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# Is it a bird? An animal? No, it's mock meat

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*Hundred per cent vegetarian chicken, duck, pork and fish is finding favour with Indian diners...*

It's a dream come true for those who love meat but don't want blood on their hands. Adventurous vegetarians, bored with run-of-the-mill greens, and health maniacs - who love the protein-rich, cholesterol-free simulation food - are freaking on it too. Little wonder then that faux meat or mock meat is gradually but certainly making its presence felt in restaurants and supermarkets in the country's metros.

Edward Wang's upmarket China Garden in Mumbai has an entire menu of mock meat - vegchick, vegduck, vegprawn and veglamb - that made its debut last year and has stayed on, spurred by loyalists such as Avanti Birla, Babita Kapoor and Mana Shetty. It was in China at a Buddhist restaurant that Wang first tasted vegetarian meat made from soya protein, yam, potatoes, seaweed and corn. Today, he imports kilos of canned mock meat from China that is sliced and made to look, smell and taste like the real thing in India. "The dishes are 15 per cent more expensive than vegetarian food but the health benefits are many," he says. Delhi's meat-loving population too seems more than happy to savour the new flavour. At the oriental restaurant The Yum Yum Tree, the faux Peking duck in hoisin sauce comes very close to what the real thing looks, feels and tastes like. Owner Varun Tuli says the demand for mock meat always surpasses the supply. "About 10 per cent of the vegetarian food sales belong to mock meat," he says giving the credit to "Delhi's changing gastronomy and evolved culinary knowledge".

While some restaurateurs are still unsure about going with a mock meat menu - Sohrab Sitaram of Delhi's Asia Stone Grill 400, has only one faux

meat dish in his restaurant while Mumbai's Olive and Aromas of China discontinued theirs in a few months - Hyderabad's Isda Thai has an impressive 40 mock meat dishes on its menu. "Mock chicken is perfect for Thai curry and the mock duck tastes best with stir-fry vegetables in black pepper sauce," says general manager Mayur Maduri, who imports canned mock duck and fish from Thailand for customers like South Indian actress Sneha Ullal, who specifically asks for mock meat only. It's the novelty factor, say restaurateurs, that makes them introduce faux on their veg menu.

And for some there's the food ethics factor too. For animal activist Yasmin Jadwani, who runs Ahimsa Foods with her husband Harish, the concept of mock meats exemplifies her idol, Mahatma Gandhi. She decided to set up a mock meat plant in Delhi's Okhla Industrial Area after shifting to India from the Philippines. "With growing health consciousness and lifestyle disorders like obesity and diabetes, awareness about eating right is on the rise," says Jadwani who manufactures vegetarian tandoori sausages, masala ham, classic fish and chicken drumsticks. Vegan communities like Sanctuary for Health And Reconnection to Animals and Nature (SHARAN) and animal rights NGOs like PETA promote mock meat recipes for people who want to take the first step towards making the big transition.

Vegan Nandita Shah, for example, freezes tofu and then thaws it to give it an extra-chewy, meaty texture and adds soy chunks to make vegetarian spaghetti bolognese and Shepherd's Pie. Nikunj Sharma from PETA is usually flooded with confessions from hardcore meat eaters who feel guilty about not being able to forgo their non-veg delights. He recommends that they savour the "100 per cent vegetarian chicken burger for 100 per cent guilt-free pleasure that is available at select supermarkets".

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One of these is Mumbai's Godrej Nature's Basket. The popularity of specific mock meat products is steadily growing at this food chain, the choices directly reflecting the popularity of certain meats in India. "Mock chicken is the most popular," says Mohit Khattar, MD, Godrej Nature's Basket, who points out that vegetarian chicken sausages and hot dogs are the fastest selling products in that range.

Gurpreet Singh, CEO, Big Five Health Foods, Asia, is a major supplier of golden crumbed schnitzel, French garlic-flavoured polony and chicken-styled vegetarian strips to chains like Nature's Basket across India. Singh's joint venture partnership with South African vegan meat giant Fry's Vegetarian last year has run a successful innings so far. Their target was the "cholesterol-hating, health-conscious Indian", and they found the breed in Bangalore and Delhi their biggest customers.

The ready-to cook alternatives to "protein-deficient vegetarian food and bland protein-rich vegetarian substitutes like vegetarian mincemeat" cost Rs 169 for 380 gm. With approval from the South African Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim Sanha Halal committee and the Jewish Kosher dietary law body, the company plans to set up mock meat factories in Bhopal and Punjab this year. There are dissenters, however. Vegan bloggers like Dhivya Karthik claim that canned gluten-based meats are "out of the frying pan, into the fire" meals since "most of these products contain preservatives and artificial ingredients which defeat the original good intention of eating natural food.

Dhivya recommends good old substitutes like tofu, tempeh, paneer and Portobello mushrooms on her blog Chefinyou.com to create vegetarian versions of Sloppy Joes, Shepherd's Pie and even a meatloaf. But these are merely vegetarian versions like vegetable Japanese sushi and Italian carpaccio derived from raw vegetables like zucchini. They are not culinary chameleons like mock meat.

*With inputs from Kanika Dhawan*

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