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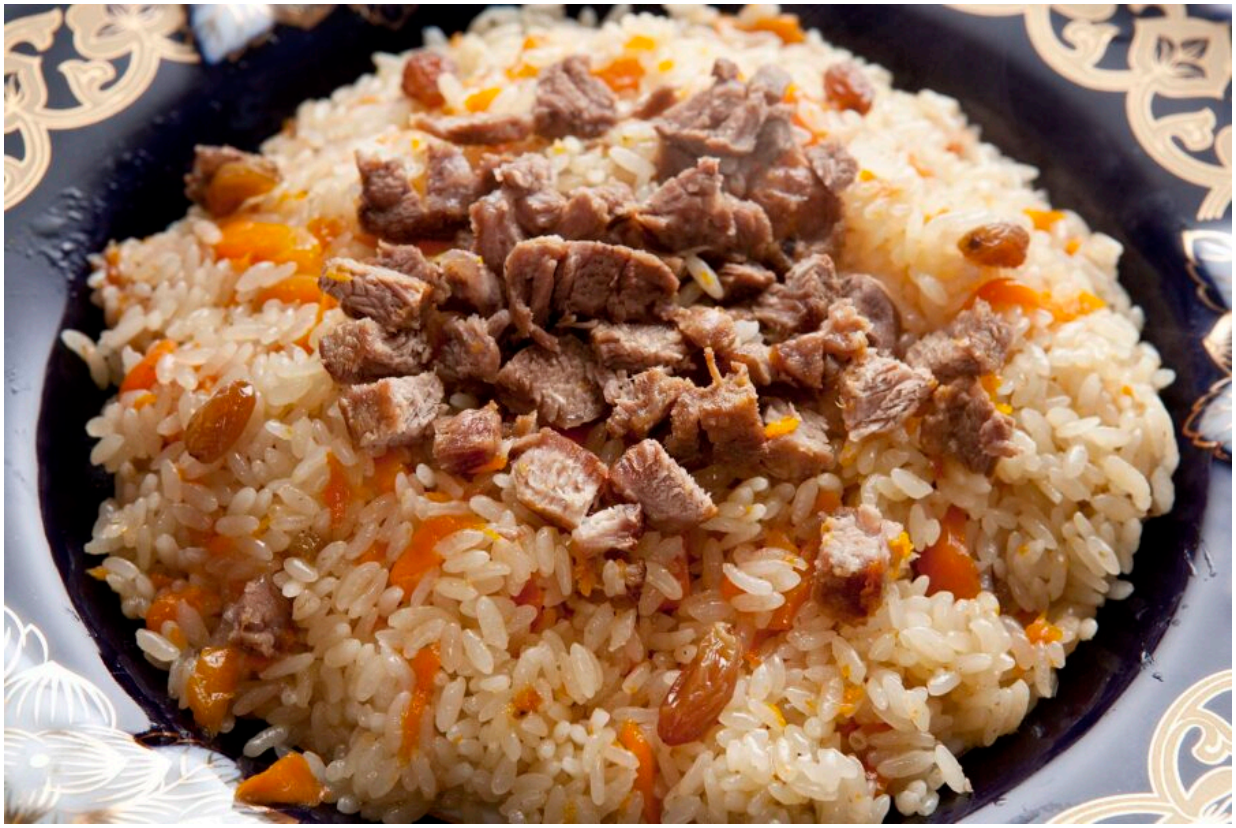
Why Pulav Is Much More Than Vegetarian Biryani

Pitamber Kaushik · Sunday, April 2nd, 2023

"There's nothing such as 'Veg Biryani'; it's Pulao," is a hackneyed piece of ridicule commonly directed at vegetarians in India who wish to savour the subcontinent's beloved and famed rice dish. 'Pulao' or 'Pulav' in India refers to a rice dish made with a host of vegetables and aromatic spices and condiments, typically cooked in ghee or oil and served at special occasions. However, neither Pulao nor Biryani are exclusive to India or likely to have originated in their distinctly-recognisable forms in the subcontinent.

