
Tandoori tastes: perceptions of Indian restaurants in America

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Abstract

The USA is culturally and ethnically diverse and becoming more so. This diversity is reflected in the variety of cuisines available both in stores and in restaurants. Trends show a movement towards trying out new and exotic foods, increasing interest in vegetarian items, as well as a growing use of spices, herbs, and hot peppers. Asian foods are getting more popular with cuisines from China, Thailand, and Japan in the lead. Indian cuisine is hot, spicy, flavored with herbs, and offers many vegetarian options. This study examines the perceptions of White Americans, South Asians, and those of other ethnic origins in their perceptions of the food and service in Indian restaurants in the USA. The findings of this study suggest that there are universal likes/dislikes as well as differential perceptions between ethnic groups. Implications for researchers and operators of Indian restaurants are provided.

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Introduction and literature review

The USA is increasingly becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse as a society. Recent immigrants have brought their cultures and cuisines to the USA just like earlier immigrants, and those flavors have found favor in the US marketplace. Many ethnic cuisines have moved beyond the phase of being merely trendy and have made a permanent mark on the US menu. Papadopoulos (1997) reports that Italian, Mexican, and Chinese cuisines dominate the ethnic-food market. These "traditional" ethnic cuisines enjoy the highest popularity among consumers because they have become ingrained in US culture and are served at restaurants nation-wide. Consumer interest in and acceptance of ethnic foods continue to expand, and reflect the increasingly pluralistic composition of contemporary US society (CREST, 1997).

In the past decade, ethnic foods have become widely available and increasingly popular in Western food markets. Many consumers desire alternatives to old food habits. The increase in diversity of populations within individual nations has fueled consumer demand for more culturally diverse foods. Increased interest in ethnic foods may be a reflection of the changing cultures of consumers, as a result of individuals from different cultural backgrounds being in continuous contact (Iqbal, 1996).

By the 1980s, ethnic restaurants constituted 10 percent of all restaurants in the USA (Gabaccia, 1998). The NRA (2000a, b) restaurant industry eating-place trends forecast discusses the impact of immigration on the restaurant industry in the last decade. An industry report on ethnic cuisines reiterates many of the trends mentioned earlier. Notable is a shift in consumer attitudes toward ethnic cuisines, in that consumers do not feel as strongly about ethnic cuisines, because such foods have become more commonplace. In particular, Indian and Korean cuisines are described as appealing to adventurous diners and those with a penchant for spicy foods (Mills, 2000).

Papadopoulos (1997) summarizes her findings on food trends in the USA, based on a survey of 180 professional chefs. According to the NRA's (2000b) survey, today's "hot" and



trendy items tend to fall into two categories: ethnic-oriented items: ethnic cuisines, hot-and-spicy foods; and healthy alternatives: lower-fat items and vegetarian entrées. Aged balsamic vinegar, hot chilli peppers, exotic mushrooms, ginger, hot sauce and roasted garlic are among the 20 most fashionable food trends, which, coincidentally, are the principal ingredients in those ethnic cuisines that are growing in popularity. Use of these ingredients creates a certain flavor intensity, another component of the trend towards ethnic food. The inclusion of hotter, spicier food is growing in importance at approximately two out of five table service operations, according to the NRA's *Tableservice Restaurant Trends – 1995* (2000b). This reflects consumers' growing interest in spicy and ethnic foods. Again, the same NRA Survey (2000a, b) confirms the rising popularity of meatless/vegetarian entrées. More than three out of ten menus offered a meatless entrée in 1995, compared with less than one-quarter of the menus in 1990. The USA's interest in international cuisine should come as no surprise, since, demographically, the USA is more diverse today than ever before, and cuisines of minority populations are making a bigger impact on the tastes of the nation (NRA, 2000b). The growing cultural diversity of the USA is certainly influencing Americans' taste for ethnic foods (Papadopoulos, 1997).

In the USA, interest in Asian ethnic food has been strongest in Chinese food, while Japanese Sushi and Thai food are slowly reaching a broader audience (NRA, 2000b). However, Indian food did not even figure in the list of "some less well-known cuisines" in the NRA study in the USA (NRA, 2000b).

