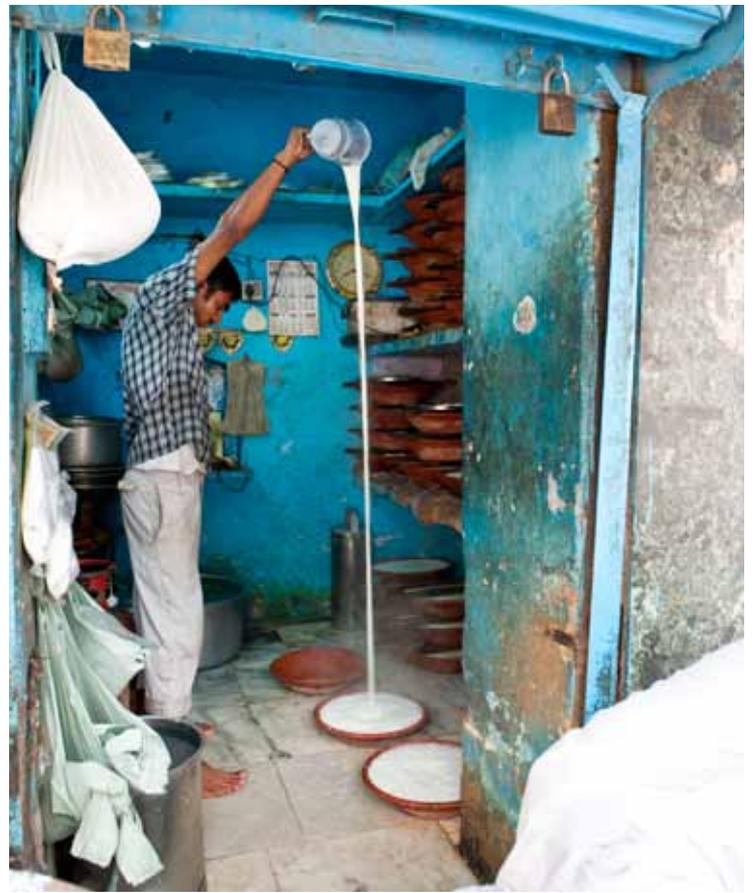


STREET FOOD IN DELHI

Bypass the Indian capital's restaurants for the sensational street snacks that have locals and visitors alike coming back for more. New Delhi resident Pamela Timms of respected blog, *Eat and Dust*, shares some of her favourite bites in this bustling city.

Photography Alan Benson



Clockwise from above: rickshaws are an easy way to get around; the making of *paneer* (a buffalo-milk cheese similar to cottage cheese) in the Old Delhi neighbourhood; India Gate in the heart of New Delhi is a national monument; *bhatura* – a fried Indian bread – is often used in place of cutlery to scoop up curries and other saucy dishes. Opposite: hand-rolled pieces of pastry are seasoned with cumin and caraway seeds, then deep-fried in ghee to make *namak para*.



Streaming past the Sita Ram Diwan Chand stall in the heart of Paharganj, a teeming backpacker district in central Delhi, oblivious tourists make a beeline for the budget hotels, vendors selling hookah pipes and cafes offering buffet breakfasts and banana pancakes; the usual backpacker fare. They really don't know what they're missing.

For almost 70 years, Sita Ram has managed to be both a culinary delight, which has Bollywood stars and billionaire businessmen standing in line, and a local secret shielded from passing visitors.

It's not alone. Delhi's most surprising and memorable food is not in its many upmarket glass and polished-steel restaurants – where distinctly average fare can leave you clutching your wallet in distress rather than your stomach in satisfaction – but in the heat, dust and flies of its streets. This is where one-man, one-dish *dhabas* (makeshift stalls) turn out eye-poppingly good dishes for just a few rupees. These stalls set a challenge for gastronomic thrillseekers: in India, the best is often to be found in the most unappetising of locations.

