



Shubnum Khan on the streets of Overport, above, and Pragnesh and Jaya Bhatt, below, with some of the delicacies on offer in their vegetarian takeaway. Pictures: Jackie Clausen and Shubnum Khan

THE TASTE OF HOME

Eating her way home, Shubnum Khan returns to her Durban neighbourhood after a sojourn in China

10 / 11

It struck me one rainy afternoon in Shanghai as I swirled my chopsticks in a bowl of noodles that no matter how much Sichuan pepper I added, the taste was not going to change. Six months in China can hit the Durban palate hard. When I was invited to live in Shanghai on a writer's residency, my biggest concern had nothing to do with communism, YouTube bans or lack of English but everything to do with what I was going to eat. I spent months dreaming about butter chicken, aloo paratha and chicken tikka.

It's what happens when you grow up in Overport. In this bustling part of Durban not only is food available at every corner counter but it's also bursting with spice. I vowed to exploit my new-found appreciation as soon as I returned.

I start at the intersection of the clogged arteries of Indian Durban's heart: Sparks Road and Brickfield Road. My first stop is breakfast at an arcade that's popular for a supermarket with specials on ghee and a Bollywood DVD store that blasts the latest hits all day, except for Friday mornings when Islamic sermons solemnly fill the incense-scented air. Tucked away in a lane is a little vegetarian takeaway that serves the "best bhajias in town".

MAGIC INGREDIENT

Even at 7am there's a queue outside Little Surat, run by husband-and-wife team Jaya and Pragnesh Bhatt. The couple are hard at work boiling masala tea, frying jalebis and dishing out the curries they've cooked that morning. In the dimly lit passage I sit with the regulars on plastic stools outside the store and sip my sweet and spicy chai from a polystyrene cup. When I tuck into my hot puri patha, to which Jaya has liberally applied her homemade chilli sauce, I understand that you can taste when something is made with love.

And perhaps that is the magic ingredient at Little Surat that keeps people



coming back. I mop up my chilli sauce with my puri, pocket a jalebi for later and wave my goodbyes to the regulars.

A DHAL TO REMEMBER

My next stop is Sparks Road, a mish-mash of Egyptian cloak stores, pavement tuckshops, fishmongers, tailors and places that sell anything from passport photos to dagga. I decide to try a fairly new eatery, an extension of one of the spice stores that grind their spices and leave the intersection stained with the scent of Kashmiri chilli powder.

When I enter Mumbai Meals I am instantly transported to Mumbai with the kitschy décor, loud colours, excessive down lighting and of course the heady scent of simmering spices. In China I really missed a good dhal so I order the dhal makhani with extra chillies and a butter naan that the menu promises me is "clapped between the hands". Made of red beans and black urad dhal, the dish comes in steaming with a spicy salad and while I know my prolonged period away from Indian food makes me biased, it's honestly one of the best dhals I've ever had.

It might even be better than Exotic Food's, a caterer down Brickfield Road where on a Friday morning I usually wait in line with a bucket or pot to buy two litres of some eye-wateringly spicy dhal for Friday lunch. At Mumbai Meals, I cool my



mouth with nimboo pani (lemon water), pack away my leftovers and head back out.

Despite myself I head upstairs to what I can only describe as the biggest puzzle in Overport: a giant pizza parlour turned Thai food and burger joint that has a reputation for hit-and-miss meals, spectacularly slow service and a thriving customer base. I order a spicy Chicknetto pizza that takes as long as I expect but tastes better than I remember.

RETURN OF THE MUMMY

As anyone from Overport can tell you, there are specific times you should avoid Sparks Road completely – the day before Eid, a Friday afternoon and lunchtime. When I step out again at 12 the roads have turned to chaos. Traffic has come to a standstill and pigeons survey the mess from worn billboards advertising fairness creams and fashionable cloaks.

Some of the roads in Overport are so narrow that I once saw two cars hit each other's side mirrors off. The azaan at Sparks Road mosque starts and bearded men in kurtas hurry past to afternoon prayers. Women in nightgowns sit smoking on the balconies of tired blocks of flats and call out conversations to each other. I hand some coins to my car guard and get into the thick of it.

My next stop is Sunrise Chip N Ranch that is as popular for its rotis as it is for

drawing white people with a hangover. I've never eaten here before, so when I order a beans, chips and cheese roti for R40, I am overwhelmed when I am given what I can only describe as a mummy's bandaged limb the size of a, er, limb. I have to carry it to my car using both hands. As I tear bits off and get into the soaked roti and chips, I'm not sure if it's the white-customer catering or my over exerted taste buds but I don't taste much.

By now the men are out of the mosque, lunch hour has died down and the roads are a little less busy. I buy a packet of bright yellow lemons at the intersection for R10 and wave away those approaching with mangos, litchis and small bags of pet fish.

SWEET ROSE SYRUP

Of course no visit to Overport is complete without a chicken tikka. There are three contenders for best chicken tikka in Overport and while I'm a big fan of MY Diners, their set-up in Sparks Road has never instilled enough confidence for me to eat there without concern for my health so I make a quick choice between Kebabish at the corner or Baba's. I go for Baba's just because I feel like they put more masala on their meat.

It's my favourite food in the world and I dig in with my fingers, relishing in the spicy flavours that are unashamedly loud and insistent. When I'm done I wipe my plate clean with the roti, wash my hands and leave feeling satisfied with myself for having enjoyed as much as I humanly could of Overport food in a day.

That is, until I get into my car and realise something is missing. I can't put my finger on it until I put my hand on it accidentally in my pocket and pull out my packet of smashed jalebi from the morning. As I take in the sight of bustling Sparks Road with its messy pavements and crazy characters, I bite into the sticky orange mess and relish the sweet rose syrup that oozes out.

Now I'm truly satisfied.