With estimates of over 7,500 Indian restaurants in the UK, Indian cuisine is the most popular cuisine there (*The Economist*, 1999). It should be noted that the links between India and the UK go back to the imperial era of the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s. The Indian restaurant business in the UK is quite mature. Establishments range from the mundane and predictable to the exciting and contemporary. Among the oldest Indian restaurants in the UK, the renowned Veeraswamy's was established in 1926 and is still in business (British Library, 2003). Indeed,

in recent years two Indian restaurants in the UK, Tamarind and Zaika, have been listed in the prestigious *Guide Michelin* and awarded one star each (*Menu Magazine*, 2003).

While the UK is a very small country in comparison with the USA and the Atlantic Ocean separates these two countries, there is very little "cultural distance" between them (Hofstede, 1983). Given the cultural similarities between the two countries and the growing interest in ethnic, spicy, and vegetarian foods in the USA, it appears that there is tremendous potential for growth in the popularity of Indian cuisine in the USA.

However, there is a distinct paucity of information on the popularity and acceptance of Indian food. This can be attributed to three reasons. First, due to the immigration policies of the USA, Asian-Indians are among the most highly educated, English-language proficient, and wealthy immigrant groups. Furthermore, they are largely voluntary immigrants who have come in search of opportunities to develop their professional careers. In these circumstances, unlike many other immigrants who open ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, and so on, Asian-Indians are mainly employed in highly skilled professions (Bacon, 1996, p. 7). Second is the difficulty of securing qualified and trained legal immigrants who can prepare and serve Indian food. Third, the children of restaurant owners and operators in the UK and the USA are keen on moving into professional occupations such as medicine, law or engineering, thus resulting in a loss of professional expertise (*Tandoori Magazine*, 1998).

There are two consequences of these issues. First, that any entrepreneur seeking to open an Indian restaurant faces significant barriers in hiring professionals. Second, that many new Indian restaurants tend to be opened and staffed by non-hospitality/culinary professionals and end up serving bad food in an unprofessional manner. The net result is a comparatively lower number of Indian restaurants in the USA.

Need for the study

The restaurant industry is highly competitive and, to attract and retain customers, it is

essential that restaurant operators have a deep understanding of the wants, needs, and perceptions of customers who will be most likely to choose their establishment (Gregoire *et al.*, 1995). Because of the changes that are taking place in the hospitality industry, such as heightened competitive pressures and increased consumer expectations, there is a growing need for a better understanding of how to develop and maintain customer satisfaction and loyalty (Sundaram *et al.*, 1997). The purpose of this study is to enable Indian restaurant operators to better understand consumer needs and attitudes towards Indian restaurants, so that they can be well positioned to take advantage of this growing trend towards eating ethnic foods in the USA.

From an academic perspective, despite the increasing interest in ethnic foods, there is very little research in this area of customer perceptions of food and service in ethnic restaurants, and the implications of these perceptions for restaurant operators. Other than Qu's (1997) study of Chinese restaurants, the researchers could find no studies in major publications addressing this issue. Furthermore, there was not even a single study of customer perceptions of food and service in Indian restaurants. This study addresses this gap in the literature.

Objectives of the study

This study researched the factors that influence the decision of patrons to dine at selected Indian restaurants in the twin cities of the Minneapolis/St Paul metro area in Minnesota, USA. The research objectives were to:

- determine the demographic profile of patrons of Indian restaurants;
- identify factors that influence all patrons' decision to dine at Indian restaurants;
- determine differences in influential factors, between patrons of South Asian origin, and those of other ethnic origin, when they dine at Indian restaurants; and
- identify the role of South Asians as "gatekeepers" for Indian restaurants.

