Three decades later and the memory is still vivid: all of us sitting cross-legged on the floor in the living room in an approximation of a circle. In the middle, the nine parcels that Dad would have brought from Hotel New Krishna Bhavan across the road. Aunt Pushpa would take two parcels and proceed to remove the thread and newspaper covering in quick jerks, as if she was the one who had originally done the packing. The living room would immediately fill up with the distinct aroma of masala dosas.

The dosas were golden brown tunnels wrapped in two green banana leaves. We children would prefer keeping the dosa in its tunnel shape as long as possible, carefully teasing out morsels and easing out the stuffing. Not Aunt Pushpa. She would spread out the folds of the tunnel, and voilà, the turmeric-coated potato-and-onion stuffing, garnished with green chilies and coriander, would be exposed. It was a mystery instantly demystified. The coconut chutney accompaniment would be between the two banana leaves, a coarse layer, thick and reddish, reddish because of the ground red chilies. Aunt would keep the chutney for the end; she would finish the dry potato-and-onion curry first. We children didn’t bother with the chutney; it was too pungent for our young tongues.

And while we gawked at Aunt gorging as if the dosas were nothing more than flimsy teatime snacks, one of us would invariably choke on a morsel. Mother would chide: “Eat slowly; the dosa is not going to run off anywhere!” I don’t remember Aunt Pushpa choking even once. But, honestly, we did take a long time over our individual dosas, picking out the crispier spots, removing the green chilies from the potato and onion stuffing, savoring every bit, licking our oily fingers afterwards, and experiencing the peculiar sensation of sated stomachs battling hungry mouths.

New Krishna Bhavan is still there, swankier and roomier, but we in the family have moved to different locations in Bangalore. Aunt Pushpa now lives in Mysore, about three hours by road. Perhaps, she still relishes masala dosa; perhaps, the two dosas have reduced to one. She is seventy-two.

Dad actually preferred his masala dosa from Udupi Sri Krishna Bhavan in the crowded Balepet district in the heart of the city. “The best masala dosa in Bangalore,” he would remind us time and again. He would take us there once a month, usually on the Sunday after his pay day. He would bundle us into an auto rickshaw quite early in the morning because the famous restaurant would get crowded soon. On reaching there, because he was a journalist with Deccan Herald and acquainted with the owners, we would be ushered into the “family rooms” upstairs.

I remember Dad didn’t like the onion in the potato stuffing. He would remove all the onion and only then begin eating. Midway through the dosa, he would ask for extra coconut chutney and sambar (lentil soup with tomato and a different variety of onions—the small ones called “Madras onions”—seasoned with mustard and asafetida). Little Geetha, the youngest of the girls, would never be able to finish her dosa, and I would eagerly wait for Mother to dump the left-over onto my plate. Garlic was taboo for Mother all her life; she believed it excited the base senses. So she would ask Dad to order the masala dosa without the red chili and garlic paste. It is this paste, a thin layer of which is scrubbed
expertly on the dosa while it is braised on the tava or griddle, which imparts the masala or the spiciness.

As time went by, I occasionally wondered if I could get to enjoy even better masala dosas outside of Bangalore.

The opportunity came when I married and settled down in Bombay. But it was a bit of a disappointment to find restaurants there unable to offer the Bangalore quality in masala dosas. Bombay dosas were far too thin and were either excessively crisp or excessively soft. I think the only restaurant that approached Bangalore standards was Satkar, just outside Churchgate train terminus. But one had to wait at least half an hour since everybody, particularly teenagers from nearby colleges, seemed to be ordering masala dosas left, right, and center.

A difference in quality of masala dosa is something one expects, but imagine my astonishment when I came across a difference in eating the snack as well. I had this unforgettable experience in a restaurant in Rajkot, a hot dusty town further north. Four teenagers at the next table had ordered masala dosas. When they arrived, the boys sat up and, grabbing forks in either hand, attacked the snack in a frenzy. They folded either end of the dosa onto the middle and stabbed and mashed it into the potato and onion curry till both dosa and curry become an amorphous mess. To this day I have wondered how a Bangalore masala dosa would taste if so treated but can’t bring myself to enact such a mutilation. It’s a different matter, though, that mutilation is inescapable in the mouth, and later in the stomach!

A few months back, when I went on a writing assignment to Chennai and Chengalput in the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu, I discovered a difference in the type of accompaniments as well. The masala dosa is usually served with coconut chutney and lentil soup. However, in restaurants in both the cities, the masala dosa is served with five different chutneys—onion, mint, coconut, chili, and garlic. A feast of choice, you would conclude, but I am sorry to report that the dosa itself lacked the perfect crispness and thickness that makes the snack such an enjoyable meal. In my considered opinion of indulging in masala dosas for over three decades now, a good South Indian–style restaurant is one that is able to dish out the perfect masala dosa. I am not much influenced by the quality of other fare.

