orak*, which you drink with Sprite or lime soda in the afternoon. The second ferment makes *feni*, which is stronger. It's never aged—I don't know why—and you have it over ice. It's sort of like an eau de vie. They manufacture and sell it, but you don't normally buy it if you're in Goa because everyone knows a guy who does it. Sadly, no one's





toddy tapping anymore and the art is dying. People are forgetting how to use toddy in their food.

In Goa I spoke to a couple of people and said, "Take your kids, write your recipes down, and keep them." We need to ensure those things go on.

Kids aren't learning to cook from their parents because they go out to eat so much. I wish I had kept recipes from my grandmother when I was young, because there are some things she made that I can't even remember the names of. In Goa I spoke to a couple of people and said, "Take your kids, write your recipes down, and keep them." We need to ensure those things go on.

What was really inspiring for me was what I saw in four restaurants the last day I was there. We went to a Japanese restaurant, an Italian restaurant, a Portuguese restaurant, and a French-inspired restaurant. They all cooked their style of food for me, using Indian ingredients, and I just love to see local ingredients being used in a more global context.

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One thing I brought back with me was realizing how good we have it here in terms of sustainability and how we grow things. A lot of time we chefs take that for granted. It makes you want to be an advocate for your own country and spread the word. Everywhere in the world chefs accept ingredients that are grown in their own country and apply them to whatever cuisine they're cooking, but there aren't enough chefs in India doing that, and I felt a little disappointed because there are so many ingredients and flavors to embrace in India. The green jowar, the rat-tailed radishes, the amaranth—I love that green amaranth!

There are people who care, but they don't know the best way to go about it. They think it's really cool to embrace western ingredients —but why are they using zucchini when they have a long squash that's very similar? Utilize what you have. Teach people about what you have and what to do with it. People in the United States and France and Italy and Japan are doing that. We need more people in India to do that, too.

[Click through the slideshow to see more pictures from Floyd Cardoz's trip home to Goa.](#)

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