Methodology

Questionnaire

The data for this research were collected through the use of a survey questionnaire, which was given to patrons of five selected Indian restaurants in the Minneapolis/St Paul metro area in Minnesota, USA. The questionnaire was developed based on the literature, issues identified in the National Restaurant Association's "Customer attitude questionnaire" (Reid, 1983); a research study on perceptions of Chinese restaurants in the USA (Qu, 1997); and the objectives of this study. The SPSS software package was used for data analysis. Basic descriptive statistics, crosstabs, and multivariate analysis of variance were computed.

The questionnaire was developed for the purpose of collecting data on the factors that influence the decision of patrons to dine at selected Indian restaurants in the twin cities.

The survey comprised five parts:

- (1) demographic data;
- (2) comparison of frequency of dining at other similar ethnic restaurants using a five-point Likert scale;
- (3) the importance of various factors when making a decision to dine out, using a five-point Likert scale;
- (4) the factors that influence the decision to dine at an Indian restaurant, using a five-point Likert scale; and
- (5) open-ended questions.

The points on the Likert scale were:

- 1 = unimportant; 2 = somewhat important; 3 = important; 4 = more/very important; and 5 = extremely important.

Data collection

The researcher conducted surveys at five Indian restaurants in the Minneapolis-St Paul metro area, Minnesota, USA. These restaurants were selected because of their urban and suburban locations, similar type of food served, and similar price range of \$12 to \$18 per person per meal. The operators consented to have the researcher conduct the survey on the premises during meal times.

It was decided to obtain 100 completed surveys from each restaurant for a total of 500 surveys. This would give a sample large enough

for robust statistical analysis, while compensating for the convenience sampling utilized.

A pilot test was conducted to test for reliability and consumer acceptance at one of the five Indian restaurants. On completion of the pilot study, the survey was updated and improved.

The surveys were conducted during June 2000 during the lunch and dinner services, at the restaurants. Restaurant patrons were approached by the researcher, requested to complete the survey, and told that their individual responses were anonymous and confidential. No compensation was provided to the respondents.

Findings and discussion

Findings are presented in tables and discussed in the context of the literature in the same sub-section. Statistical findings are supported by discussions of the responses from open-ended questions on the survey. While not all respondents gave open-ended statements, those that did apparently felt strongly enough about certain issues to supplement their responses to the closed-ended questions.

Demographics

The sample size selected was 500. A total of 489 usable responses were obtained. There were an almost equal number of females (51 percent) and males (49 percent). The average respondent was 32 years old and White-American (75 percent). Many respondents had Bachelor's degrees (44 percent), and one third (33 percent) had postgraduate degrees. Over half the respondents were "professionals" (50.6 percent). Total household income was well distributed across the given choices.

These demographics are consistent with the demographic profile of the population of the Minneapolis/St Paul metro area, in terms of age, gender, and particularly the predominance of White Americans (Demographics USA, 1999). It appears that the patrons of Indian restaurants are more educated and more affluent than the average population. This is not surprising, since more highly educated and

more affluent people are more likely to have sampled different cuisines, traveled widely, and to be adventurous.

Since many of the objectives of this study are focused on ethnic differences, respondents were asked to identify their ethnicity with five sub-categories of "American" such as White, Black, Hispanic. Similarly, South Asians were asked to self-identify whether they were from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, or Nepal. For purposes of meaningful statistical analysis, these sub-categories were collapsed into three categories of White American, South Asian, and other. Furthermore, for multivariate analysis, these were additionally collapsed into just two categories of "South Asian" and "other ethnic origin."

The results are provided in Table I. Given that "White Americans" dominate the sample, it should be noted that averages would be skewed by their perceptions.

Customer perceptions of importance of influential factors

To address the second objective of the study, respondents were asked to score, on the Likert scale, the importance of each of the 15 given characteristics when deciding to dine at an Indian restaurant. The findings are presented in Tables II and III. Table II shows the score on the importance of restaurant characteristics, while Table III focuses on the importance of various influences on respondents.