Outside of restaurants, the only true blue (or should I say true red?) masala dosa I have had the pleasure of enjoying was at the home of Mrs. Sumitra Seshadri, a family friend and a banker. “There is nothing extraordinary to be done to
the batter or the potato curry,” said Mrs. Seshadri. “The art is in the correct degree of heat and the correct thickness of the griddle on which the dosa batter is cast.” Mrs. Seshadri’s griddle was three-quarters of an inch thick, and it took about ten minutes of a little less than medium heat to cook up one exquisite golden brown masala dosa. When she served me one, I had to excuse myself from an interesting corporate video that Mr. Seshadri was showing; the dosa deserved all my attention.

At home my wife did attempt to make a masala dosa once. The dosa and potato curry turned out passably well for a first timer, but the red paste tasted somewhat bland. When I remarked about it, she said she didn’t like it pungent. These days, I too find myself asking the waiter in any restaurant to instruct the cook to put less of the red paste in the masala dosa. As we grow older, we seem to prefer everything less hot. Including masala dosas.

Vidyarthi Bhavan

Growing old also means growing more knowledgeable. I learnt only recently that Vidyarthi Bhavan is the most famous restaurant for masala dosas in Bangalore. Why hadn’t Dad mentioned Vidyarthi Bhavan? Hadn’t he known? Did Dad’s choice of Udupi Sri Krishna Bhavan as the best place for masala dosas arise out of personal taste, in contrast to almost an entire city’s preference? Or did Dad simply not take us there because the restaurant is located at the other end of the town? It’s too late now to ask these questions because Dad died two years back. I just hope they serve masala dosas up there the way he wants them.

I got to know about Vidyarthi Bhavan from a cousin who travels all over Bangalore on photography assignments. “Don’t be deceived by the smallness or simplicity of the place,” he said. “Just go and have a masala dosa there.”

The restaurant has been around for nearly seventy years, changing proprietary guard only once. It’s located on the busy main road of Gandhi Bazaar. I went there to see for myself whether its reputation was genuine or cooked up.

The restaurant is a flat, low building, resembling a house left over from ancient times. The signboard on top of the main door is modest, and once you enter the compound, you are immediately removed from the glitter and frenetic activity of the malls and shops on the main road.

Ramakrishna Adiga, the proprietor, sits right beside the entrance, collecting money from his patrons as they line up in front of his small table. Their faces reflect satisfaction, as if they have experienced a short but fulfilling gastronomic journey in the narrow confines of the restaurant. The place is packed with small functional tables. Customers sit hunched over dosa, dosa, and more dosa, a sea of dosas broken by the few cups of coffee or a plate of some other dish like the vada (ground black gram deep-fried in a doughnut shape) or khara bath (boiled semolina seasoned with spices). A narrow aisle stretches right through the middle of the long dining room up to the wall some eighty feet away from the entrance. More customers stand in the aisle, waiting rather impatiently for a seat to be vacated. I got the distinct impression that I had boarded an overcrowded train that was reluctant to accommodate one more passenger.

“This restaurant was first opened in 1938 by two brothers, Parameshwara and Venkatraman Urula,” Adiga told me in between slipping currency notes into a half-opened drawer. Not for a moment did his concentration waver from what he had to accept, what he had to pay back. “In 1970 we purchased it from them. Of the twenty-five people who work here, two are from that era, a grinder and a cutter.”

“Cutter?” I was puzzled.

“Vegetables have to be cut, isn’t it?” Adiga laughed, as he slipped more currency into the drawer. He was undoubtedly more than sixty, but the laugh took away several years from his glowing, bespectacled face.

“What is so special about your masala dosa?” I asked, bravely. “A quality that is consistent,” Adiga said with a certainty that did not brook challenge. “Our masala dosas have been prepared the same way for the last sixty-seven years. We purchase the same good-quality rice, dals, and vegetables. Not to forget the groundnut oil and butter. We follow the same soaking and grinding procedures. No variation absolutely.”

The restaurant opens at 6:30 in the morning and serves masala dosa, idli (rice cake), vada, and khara bath up to 11:30. Then, after a break, the restaurant resumes business at 2:00 in the afternoon and remains open till 8:00 in the evening. About 1,500 masala dosas are served every day. Adiga showed me the visitors’ book—testimonials written mainly in Kannada by well-known personalities from politics, arts, and industry. Mr. Adiga and his restaurant are indeed well known. Further evidence is that many of the customers exchange with him quite intimate talk as they pay their bills.

