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Democracy Dies in Darkness

How kala namak, black salt, went from Indian staple to vegan star

By Mayukh Sen

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When Nisha Vora was a little girl in Barstow, Calif., she had one request whenever her mother prepared pani puri: Please make the water milder. Those single-bite [orbs of fried bread](#) — typically poked with a crater in the middle and crowded with some combination of potatoes, onions and chickpeas — were a beloved street food in the Indian city of Mumbai, where Vora’s mother had grown up. Among pani puri’s most essential elements was the flavored pani, or water, that one submerges it in just before gulping it down. Her mother’s rendition contained a heady punch of kala namak, Hindi and Urdu [for](#) “black salt.” It was unlike any salt Vora had ever tasted, and that smell was unmistakable.

“Funky is gracious,” Vora said on our call, laughing. “It smells like rotten eggs. It smells like sulfur. If you’ve ever been to a geyser, I compare it to that smell.”

It’d take some time for Vora, who now runs the popular vegan food and lifestyle blog [Rainbow Plant Life](#), to come around to the beauty of kala namak. She became vegan in 2016, and a string of sad tofu-based egg replacements that tasted like, well, raw tofu, made her pine for the sensation of eggs. A few Google searches later, she realized that many vegan cooks swore by kala namak, which had been a standby in her Gujarati family’s household, to satisfy that itch for eggs.

Today, kala namak is the star ingredient of Vora’s [tofu scramble](#): Dashes of it suffuse an entirely plant-based dish with what Vora calls an “eggy” aroma and an “umami” flavoring. “It’s so hard to place, but I kind of feel like it’s the MSG of Indian cooking,” Vora said.

Ask evangelists about kala namak and you’ll likely hear warnings about the pungent perfume of this rock salt mined in the Himalayas. They may also tell you that, despite the name, its color is a soft blush of carnation pink, even lilac. (This is its usual shade when encountered in nature; its crystals darken during a kiln-firing process, hence the “black salt” label, but it retains that lighter complexion when ground.) They may note that a little goes a long way, though its personality mellows as it cooks. And they may say that its olfactory traits, which could deter a shy palate, are crucial to its appeal.

Get the recipe: “Eggy” Chickpea Salad Sandwiches

Over the past few decades, kala namak has been crawling its way out of kitchens in the South Asian subcontinent and its diaspora to become embraced by vegan cooks, even non-vegans. A bedrock of South Asian cooking, kala namak has been cherished in Ayurvedic philosophy while bringing its savory vigor to spice mixes such as [chaat masala](#), or animating variations of lemonade or limeade like [nimbu pani](#). Nowadays, though, you’ll see kala namak on the official website for the mung bean-derived egg simulacrum [Just Egg](#), which recommends cooks use it when making a [breakfast scramble](#), an indication of the unlikely journey kala namak has made in America.

The salt has long been an abiding presence across the cooking traditions of South Asia, explained Barkha Cardoz, the founder of [Cardoz Legacy](#) — a company she began after the death of her husband, chef [Floyd Cardoz](#), in 2020 — and co-creator of the [Floyd Cardoz Masalas](#), a series of spice blends.

“I think they use it everywhere — Pakistan, Bangladesh, even Nepalis use it,” Cardoz said in a phone call. Cardoz also said that it’s consumed across many regions in India, although she associates it most prominently with street foods in North India.

As a girl in Mumbai, Cardoz would find relief from the summer heat by drinking [jaljira](#), made with cilantro and mint leaves and finished with toasted cumin powder, amchoor (green mango) powder, black pepper and dribbles of kala namak, which gave that refreshment what Cardoz called a “tangy” bite. These days, she uses it in her [raita](#), a yogurt-based cooling condiment, and on her tomato toasts. She may even dust it on her fruit.

To Cardoz, kala namak is that rare ingredient that doesn’t just harmonize with other flavors in a dish; it elevates them. “It almost takes everything with it to a higher level,” said Cardoz, adding that other, more frequently-used salts in America feel flatter in comparison.

Unsurprisingly, kala namak appeared regularly in cookbooks on South Asian cooking released in America in the later 20th century; it was mentioned, for example, in [Julie Sahni’s](#) 1980 tome “[Classic Indian Cooking](#).” But it would take some time to migrate to vegan cookbooks.