Taken together, Tables II and III show that the most important factors for the entire sample were quality of food, taste of the food, and hygiene and cleanliness, in descending order. Availability of vegetarian choices, availability of new items, and cultural familiarity were rated the lowest as important factors for the whole sample. However, it is noteworthy that even the lowest rated factors such as "price" were scored

Table I Demographic profile of respondents by ethnic origin

Ethnic categories	<i>n</i>	Percent
White American	361	75
South Asian	57	12
Other	63	13
Total	481	100

Table II Mean of importance of restaurant characteristics to respondents

Restaurant characteristics	Mean for total sample
Quality of food	4.69
Hygiene and cleanliness	4.25
Authentic cuisine	4.08
Cleanliness of rest-rooms	3.83
Employee friendliness	3.74
Menu variety offered	3.65
Value for money	3.64
Atmosphere	3.54
Efficient service	3.52
Reputation/word of mouth	3.29
Cannot prepare at home	3.11
Convenience of location	3.06
Portion size	3.03
Vegetarian choices	3.00
Availability of new items	2.66

Table III Mean scores of importance of various influences on respondents

Food attributes	Mean for total sample
Taste of food	4.61
Aroma/smell	3.80
Personal preference	3.66
Appearance of the food	3.56
Spicy food	3.44
Price	3.25
Cultural familiarity	2.56

by respondents as more than “important” and not inconsequential in decision making.

These findings are consistent with national studies of restaurant patronage. “Food quality” and “cleanliness/hygiene” are consistently rated among the most important factors in selecting restaurants (Reid, 1983; Dulen, 1999).

Ethnic differences in customer perceptions and influences

To address the objective of measuring differences of perceptions of ethnic groups, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The results are shown in Tables IV and V. Significant differences were found in several influential factors, between respondents of South Asian origin, and those of “other” ethnic origin. Quality of food and taste of the food were the only two significant factors on which respondents of other ethnic origin had higher

Table IV Analysis of variance of restaurant characteristics by ethnic origin

Characteristic	South Asian	Other ethnic	F
	mean	mean	
Hygiene and cleanliness	4.49	4.21	6.343
Cleanliness of rest-rooms	4.18	3.78	5.538
Employee friendliness	3.95	3.70	4.043
Efficient service	3.91	3.47	13.800
Quality of food	4.51	4.72	7.708
Availability of new items	3.19	2.58	16.640
Vegetarian choices	3.33	2.94	3.967
Value for money	3.91	3.60	7.490
Atmosphere	3.80	3.49	6.809
<i>No significant differences</i>			
Reputation/word of mouth	3.21	3.30	0.094
Cannot prepare at home	2.82	3.15	1.843
Convenience of location	3.09	3.06	0.043
Portion size	3.25	3.00	3.077
Menu variety offered	3.75	3.64	1.011
Authentic cuisine	4.11	4.08	0.000

Note: F is significant if $p < 0.05$

Table V Analysis of variance of food attributes by ethnic origin

Characteristic	South Asian	Other ethnic	F
	mean	mean	
Taste of the food	4.46	4.63	4.077
Spicy food	3.82	3.38	7.804
Cultural familiarity	3.19	2.46	19.367
Price	3.58	3.21	6.797
<i>No significant differences</i>			
Appearance	3.63	3.54	0.243
Aroma/smell	3.93	3.77	1.523
Personal preference	3.68	3.65	0.075

Note: F is significant if $p < 0.05$

expectations than those of South Asian origin. South Asians had significantly higher expectations than those of other ethnic origin on the following factors:

- hygiene and cleanliness;
- cleanliness of rest-rooms;
- employee friendliness;
- value for money;
- efficient service;
- spicy food;
- atmosphere;
- price;
- vegetarian choices;
- availability of new items; and
- cultural familiarity.

Perceptions of hygiene/cleanliness

It would appear that South Asians are more demanding customers than customers of other ethnic groups. It may be that, as a culturally distinct group, South Asians have a perception that Indian restaurants need to improve their standards of hygiene and cleanliness, and cleanliness of restaurant rest-rooms. They may be more critical of the hygiene and sanitation standards in Indian restaurants than of those maintained in other restaurants. Independent of ethnicity, poor sanitary conditions were close to the top of the list of reasons for consumer dissatisfaction in an NRA consumer survey (Reid, 1983). It was a greater source of annoyance as income increased.