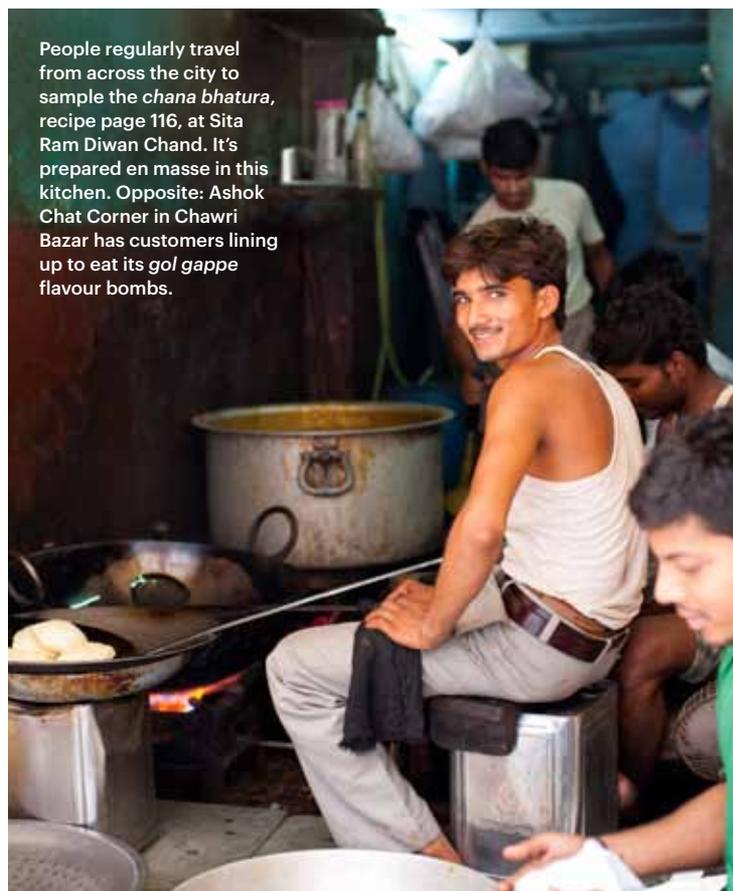
Sita Ram is one of the tastiest examples of this point. The shop is tucked away through a nondescript doorway near the Imperial cinema in Paharganj, inconspicuous apart from the hordes of loyal locals who

flock there every day for the house speciality: *chana bhatura*. This is a simple, yet hearty dish of more-ish, spicy chickpeas served with deep-fried flatbread, red onion and pickled vegetables.

Like much of Delhi's street food, *chana bhatura* is the perfect union of comfort and spice, and many fans travel great distances to sample it. The first time I visited, two years ago, I ate with an old man, Gulshan Jaggi, who told me he'd been crossing the city several times a week since 1948 for this dish. "I have tasted *chana bhatura* all over Delhi," he told me, "but here it is unique, very delicious. They maintain the standards that have been set by their ancestors."

I went back recently and found that Sita Ram had moved to a larger shop and installed stainless-steel tables in a back room. I was anxious because when street food goes upmarket, it sometimes loses its edge, but I was relieved to find the food was as good as ever and also seemed to be attracting more of a family crowd. Gulshan Jaggi would have approved. So, too, would the ancestors, I believe.

Diwan Chand and his son Sita Ram came to Delhi from what is now Pakistan at the time of Partition, in 1947, with little more than their recipe for *chana bhatura*. For almost 30 years, they sold their



People regularly travel from across the city to sample the *chana bhatura*, recipe page 116, at Sita Ram Diwan Chand. It's prepared en masse in this kitchen. Opposite: Ashok Chat Corner in Chawri Bazar has customers lining up to eat its *gol gappe* flavour bombs.

food from a handcart, which they trundled all over the area between Connaught Place and Old Delhi before moving to their first shop site.

Like most of Delhi's street food joints, Sita Ram makes only one dish and the recipe is a closely guarded secret [see Pamela's version on page 116]. The current owner Pran Kohli, a grandson of Sita Ram, joined the business in 1984 after he finished school and has done nothing to change the formula. The secret, he says, is to treat even the most humble of ingredients with respect. "This is a cheap roadside dish," he says. "But we use good-quality ingredients; we don't compromise."



