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CURRY GERMAN STYLE

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We are at the Cherry Festival in Witzenhausen - a tiny town in central Germany, scampering amid the chaotically assembled town people along a narrow street for a glimpse of the year's Cherry Queen. She has been crowned that morning, to adorn the pageant of the year. Suddenly we hear someone enquiring, "Aap India se hai?" "Are you from India?" The Cherry Queen is quickly forgotten, eclipsed by these words in chaste Hindi by an Indian woman in an alien city.

We are drawn to this Hindi Queen instead - Mrs Raj Binder - only to realize that we were standing in front of her Indian cuisine restaurant, something we never expected to come across in that isolated small town in Germany. She was there with her husband Surinder Pal Singh, the owner of Rialto Pizza, a name not exactly suiting the cuisine they served.

All six of us, professors from India on a mission to defend an Indo-German project on agriculture, had landed there only the previous night and were more than pleasantly surprised to find that at Rialto Pizza we could order *dhal thadka*, chicken

curry, *chapathi*, *biryani* and even *raitha*. To beat a sleepless night after a long journey, we were prompted to order a rather large dose of Indian dishes and ate to our hearts' content, only to realize that Raj Binder was not willing to bill us for the food. She was more than happy to feed Indians for free in that far-off town in Germany.

It is from there that we were drawn into a most interesting experience of listening to the social, cultural and economic journey of this family - an exploration that at times triggered tears in their, and our, eyes too. They had learnt over the years that their living was a function of the social success of the food they cook; of cultural mimicry of the cuisine they love to serve; and of course the love to eat. For this they had to experiment, adjust and adopt and evolve in myriad ways, both in the food and in their business.

Born in the dusty village of Barthakla, Namasshar Thesil, Punjab, Surinder Pal Singh set out to Germany in 1986 to make a living. He ended up in Witzenhausen and took up odd

jobs for survival. Undaunted by the severe winter and the hardship of life in small town Europe, he tried his hand at the hospitality business and set up Rialto Pizza, a seventy-seater restaurant serving all types of German and Italian cuisines, apart from spicy Indish (Indian) biriyani, sag, roti, dhal, korma and typical Indian Adrak ki Chai - ginger, masala tea. Business soared for Surinder, given that there were no competitors.



Indische Gerichte	
82 Chicken Curry mit Reis	7,50 €
130 Chicken Korma mit Reis	8,50 €
133 Sag Spinat mit Mozzarella Reis	6,00 €
134 Indisch Biryani vegetarisch Gemüse mit Reis, Zwiebel, Paprika, Nüsse, Rosinen gebraten	6,00 €
135 Mix Sabzi Gemüse mit Tomaten, Zwiebel, Ingwer, Knoblauch	6,00 €
136 Tardka Dal Linsen mit Zwiebel, Tomaten, Ingwer, Knoblauch	6,00 €
140 Lamm Curry mit Reis	10,50 €

Then he decided to get married. Bubbly and exuberant Raj Binder from India joined him in 2002. Together, the couple set up a boutique, selling garments mostly from India. Amazed by their success, young Germans in the town were prompted to emulate their business and

consequently more shops and eat-outs mushroomed. The small town had place for only a few similar businesses, moreover the locals preferred the natives over the established outsiders. This led to a slump in the Singh family's good fortune and they decided to close down the garment outlet and downsize Rialto Pizza.

What the local eat-outs could not emulate were the Indian curries. Soon, Rialto Pizza bounced back. Over the last twelve years it has earned a name for itself, catering to the taste of their guests from across all strata of the town and the tourists there.

Behind this success, however, is a longer story of how the family adapted to local tastes and traditions. The initial years found few takers for the Indian food, except for the odd Indian visitor. However, over the years they carefully followed what the Witzenzausen's tongue liked, and adopted their cooking skills accordingly. Their culinary skills helped them combine spices and creams to levels acceptable to the locals while staying true to the basics of Indian cooking. Thus, while mixed vegetable curry, chicken curry, dhal fry and other Indian dishes are normally spicy, at the Rialto Pizza, mustard and sesame oils are replaced with butter and olive oil. Tomato puree is used to reduce the pungency of



spices. Ginger garlic paste, a must in chicken dishes, is used sparingly. Garnishing, normally with coriander, is replaced with herbs such as cilantro, thyme, oregano and rosemary. Mustard sauce is served with chicken to reduce the effect of fat, along with mayonnaise as a taste enhancer. The couple experimented with such fusion to Germanize Indian cuisine.

Just as in the evolution of living beings, in business as well, survival is for the fittest who adapt successfully to changing environments. The Singhs did so effectively over the years and Rialto Pizza has remained a success story. The couple is

hugely popular with the locals as well, fully integrated into that small town as they are.

PHILANTHROPISTS OF THE COUNTRY SIDE:

Philanthropy, it appears, is in their blood. There have been several occasions when the couple have served meals free to those who could not afford to pay for food. The ever smiling Raj Binder has been known by the sobriquet 'Mama' by Rehemo, a 70-year old native and many others because of her care and hospitality. Their popularity has grown so much in the small country side that a sizeable population of Hubanthal, a small



hamlet near Witzenhausen, wait for an annual Indian feast hosted by them. The community also frequent Rialto Pizza to relish Indian cuisine.

The couple's generosity extends to their homeland as well. A Shiva temple they have built provides free food and organises several activities for the local populace. During the Shiv Rathri festival, the Singhs visit India, bearing with them gifts and goodies for friends, family and the needy.



and that they long to go back to their country, Raj Binder hastens to add, "The earnings, quality of life and facilities for their children are superb in Germany, though there is a sense of insecurity as well, especially in case of my daughter Priya." They remain torn between two cultures. *"Paise tho bohuth hai lekin life tho nahi hai"* says Raj Binder with swollen eyes, that there is a lot of money here but not much of a life. All we have by way of consolation for them is a hug.

In the one week of our stay in Witzenhausen, we are treated to the best of Indian food at the Rialto Pizza. In that distant German town, Surinder, Raj and their two lovely children win us over with unmatched hospitality - Indian style.

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HEARTS STILL IN INDIA

Blessed with two adorable kids, Priya, 12, and Anmol, 9, the couple say that they remain in Germany for their children who are fluent in German and have adopted the German way of life.

Even as Surinder Pal Singh says that their hearts are in India



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