The vegan cookbook author and restaurateur Isa Chandra Moskowitz has crystalline recollections of her first brush with kala namak. She encountered it while visiting a punk house in Minneapolis in the early 1990s, where people were cooking a tofu scramble together. “So I was introduced to it by a Palestinian punk rocker in the Midwest,” Moskowitz wrote in an email. “It was the best scrambled tofu I ever had.”

That meal kindled a lifelong devotion to kala namak. When Moskowitz lived in New York later that same decade, she’d trek to a South Asian grocery store in Manhattan’s East Village, where packs of kala namak would sit at the bottom of a staircase alongside nigella seeds and rosehips.

Moskowitz’s 2009 cookbook “[Vegan Brunch](#)” was one of the first non-South Asian cookbooks in America to feature kala namak, in a recipe for tofu omelets. In Moskowitz’s memory, though, kala namak wasn’t yet a vegan staple back then.

“I don’t think it was a commonly used vegan cookbook ingredient even in the aughts,” she said. “I don’t recall seeing it in other vegan cookbooks but online vegan communities were well aware.”

To Moskowitz, the first clue that kala namak was broadening its reach was a visit to an artisan salt shop in Portland, Ore., a year after the release of her cookbook, when she saw a sign encouraging shoppers to sprinkle kala namak on their eggs.

Kala namak remains an active part of Moskowitz’s cooking repertoire. She uses it to perk up her homemade vegan mayonnaise, her potato salads and her avocado toasts, to name a few. More recently, kala namak appeared in her 2019 book “[I Can Cook Vegan](#),” where a few flurries of this salt make a bowl of mashed chickpeas bear a delightfully uncanny resemblance to an egg salad.

But mainstream awareness of kala namak was still slow-going over the past decade, said Vora of Rainbow Plant Life. “I feel like when I first went vegan in 2016, it was kind of like this hyper-specialty ingredient that nobody was really going to go out of their way to seek out — at least, non-South Asians,” Vora remembered. “But now, I feel like if you’re a vegan who enjoys cooking, you probably know about it, or have it in your spice cabinet at home.”

Despite suggestions that kala namak has “arrived” in a way similar to powerhouses like [nutritional yeast](#) (now treasured widely across diets), it remains the case that kala namak is still most commonly found on shelves in South Asian supermarkets like [Patel Brothers](#) or through online specialty food companies such as [Burlap & Barrel](#), which has been selling kala namak since summer 2021. Ethan Frisch, the company’s co-founder and co-CEO, characterized kala namak as a “delicious and undervalued” ingredient in our call. It’s his primary cooking salt: Frisch uses it to accelerate the breakdown of tomatoes and vegetables in sauces, even for meats.

“Everybody gets all worked up about fancy sea salt, typically from European countries,” Frisch said. The enthusiasm hasn’t carried over seamlessly when it comes to kala namak, which Frisch said is by no means a blockbuster product for the company; some customers might still regard it as “esoteric,” as he put it.

But in an attempt to convert more cooks to kala namak’s cause, he has marketed it with purpose, even tinkering with the name ever so slightly. “We call it ‘black mineral salt’ to make it a little more accessible to people who just are trying it for the first time,” he said. “And it takes some convincing.”

Frisch feels such efforts are worthwhile, as they might just get kala namak skeptics in the door. That’s how Vora sees kala namak’s progression, too: She isn’t worried that it might go the way of, say, turmeric, another gemstone of South Asian cooking that she feels has been “misunderstood” by some Americans who’ve co-opted in the name of wellness, whisking it into \$7 lattes.

Maybe trying kala namak, Vora said, will pique the curiosity of cooks across the country, getting them to study its provenance in South Asian cooking. Or perhaps they’ll be inspired to imagine wondrous new ways to use it, just as vegan cooks did when they began to snow their tofu scrambles with an ingredient they could find only in their city’s Little Indias.

“They’ll be more like, what else can I do with this spice that I have in my pantry now that I’ve invested in this?” Vora said. “How else can I use it?”

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Mayukh Sen is the author of “Taste Makers: Seven Immigrant Women Who Revolutionized Food in America.” He has won a James Beard Award for his food writing, and his work has been anthologized in three editions of “The Best American Food Writing.”