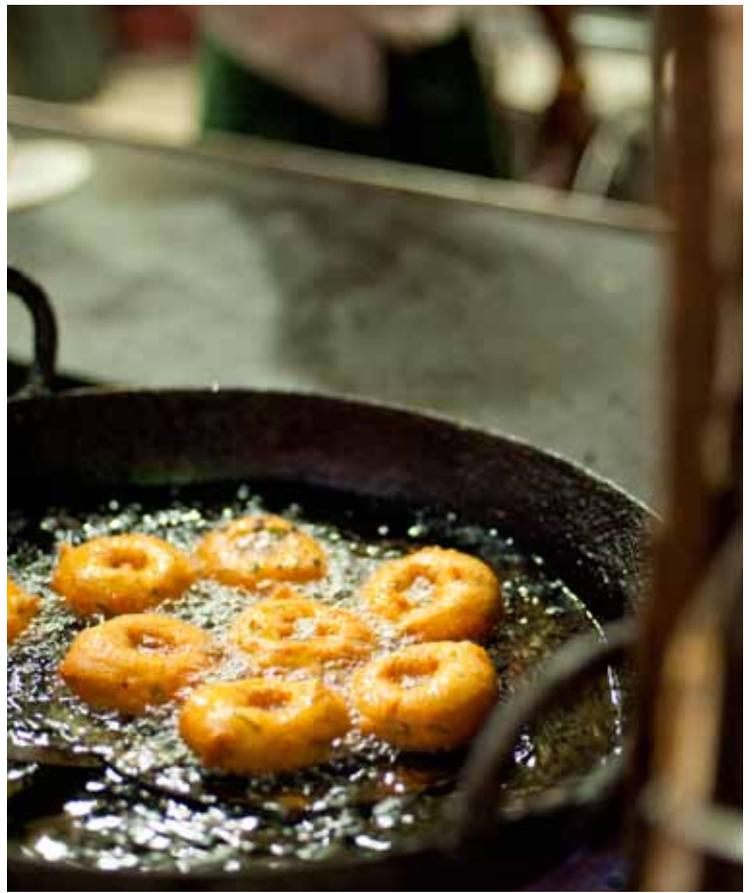
For many visitors, the first glimpse of Old Delhi's heart-stopping wholesale markets is when they emerge, blinking, from the modern, air-conditioned metro station into the medieval chaos, dirt and hardship of Chawri Bazar. If they look up, they might imagine the courtesans who once peered from the ornate balconies that are now crumbling and imprisoned by a jungle of electrical wires. At street level, hawkers bellow, mangy dogs scavenge, ragged beggars hope for a windfall and emaciated rickshaw wallahs struggle with loads five times their own weight.

In this sensory onslaught, many tourists miss out completely on one of the old city's great joys: from kebabs to *kheer* (a sweet rice pudding, also known as *payasam*) and *faluda* (a drink made from rose syrup, vermicelli, tapioca pearls and milk or water), to stuffed *paratha* (flatbread), the range of tasty street food here is vast.

A few steps from the metro, on the left side of Chawri Bazar, a cluster of stalls offers an introduction to the endless variety of *chaat* or savoury snacks. If you order *papri chaat* at Ashok Chat Corner, for instance, the vendor will break up a handful of deep-fried pastry discs into a dried-leaf bowl, add a few cubes of potato or some chickpeas, then mix the whole lot together with *chaat masala*, yoghurt, sweet tamarind and coriander sauces. For the *gol gappe* snack, he will press his thumb into a hollow, egg-shaped pastry and fill it with chickpeas, potato and a spiced water called *jal jeera*. To eat it, you simply put the whole ball into your mouth for an explosion of tastes and textures. The vendor will keep handing gol gappe to you until you shout for him to stop.