The dish is known by various names in different regions and communities, most of them some variation of vowels or aspirated pronunciation of 'Pulav', practically a spectrum of every such combination conceivable – pilao, palau, polov, pilaf, polo, polu, palaw, fulav, fulab, and so on. The exact origins of such dishes are as smudged as their definition and there is perhaps some causation as the heart of this correlation. The continuum of richly-spiced meat-and-rice dishes that these names refer to is fairly generic and one can expect various cultures to have independently come up with some sort of fragrant, richly-flavoured slow-cooked rice dish for feasts and special occasions. The various names of the dish ultimately trace their origin to the Persian word 'Pilaw'. From Persia and later via Turkey, the dish spread to Central Asia, Western Asia, and even Eastern Europe and North Africa. Interestingly, the Valencian dish Paella, perhaps Spain's most iconic and recognisable food item, is hypothesised to have originated from Pilaf-like dishes cooked among the Moors of Spain as a result of diffusion of Arabic culinary practices into the region. Over time, the dish gave rise to derivatives in Europe, East Africa, and via Spain, even parts of Latin America. Today, dishes originating from the Pilaf can be found all the way from Mongolia, the Xinjiang province of China, and Russia to Uganda and Zanzibar in the South and Crete & Cyprus in the East.

Although the ultimate origin of the Persian etymon 'Pilaw' itself likely came from India, being ultimately Sanskritic or even Dravidian (wherefrom it entered Sanskrit) in origin and referring to a general rice dish, the dish even with its most fundamental recognisable distinctions likely originated in Persia, as indicated by its first documented recipe being described by the 10th-century Persian scholar and polymath Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna) consistent with its geocultural diffusion patterns over the course of history.



Uyghur Polu | Image by Mizu basyo at Japanese Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0

There are as many origin theories to the dish as grains of rice in a typical serving of it. The multiplicity of narratives is numerous to the point of constituting a continuum – a loose family of dishes united solely by the shared characteristic of separateness of rice-grains. The evolution of the spectrum of preparations loosely labeled such is inextricably tangled in the warps and wefts of civilisational history, going back and forth, more times than one could keep track of, to the point where no community is anymore strongly convicted to lay claim to the general origin of the family of dishes. It all boils down to a Ship of Theseus line-of-argumentation and the issue of diffused definition.

The cultivation of rice as a crop spread from South Asia to Central and Western Asia. Narratives recounting the origin of the dish claim to go as far as Alexander's time, claiming that it was he who first brought pulav-like dishes from regions in what is modern-day Afghanistan to West Asia and Central Asia. The Abbasid Caliphate facilitated the exchange and subsequent evolution of not one but multiple varieties of pulav. While it is certain that the spread of Islam was instrumental to the proliferation of the pulav, certainties end there – we are not even sure of the direction of the flow, or if the flow at all was directional. It is safe to assume that at an indefinite point in history, a particularly famed pot-cooked specially-spiced motley loose-grained (non-clumped) rice, meat, and vegetable preparation from what is roughly modern-day Afghanistan and Uzbekistan was introduced to Persia and subsequently to the rest of the Middle East. It is likely that the dish went back and forth as it evolved with waves of conquerors and migrants. For instance, while the dish in its most basic form originated in or around Bactria, roughly the region between the Hindu Kush mountain range and the Amu river (largely corresponding to contemporary Afghanistan and Uzbekistan), and spread from there to West Asia, its evolved version with distinctive Turkish, Persian, and Arabic influences travelled back eastwards to its area of origin, spilling over into the Indian subcontinent in recurrent waves, washing over existing versions to create successive ones, each assailant, dynasty, and crusader serving as a stroke of spatula in the subcontinent's simmering pot. Influences likely volleyed back and forth multiple times through waves of migration, trade,

and conquest. The dish thus proliferated, evolved in different quasi-isolated geocultural niches, and repeatedly converged, diverged and reconverged across the length of Eurasia, not very different from the evolution of species in the natural world. The dish was thus stirred, turned around, and simmered to its modern state.