Perceptions of service standards and quality

South Asian respondents had significantly higher mean scores on "efficient service", and "employee friendliness." In the familiar cultural setting of an Indian restaurant South Asians may indeed have a higher expectation for efficient service and friendliness of employees than other ethnic groups. Unfortunately, it appears that these high expectations were not met in many instances. As mentioned in some of the open-ended questions, by both South Asians and respondents of other ethnic origin, there was unequal treatment or service given to South Asians. Furthermore, some South Asian respondents indicated that they dislike the service in Indian restaurants; that service personnel exhibit the attitude of "familiarity breeds contempt;" and that Indian restaurants do not realize that the restaurant business is a service business first.

Perceptions of price and value

South Asians gave a significantly higher score to "value for money" and "price." This suggests that South Asians are more price-sensitive, as a group. Many of the open-ended responses from South Asians indicated that they felt that Indian restaurants were overcharging and serving small portions. A consumer's relative perception of value must be considered when establishing menu prices (Reid, 1983). The concept of value for money is related to price. Although larger portions do not always equate to better value in the minds of all consumers, larger portions do enhance perceived value for customers (Grindy, 1999).

Perceptions of hot and spicy food

South Asians tend to like hot, pungent food, and therefore their mean score for the importance of spicy food was higher than the mean rating by the "all other ethnic origin" group. Consistent with these scores, in the open-ended questions, some South Asians indicated that they would eat more often at Indian restaurants if the food were spicier. Moy and Witzel (1998) state that Indians embraced the chilli pepper, although it was not a native Indian plant. South Asians and some other cultures have a higher tolerance for spicier food, since they are accustomed to it (Dulen, 1999).

Perceptions of taste of food

The lower score for taste of the food by South Asians may well be because they take the taste for granted. It is not very exotic for them, in comparison with the view of the "other ethnic origin" group. They may also feel that the taste may not be quite as they want it, or are accustomed to, but is an acceptable substitute. On the other hand, the "other ethnic origin" group probably does not have any other yardstick by which to measure or compare the food.

Perceptions of vegetarian options

South Asians reported a significantly higher mean for vegetarian choices. This is because Indians have a high percentage of the population that is vegetarian. Religion has affected the diets of Indians. Over 80 percent of Indians are Hindus. Vegetarianism is part of Hindu philosophy, although some Hindus do eat chicken, fish, goat, or lamb. Buddhists and Jains avoid meat altogether (Moy and Witzel, 1998).

Perceptions of menu choice

While the "all other ethnic origin" group perceives that the items on the menu offer a lot of choice, South Asians probably make many of the items at home. Therefore, they seek new items, and/or something different.

Perceptions of atmosphere/ambience

Atmosphere or ambience refers to the internal environment of a restaurant. It is a fairly important decision factor when people go out to restaurants. Sight, sound, smell, and touch all combine to create the stage setting for the dining experience (Marvin, 1992). For many

South Asian respondents, atmosphere in an Indian restaurant is very important. It is likely that they see it as an extension of themselves, and as a show-case for their culture. They are generally knowledgeable about South Asian (i.e. their own) culture and are therefore better able to rate Indian restaurants than those who are unfamiliar with the culture. Such feelings were often mentioned in the responses to the open-ended questions.

Perceptions of cultural familiarity

It is only natural that there would be a significant difference on the mean scores of cultural familiarity. While respondents in the all other ethnic origin group go to an Indian restaurant for what they consider a cultural experience (as stated by many in the open-ended questions), South Asians probably view the dining experience as an integral part of who they are. Their comments in the open-ended questions reflect this: "I really like the element of cultural familiarity in Indian restaurants"; "I really like the Indian atmosphere"; "Availability of food prepared in the style of my country"; "Nice people and feel at home," were some of the many comments. These reflect a cultural familiarity with reference not only to the food and its preparation, but also the atmosphere of the restaurant. The comments of respondents of "other" ethnic origin mentioned that "It is interesting to me, since I am not a part of the culture"; and "How interested some people are in their culture."

