

From the bylanes

FOOD SPOT The street food festival organised by the National Association of Street Vendors of India left RAHUL VERMA gobsmacked

I don't usually get invites from street food vendors. They are too busy doing their own work to worry about the media. But the other day, I got a call from a group that represents street food. I was told that a festival of street food from across the country was being organised in Delhi, and asked if I would like to attend it. Would I? Nothing, I thought, would give me greater pleasure. Imagine landing up at a place where you find street food from all corners - the vada pav of the west, the jhalmuri of the east, the medu vada of the south and the chusht-papri of the north.

The fair was being held over two days last weekend. I landed up there on the last day, and discovered that the festival was, though different from what I had imagined, a wonderful confluence of street food. The National Convention and Street Food Festival had been organised on the laws of the Constitution Club in Central Delhi by the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NAS-VI), a platform for street vendor groups from across 23

states. The first day was apparently such a success that they ran out of food. On the second day - despite being a Sunday when this largely office area is shut - I found the festival humming happily. It was rather well organised too. You had to buy coupons from the reception outside, and then go splurge them on food inside a tented area.

I looked around and found that many parts of India had been covered by the festival. The street food consisted not just of snacks but other more substantial dishes that are offered at reasonable rates on the streets of every city and town. The prices at the festival were as attractive as the dishes, most of which - even some thalis - cost only Rs. 30. A few items, such as the Hyderabadi biryani, were for Rs. 60. I bought coupons for Rs. 300 - and let me tell you all that I bought with that.

I got a thali of Odisha food - consisting of rice, dalma and an eggplant and curd curry, a Bengali thali of prawns in mustard, a piece of steamed fish wrapped in

banana leaf (pattur) and rice, a thali from Bihar with mutton and rice, litti chokha also from Bihar, Hyderabadhi biryani, two plates of makke ki roti and surson ka saag with a piece of gur from Punjab, Kerala chicken, fish, gatta and egg curry. What I didn't buy and should have was the banana jalebi from Jharkhand. But by then my hands were so full of food that I felt I just couldn't add to the heap.

The food was indeed very, very good. It was very hot, no doubt - the Kerala food, for instance, sparked a mini inferno in my tummy - but delicious the way only street food can be. I loved the saag and the makke ki roti, and thought the Bengali thali was real value for money. But the Bihar mutton stole my heart. This had been cooked with entire bulbs of garlic which gave a piquant taste to the gravy. This, mixed with hot rice, was heaven.

If you missed this fest, don't fret. NASVI has promised to organise more such festivals in a year. I doff my cap to them. Let many such festivals bloom!



ILLUSTRATION: TERRY SMITH