Oshi Palov from Central Asia | Image by I, Ibrahimjon, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Akin to the grains of the dish, the accounts of pilaf's evolution, although numerous, are segregated and averse to adhesion. In many Arab nations, for instance, the same dish that is called Qabuli Palaw elsewhere is known as 'Bukharan rice'. In India and Bangladesh, a popular variant of the pulav is made with a meat broth known as 'Yakhni', having its origins in Persia and Turkey. In Armenia, even the bedrock supporting the sprawling, dangling edifice of the spectrum of dishes known by these related names, is done away with. Armenian pilafs (yes, there are multiple varieties of the same) are often made with cracked wheat (bulgur), orzo (a rice-shaped variety of pasta), and vermicelli (thin noodles or strand-shaped pasta). Pilaf is often filled in cabbage rolls. In Azerbaijan and parts of neighbouring nations, one can find one of the more luxurious variants of the preparation – Shah Pilaf (King Pilaf), known as a dish cherished by lords and chieftains and a staple at major feasts. Shah Pilaf consists of meat, nuts, and dry-fruit laden pilaf stuffed and cooked in a crust of traditional breads. In the Caribbean, various varieties of 'pelau' are made, involving ingredients as corn, pumpkin, coconut, crab, cured pig tails, prawn, fish, and ketchup, among various other local ingredients. In Pakistan alone, at least ten distinct kinds of meats are used in Pilafs, ranging from chicken to camel. Even in the Indian subcontinent, there are prominent varieties of Pulav that are made from rice other than the famed Basmati. In Central Asia, cooking pilaf is particularly rich, being slow-simmered in copious amounts of liquid fat. Condiments and garnish often include varieties of nuts and dry fruit. Pilaf-making has traditionally been a family or community act, often done in giant cauldrons on open-fire, at items at a scale to feed hundreds of

people with one preparation. In certain cuisines, particularly in prevalent European preparations, the rice grains of the pilaf need not be loose and separate, either. The preparation methods vary across and even within nations, with there being hardly any agreement on choices as elementary as whether and when should the various components of the dish be cooked together.

Persian-style Pilaf | Image by Tamorlan, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Given its prominent and pervasive exceptions, if Pilaf is neither essentially loose rice nor essentially rice with meat, what is it? What consistent traits characterise it and what saliencies set it apart from similar preparations? Pilaf, thus it seems, is conclusively an idea – an idea of a grand eclectic meal with assorted ingredients for a rich, celebratory dining experience with friends and family – a lavish feast for occasions, a mark of prosperity, plentifulness, and unity within and across communities. It is a celebration of the diversity, fecundity, and bountifulness of one's land, and at times the well-connectedness of it by means of trade routes. Given the expanse, scope, and vibrance of the dish we label Pulav, it is as foolhardy to try to limit it in the confines of semantics, geography, polity, and culture as it is to try to faithfully represent the word 'bird' by means of a single picture. To try to put down Pulav to a single definition is akin to trying to depict water by a glass, as vain as trying to render an idea by an object. Any attempt at reduction to particulars is an act of vandalisation of heritage – a living, breathing, evolving, proliferating one.

At this point, one could delve into an equally-lengthy and almost as extensive exploration of the definition of biryani and before proceeding into a winding series of arguments over similarities and differences vis-a-vis pulav. Almost any trait that can be cited as being definitive and distinctive of one can be found in at least one prominent version of the other. When debating questions of cultural origin, identity, and staked claims, we often fail to question the validity of the question itself – whether the partisan motion stands on firm assumptions and thus whether such divisive questioning makes any sense? The biryani has enough semantic flexibility to accommodate a vegetarian version as the pulav has geocultural precedent to contain any varieties of meat. It is still interesting to peruse the etymology of Biryani – going by one hypothesis, the name of the dish

traces itself to the Persian word for ‘roasting’, which in turn derives from an Indo-European root that is also shared by words like ‘Bhun’ and ‘Bhunj’ in Hindi and related languages as well as by the English word ‘fry’ and its counterparts in a number of other European languages. No knitwork of etymological or philological tours-de-force can serve as a cloche that contains the fragrance of either dish from spreading across the length and breadth of the ever-shrinking world, inspiring local adaptations and fusions. In a time of polarisation, where we strive to force dichotomies as pulav versus biryani, it does well to see the dish as a magnanimous syncretiser, an idea expressed differently in different lands, held together by history – the cherished shared ideal of unity within distinction – capturing the very essence of the dish.