“Why is it difficult to make the restaurant type of masala dosa at home?” I asked.

Adiga shook his head slowly, like a benign principal faced with a naïve student. “It is simply regulation of heat and the thickness of the griddle. The griddle normally used at home is very thin. Ours is custom made and a good one-inch thick. The iron is soaked with oil over years of usage. That contributes to the making of a good masala dosa, too.
Secondly, even if you did have such a griddle, you would need to practice casting dosas for a minimum of two weeks before you can get it right. Here we cast twenty dosas at a time. At home you would cast only one at a time, isn’t it?”

I was taken to the kitchen to see how the dosas are cast, and I got busy with my camera. What astounded me was the way each waiter picked up the dosas, fifteen of them in steel plates placed one on top of the other all along the arm from palm to shoulder. It was terraced magic. I followed one such magic-laden waiter into the dining room and watched him serve the dosas. Fifteen waiting customers heaved different sighs of pleasure and relief.

As I got busy once again with my camera, I felt a lump rise in my throat. What if Dad, Mom, Aunt Pushpa, my sisters and their husbands, and my wife were all here, just now? I would have introduced them all to Mr. Adiga. Dad would have had a lot to talk with him about masala dosas and other things. Then Mr. Adiga would have surely offered to accommodate all of us in such a way that we would be facing one another. This time I would be the one who would order. And perhaps Aunt Pushpa would interrupt me to say, “Don’t mind, but order one extra for me.”

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**Recipe**

A well-made masala dosa takes time and patience, but the reward is sumptuous.

**Ingredients for dosa**

- 3 cups long-grain raw rice
- 1 cup black gram dal (Urad dal)
- 1 teaspoon fenugreek seeds

**Preparation of batter**

Mix all of the ingredients and soak in water overnight. Drain. Rinse the mixture in clean water and drain once more. Blend into a smooth paste adding a little water at periodic intervals, till the resultant batter can coat a ladle thickly. If there is excess water in the batter, it will make your dosa excessively soft. Add salt to taste.

**Ingredients for potato and onion stuffing**

- 4 large potatoes
- 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
- pinch of asafetida
- 2 teaspoons channa dal (Bengal gram, split and skinned)
- 1 large onion, diced
- 2 to 3 hot green chilies, chopped
- 1 sprig coriander or curry leaves
- ½ teaspoon turmeric powder

**Preparation**

Boil potatoes until soft. Meanwhile, pour a tablespoon of oil in a pan and crackle mustard seeds. Add asafetida and channa dal and stir-fry till dal is brown. Add diced onions and sauté on low flame till golden brown. Remove pan from fire. Peel the boiled potatoes and mash them into the sautéed onions. Add chilies, coriander/curry leaves, and turmeric powder and stir till yellow color is evenly spread. Add salt to taste.

**Ingredients for coconut chutney**

- 1 cup grated coconut
- 3 to 4 dry red chilies
- 1 clove garlic
- 1 teaspoon tamarind paste
- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
- salt to taste

**Preparation**

Mix all ingredients except mustard seeds and blend to a fine paste. In a small pan, heat one teaspoon of oil and crackle mustard seeds. Pour into chutney paste and mix.

**Ingredients for masala paste**

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- ½ teaspoon mustard seeds
- 2 or 3 cloves garlic
- 3 to 4 dry red chilies
- pinch of asafetida
- 1 cup grated coconut
- salt to taste

**Preparation**

Heat oil in pan and crackle mustard seeds. Add the remaining ingredients except for the grated coconut. Sauté till chilies turn a darker red. Remove from fire and blend to a fine paste with the coconut. Add salt to taste.

**Preparation of masala dosa**

Heat pan on medium flame for two minutes and smear lightly with oil. Take one ladle of dosa batter and place in center of griddle. Using the bottom face of the ladle, spread batter in a circular motion slowly to nearly fill griddle. Wait for bubbles to appear on dosa. Take a teaspoon of oil and drizzle all around dosa edge. Take another teaspoon of oil and drizzle all over the face of the dosa. Next, lightly smear two-thirds of the dosa with garlic and chili paste. Place two tablespoons of potato and onion stuffing in the center. Top with a teaspoon of butter. Check whether bottom of dosa is golden brown by teasing up a portion at the edge. When golden brown, with a spatula ease one-half of the dosa over onto itself and remove.

The ingredients listed above should yield eight to ten masala dosas. You may reduce or increase quantities proportionately, according to your requirement. But do remember, a little patience and a little practice will fetch you success. Don’t panic if the dosa breaks or sticks. Just sprinkle water on the griddle, wipe clean, and try again. Soon you should beam with pride and joy as family and friends relish a genuine masala dosa cooked by you!