

A WINTER AFFAIR WITH SHIMLA'S FLAVORS

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Shimla, it's home! It always has been! For as long as I can remember, I've lived in this town—this quiet hill station tucked away in the foothills of the Himalayas. Born and brought up here, I've watched Shimla grow and change, yet at its core, it's remained the same in its soul. The crisp air, the old colonial buildings, the winding roads that stretch like veins through deodars, and the ever-present mountains standing guard over the town—it's all been a part of my life for as long as I can remember—Shimla holds a timeless appeal. It is more than just a tourist destination; it is a feeling, a memory, a story that keeps unfolding with every season.

My entire education, from school to higher education, has been in Shimla, and now, I work at Himachal Pradesh University, where I've spent my career watching the next generation of Shimlaites learn and grow.

Over the years, my interest in cuisines has grown beyond mere sustenance—it's a subject of exploration, a means to understand culture and history. Every bite has a tale, and every flavour carries the weight of tradition.

Growing up in Shimla, I remember the summers, with families visiting from all over India to escape the heat, and the winters, when the town would be blanketed in snow, the silence broken only by the crunch of boots in the snow or the faint sound of ringing church bells. There was always a certain charm to Shimla, one that never really left me, even as I grew older. Shimla isn't just about the mountains or the history. It's about the people, and more than anything, it's about the food. Shimla's food scene, especially the street food, has always been a reflection of the diverse and rich culture that the town represents. And as much as I love Shimla for its beauty, it's the food that truly connects me to this place—the food that tells stories of generations before me, the food that's both familiar and new every time I taste it.

A Celebration of Himachali Flavors

As December arrived, so did something special—the much-anticipated Two-Week Food Carnival, initiated by Him Ira. This event was not just about food; it was a celebration of Himachal's culinary heritage, bringing together the diverse flavours of the hills and valleys.



The food festival was a grand affair, showcasing the richness of traditional *dham* from different districts. For eight days, visitors could taste *Kangri Dham*, *Bilaspuri Dham*, *Mandyali Dham*, and *Chambyali Dham*, each a unique representation of its region, cooked with devotion and served with love. But this wasn't just about the well-known feasts; it also gave a platform to the ethnic cuisines of the Trans-Himalayan areas—a rare treat for those unfamiliar with the deep-rooted food traditions of Himachal. Walking along the Ridge, wrapped in layers against the winter chill, I watched people—locals and tourists alike—huddled near food stalls, their breath forming little clouds in the icy air. The historic Christ Church stood tall, its pale-yellow façade glowing softly under the winter sky, as fairy lights twinkled over the stalls. The entire atmosphere was one of warmth, laughter, and the mingling aromas of steaming delicacies.

The festival was officially inaugurated by Shri Anirudh Singh, the Rural Development Minister, who spoke about the importance of reviving local culinary traditions and promoting sustainable food practices. But what stood out was the participation of women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) from various districts. Their stalls, adorned with colorful fabric and traditional motifs, were packed with organic produce—hand-pounded grains, local lentils, sun-dried morels, fragrant spices, golden honey, pure cow's ghee, and homemade pickles, chutneys, and jams. I watched as a group of tourists excitedly bought jars of apple chutney and rhododendron squash, while an elderly woman from Lahaul patiently explained the curative benefits of *charma*, the seabuckthorn. Nearby, a family huddled together over plates of hot rajma chawal, savouring the warmth of the meal against the cold wind. For many of these women entrepreneurs, this wasn't just a festival—it was an opportunity to connect, share their craft, and create a livelihood. There were stalls displaying traditional woollens from different parts of Himachal, whose vibrant colours were adding to the event's grace.

A Feast for the Senses

But what stole my heart was the dishes from tribal regions—the rustic, hearty meals that have sustained people in the harshest winters. The *jutthe*, traditional buckwheat funnel cakes, were a rare find, their nutty flavour enhanced by local honey. The namkeen chai, prepared in *dongmo*, a wooden churner, had an earthy depth unlike anything else. And of course, fresh momos, steaming hot, filled with spiced vegetables, transported me straight to the high-altitude villages of Spiti and Kinnaur.





Every stall held a new delight. Freshly prepared vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes drew eager crowds—steaming *siddus*. Each *dham* had its charm, viz. Kangri Dham with its rich *channa madra*, *khatta* and *meetha bhaat*; Bilaspuri Dham, lighter yet flavorful with *dhui dal*, *kaddu ka khatta* and *kaddu ka meetha*; Mandiyali Dham, known for its unique spices, crisp *kachoris*, *babru*, *jhol*, and *seepu badi* and Chambyali Dham, where *rajma madra* was served with steamed rice

A Time for Revival

This festival was more than just an event—it was a revival of traditional grains, recipes, and culinary wisdom. In an era where processed foods dominate, it was refreshing to see a return to barley, buckwheat, red rice, millets, and heirloom legumes. These foods not only hold nutritional benefits but are also deeply intertwined with our identity. For the Self-Help Groups, this was an opportunity to showcase their skills, generate income, and introduce their products to a wider audience. For tourists, it was a rare chance to taste the true flavours of Himachal beyond the usual restaurant fare. For the government, it was a step towards strengthening the local economy, preserving food heritage, and encouraging sustainable food practices.

My Day in Nutshell

As the evening grew colder, I found myself sipping on a cup of *Namkeen chai* amidst the hum of conversations, the clatter of plates, the occasional bursts of laughter—all formed a melody of joy and community. As the evening deepened, golden fairy lights twinkled over the Ridge. The air was filled with laughter, folk music, and the occasional clinking of cups as people sipped on steaming chai. I let the flavours of the day linger on my tongue—sweet, spicy, rich, and nostalgic, much like Shimla itself.

Shimla has always been known for its beauty, its legacy, and its street food. But today, it reminded me that its true essence lies in its people, its traditions, and the timeless warmth of a shared meal. My day had been filled with flavours, stories, and nostalgia, and as I walked down the streets of Lower Bazar, I couldn't help but feel grateful. I had come for the food but left with so much more—the warmth of people, the pride of tradition, and a renewed love for the place I call home. Shimla will never fail to amaze me.