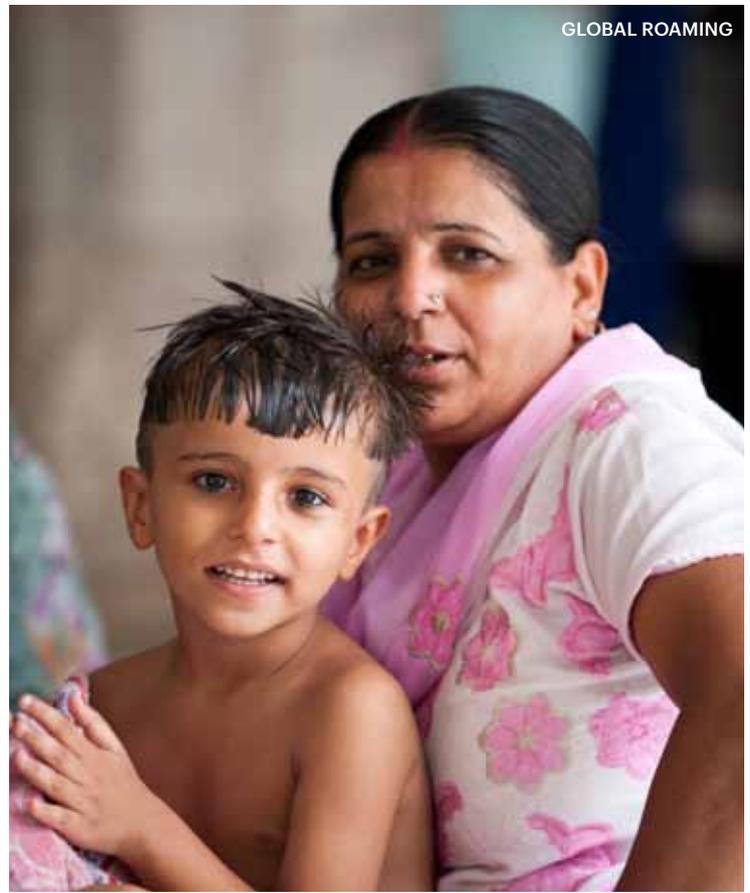
A few steps on, try *cheela* – a *moong dal* (mung bean) pancake; *aloo tikki* – deep-fried potato croquettes stuffed with spicy peas; or *paneer* – a type of cottage cheese and one of India's most famous street foods. »





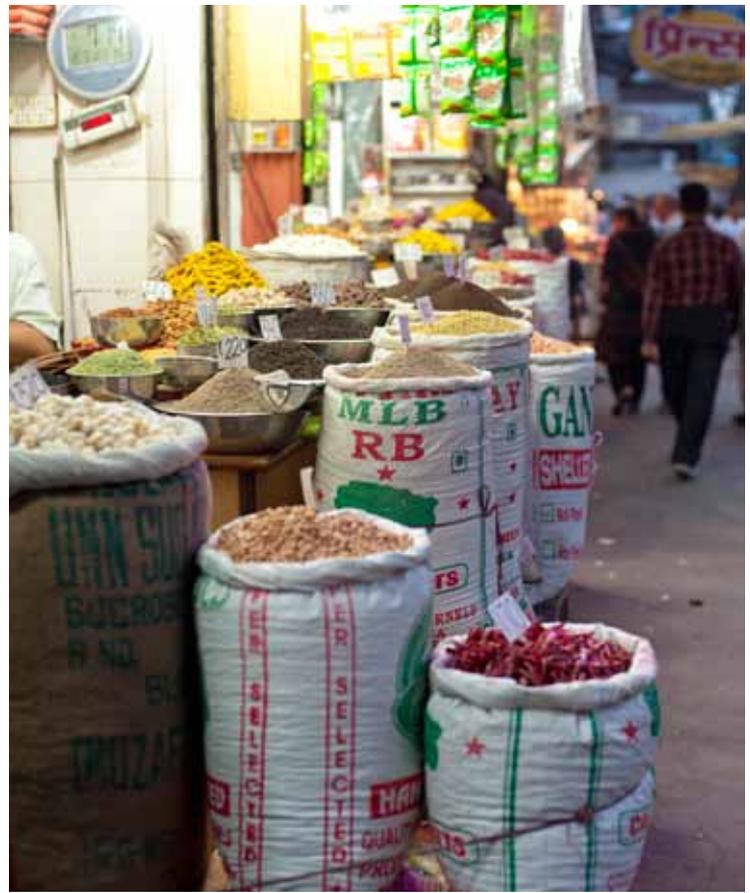
Clockwise from above: worshippers drink holy water at the Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib, a Sikh temple in New Delhi; vada – a savoury, deep-fried snack made from pulses – sizzles away at Pasricha's Kerala food stall at the INA Market in Kidwai Nagar; food and drink in India's eateries are generally served in stainless-steel plates and cups; pomegranates at INA Market – the fruit, which symbolises prosperity and fertility, has been cultivated in India since ancient times and its juice makes a refreshing drink.