Role of South Asians as "gatekeepers"

It appears that South Asians are more critical of the Indian restaurant experience across the board. Given their cultural and culinary familiarity, this is not surprising. Perhaps it is fortunate for Indian restaurant owners that they constitute a comparatively small percentage of their clientele. However, Indian restaurant owners should also be aware of the "gatekeeper" power of their customers of South Asian origin. "Gatekeepers" are people who have the power to prevent sellers or information from reaching members of a buying center (Kotler *et al.*, 1999). For example, often non-South Asians ask a South Asian to recommend a "good Indian restaurant."

Respondents were asked about the role of other South Asians in selecting this restaurant. All three ethnic groups were significantly influenced by the recommendation of South Asians. While the scores for White Americans (26 percent) and others (31 percent) are not surprising, South Asians (43 percent) were influenced the most! Restaurant operators would do well to heed these results. Unfortunately, some South Asians complained about being at the receiving end of discriminatory treatment, suggesting that some operators are antagonizing this important segment at their own peril.

Conclusion

Indian restaurants in the USA are serving a diverse clientele, with at least two distinct ethnic market segments of White Americans and South Asians. Both ethnic groups are interested in high quality food and service. Despite the fact that South Asians are a smaller segment, they do play the role of both patrons and gatekeepers; hence their perceptions need to be addressed also.

Patrons of Indian restaurants in the USA perceived a lack of consistency and professionalism in both the food and the service areas. This is a significant barrier to positive word of mouth as well as repeat and referral patronage. Operators need to address this issue on a priority basis. Perhaps they can take a cue from their compatriots in the lodging industry. One of the primary objectives of the Asian-American Hotel Owners Association is to professionalize, educate, and train Indians who own hotels. Furthermore, one of their new initiatives is to induct the second generation of Indian hoteliers into the business, so that the expertise and wealth are retained in the community (AAHOA, 2003).

Finally, it must be acknowledged that Indian restaurants in the USA are coming of age too, with the emergence of differentiated restaurants breaking new ground. Examples are *Tabla* in New York (New York, 1999) or *Indique* in Washington, DC (Washingtonian, 2003). The former features Goan Spiced Maine Crab cake, while the latter offers Tandoori Quail – indeed a far cry from the standard Tandoori Chicken

and Pork Vindaloo of yore! Such menus, with cocktails and ambience to match, leave food critics searching for terms such as “Nouvelle Delhi” to describe the cuisine (*New York*, 1999). Nevertheless, the recommendations that flow from this study offer opportunities to broaden the market for Indian cuisine in the USA.

Recommendations for Indian restaurant operators

This study provides information which facilitates a better understanding of customers and their needs, and systems that can be implemented to improve customer satisfaction. The following recommendations can be made for Indian restaurateurs:

- (1) Improve hygienic practices in all restaurant areas, including the rest-rooms.
- (2) Staff should be properly trained to deliver quality service. Performance standards should be set and staff trained on the following dimensions:
 - Describing menu items.
 - Delivering prompt and efficient service consistently.
 - Being sensitive to the differing needs of first-time versus regular customers.
 - Communication skills – language, speech, and accent issues.
- (3) Improve restaurant ambience – use the services of a professional interior designer.
- (4) Control quality of food – train kitchen staff in the importance of standardization of each dish, and maintenance of quality control standards.
- (5) Set reasonable prices after researching price sensitivity of customers.
- (6) Serve larger portions for the same price.

Recommendations for further studies

The researchers have the following suggestions for future studies:

- Similar studies can be conducted with other ethnic restaurants.
- National and international research can be undertaken in cities world-wide with a large number of Indian restaurants and/or a large population of South Asians such as Sydney, Australia or London, UK.
- Where market segmentation exists among Indian restaurants, studies can be

- performed to identify similarities and differences between the various segments.
- In locations with a large South Asian population, comparative studies can be undertaken between acculturated South Asians and recent immigrants.

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