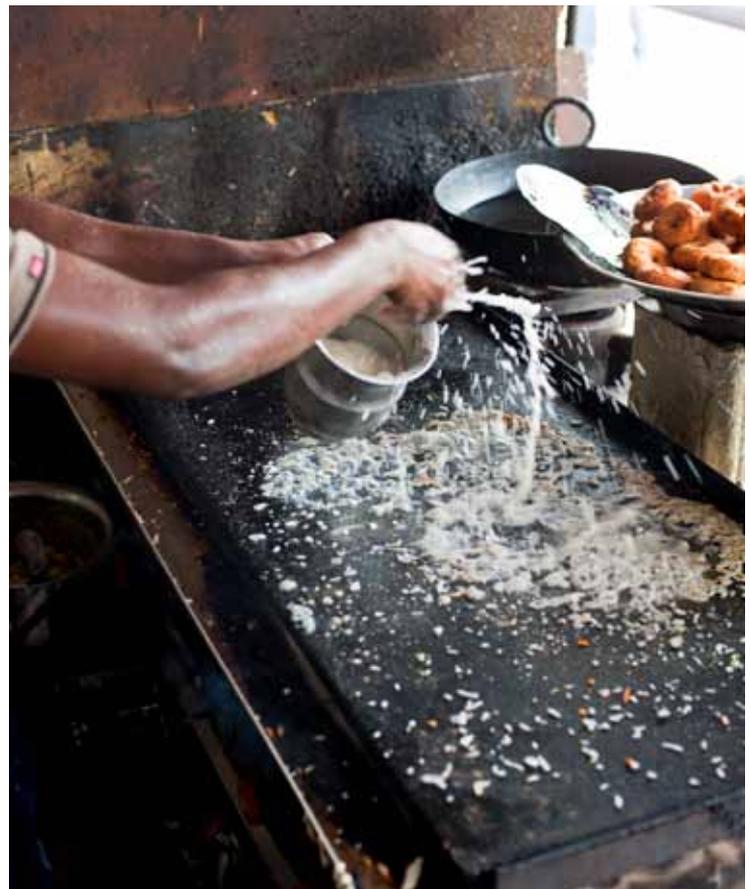


Clockwise from above: in the monsoon season, *chai* is made with either buffalo or cow's milk and sweetened with sugar. In cooler weather, cardamom or ginger is added and the tea is then known as *masala chai* (spiced tea); eateries are usually run by families, with recipes passed on generation after generation; *kulfi* is a frozen dessert similar to ice-cream, but is denser and a little creamier due to the fact it isn't whipped. The traditional flavours are cream, raspberry, rose, mango, cardamom and saffron; spices are delivered in bulk to the market on Khari Baoli Road in Chandni Chowk.





Clockwise from above: although Delhi is a bustling, modern city, many old-fashioned processes are still carried out, even when it comes to tasks like ironing, whereby no electricity is required; the aroma can be overwhelming at Asia's largest wholesale spice market in Chandni Chowk; *dosas* – crisp, savoury pancakes made from rice batter – being cooked on a hot plate at Pasricha's Kerala food stall; at Darya Ganj, in Old Delhi, mountains of fresh produce colour the concrete. Opposite: *bhatura* being prepared at Sita Ram.





If you continue along Chawri Bazar and turn into a little passageway called Raghu Ganj, you'll find yourself in a quiet haven where an enterprising grain merchant has set up a surprising sideline, Jain Coffee House. Just say the word and Pavan Kumar Jain will build you a sandwich like no other. First, he slathers a slice of white bread with jam, then adds layers of paneer and thinly sliced fruit – mango, pomegranate seeds, apple or whatever's in season – and then tops it with another slice of bread. It shouldn't work, but it does. Bag a sack of grain to sit on and wash it down with a milkshake made from *chickoo*, a sweet tropical fruit. As far as anyone knows, Pavan's fruit sandwiches are unique. Pavan says he got the idea while on honeymoon in Bombay, where street sandwiches are a more common sight. Then, back in Delhi, he decided to experiment before hitting upon the idea of layering fruit, resulting in one of the old city's more unusual mouthfuls.



A trip to Old Delhi's wholesale spice market, in Chandni Chowk, is one of India's most memorable experiences. From dawn, when the flower market overflows with marigolds and roses, to dusk, when the

hardworking market porters finally flake out on top of their carts, the area's streets are a blur of commerce, colour and chaos. You'll choke on fumes from a thousand sacks of red chilli, fear for your life as spindly and weather-beaten porters weave in and out at breakneck speed, and marvel at the impossible loads one man can carry on his back. Most visitors, unsurprisingly, hardly notice the food stalls.

At Ram Prashad Makhan Lal's tiny eatery on the corner of Khari Baoli and Naya Bans, Jamna Lal is the third generation of his family to specialise in making food for hungry market workers. The Lals, originally from Rajasthan, have been doing their bit to keep the spice market moving since 1942. Their delicious *puri sabzi* (deep-fried bread served with spicy vegetable curry) and *paneer pakora* (soft-cheese fritters) are often the only highlights of punishing, monotonous days in the market and provide the fuel to keep traders trading and porters moving. Enjoy a plate on the move or sit at one of the tables in the back. On your way out, ask for some *lauki burfi* – an unusual pale-green, milk-based sweet made from bottle gourd. If you ask nicely, the family might let you go up the ladder to a tiny loft where the sweets are made.



The famous fruit sandwich by food entrepreneur Pavan Kumar Jain. Right: *lassi* is a refreshing, yoghurt-based drink; sweets at the Ram Prashad Makhan Lal eatery are made in a tiny attic kitchen. Opposite: dough coils are cooked in a huge fryer before being tossed in spicy syrup to make *jalebis*.



Turn the corner into Naya Bans and you'll find a stall where Gori Shankar Doodh Bhandar sells *lassi*, a sweet, yoghurt-based drink. Just expect to be alarmed by the terrifying amount of sugar that goes into it.



A rickshaw ride through Dariba Kalan (Silver or Jewellers' Street) and Kinari Bazaar (Wedding Street) in Old Delhi is a highlight. Jain temples, brightly painted *havelis* (private mansions), the majestic Sikh Gurdwara temple and spangly, sparkling shops, are awe-inspiring, but there are also some great culinary landmarks in this area.

The aptly named Old and Famous Jalebi Wala is a family-run business that was founded in 1884 when a young man called Nem Chand Jain, from a village near Agra, set out to make his fortune in the city. Four generations later, the family has come a long way from the village – they no longer live above the shop, but in one of Delhi's smarter residential areas. The *jalebis*, deep-fried coils of batter drenched in sticky sweet syrup, are still true to the four-generations-old recipe.

For some time now, I've been pestering the Jains for the family recipe, but was recently told, in no uncertain terms, by Nem Chand's

great grandson Abhishek: "Nobody outside of the family has ever been shown or told the recipe for the jalebis and it won't happen now."

I have gleaned, however, that the jalebi batter is made from 75 per cent white flour and 25 per cent ground *urad dal* (black lentils) mixed into a thick paste. At the end of each day, a little of the batter is left in a brass pot to ferment slightly, then used as the base for the next day's batch. This process, Abhishek tells me, called *khamir uthana* (meaning 'ferment'), is similar to an artisan baker's sourdough starter – it makes the batter ferment just enough to put air into the jalebis, but not so much as to make them 'sour', like sourdough.

Arvind Chauhan, who has been making the Old and Famous jalebis for more than 25 years, pipes hundreds of spirals into the boiling oil every day. As they start to crisp and brown, he flips them over, then places them in the syrup, where the real secrecy begins. According to Abhishek, they use a blend of up to 16 different toasted, ground spices, which are then mixed into a sugar syrup. The resulting sweet hit is a treat at any time of year, but especially in the winter with a cup of hot, steaming *masala chai*. Locals also flock to the shop during the monsoon season from July till September.





Dilli Haat craft market in South Delhi is a favourite spot for tourists and locals to scoop up inexpensive handicrafts from all over India – soft shawls from Kashmir, earthenware pots from Assam, embroidered tablecloths from Bengal. The market's food stalls also offer you a chance to eat your way round India without setting foot outside of Delhi. Here, more than 25 stalls give some indication of India's vast repertoire of regional specialities.

Some of the best stalls are those showcasing the cuisines of Nagaland, Manipur, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. One good way to sample a range of food is to order a *thali*, a platter consisting of a selection of dishes. The Maharashtran thali might include the rustic *zunka bhakar*, a spicy *gram* (chickpea) flour dish served with flatbreads, or *puran poli*, a sweet pastry filled with *chana dal* (black chickpea) and *jaggery* (unrefined sugar). The Rajasthani thali will include *dal baati*, a lentil dish served with unleavened bread, the state's most famous dish. The Manipur stall is a good place to try *momos*, a common street food in Delhi, that actually hails from Tibet and Nepal. These are fried or steamed dumplings with either meat or vegetable fillings, served with a chilli dipping sauce and chicken broth. From Nagaland, one of India's more remote states, there will be pork dishes, such as *rajamirch* (very hot chilli) ribs and fruit beer.

Just across the road from Dilli Haat is INA Market, South Delhi's largest and freshest retail food market. A dazzling selection of river and sea fish is delivered daily, along with fruit and vegetables from all over India. The perfect reward for stocking up the larder is a plate of *vada*, deep-fried pulse-based snacks, from Pasricha's Kerala food stall at the front of the market. It serves two types of vada: one that resembles a doughnut and another that's more like a patty. Both are delicious eaten with a little coconut chutney and dipped into spicy *sambar* (a soupy curry).

The key to eating well in Delhi is to look very closely in all the grittier corners, where you'll find one of India's enduring truths: to eat like a king, you have to get down in the dust.



Sita Ram Diwan Chand On Chuna Mandi, Paharganj. From Ramakrishna Ashram Metro Station, head for the Main Bazaar, then take the first left into Chuna Mandi. Sita Ram is about 90 metres after the Imperial cinema. Open 8am–5pm daily. **Ashok Chat Corner** In Chawri Bazar, next to the metro station. **Jain Coffee House** On Raghu Ganj, off Chawri Bazar Rd. **Ram Prashad Makhani Lal** On the corner of Khari Baoli and Naya Bans, Chandni Chowk. **Old and Famous Jalebi Wala** Shop 1795, Dariba Corner, Chandni Chowk. **Dilli Haat** Sri Aurobindo Marg, Kidwai Nagar, near INA Market. **Pasricha's Kerala food stall** Front row of INA Market, opposite Dilli Haat (see above).

CHANA BHATURA

SERVES 6

This is Pamela's domestic-kitchen version of Sita Ram's famous street snack. Traditionally, this is eaten for brunch at the weekend. Soak the chickpeas overnight.

300g (1½ cups) dried chickpeas, rinsed, soaked overnight
 1 bay leaf
 4cm piece ginger, finely chopped
 1 pinch of bicarbonate of soda
 1 tsp ground amchur*
 1 tsp ground coriander
 1 tsp ground cumin
 1 tsp ground chilli, plus extra, to serve
 1 tsp garam masala
 2 tbs ghee
 1 heaped teaspoon cumin seeds
 Thinly sliced red onion, chopped
 coriander and lemon wedges, to serve

Bhatura

250g (1½ cups) plain flour
 50g (¼ cup) semolina
 ½ tsp baking powder
 1 pinch of bicarbonate of soda
 ½ tsp sugar
 2 tbs yoghurt
 2 tsp peanut oil
 Vegetable oil, to deep-fry

1 To make bhatura, sift flour, semolina, baking powder and bicarbonate of soda into a bowl. Add sugar, yoghurt, peanut oil and ¼ tsp salt. Gradually add 125ml (½ cup) warm water and combine to make a dough. Cover with plastic wrap and rest dough for 2 hours.

2 Rinse chickpeas under cold running water. Place in a large saucepan with 1.5L water, bay leaf, ginger and bicarbonate of soda. Bring to the boil, then

reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 1 hour or until chickpeas are soft but still hold their shape.

3 Stir in amchur and ground spices and return to the boil, then reduce heat to a simmer.

4 Melt ghee in a small pan over high heat until smoking. Stir in cumin seeds, then pour into chickpea mixture.* Add ½ tsp salt and simmer for 10 minutes, then remove and discard bay leaf.

5 Divide the bhatura dough into 12 golf ball-size balls. Roll out each ball on a work surface lightly dusted with flour until an 8cm round.

6 Fill a large saucepan one-third full with vegetable oil and heat over medium heat to 180C (or until a cube of bread dropped into the oil turns golden in 10 seconds). Using a slotted spoon, carefully slide one round of dough into the hot oil and push down to submerge; it should instantly puff up. Fry bhatura, turning halfway, for 2 minutes or until golden brown. Remove with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towel. Repeat with the remaining dough.

7 Remove a little of the chickpea mixture and roughly mash, then return to the pan. Season with salt and chilli.

8 Scatter onion and coriander over chickpea mixture and serve immediately with bhatura and lemon wedges.

* *Ground amchur, also known as ground dried green mango, is available from Indian food shops; substitute the juice of 1 lemon for every teaspoon of ground amchur.*

* *Frying spices in hot ghee is called 'tempering'. The hot ghee disperses the flavours, giving the chickpeas an intense spicy kick.* 🌶️