

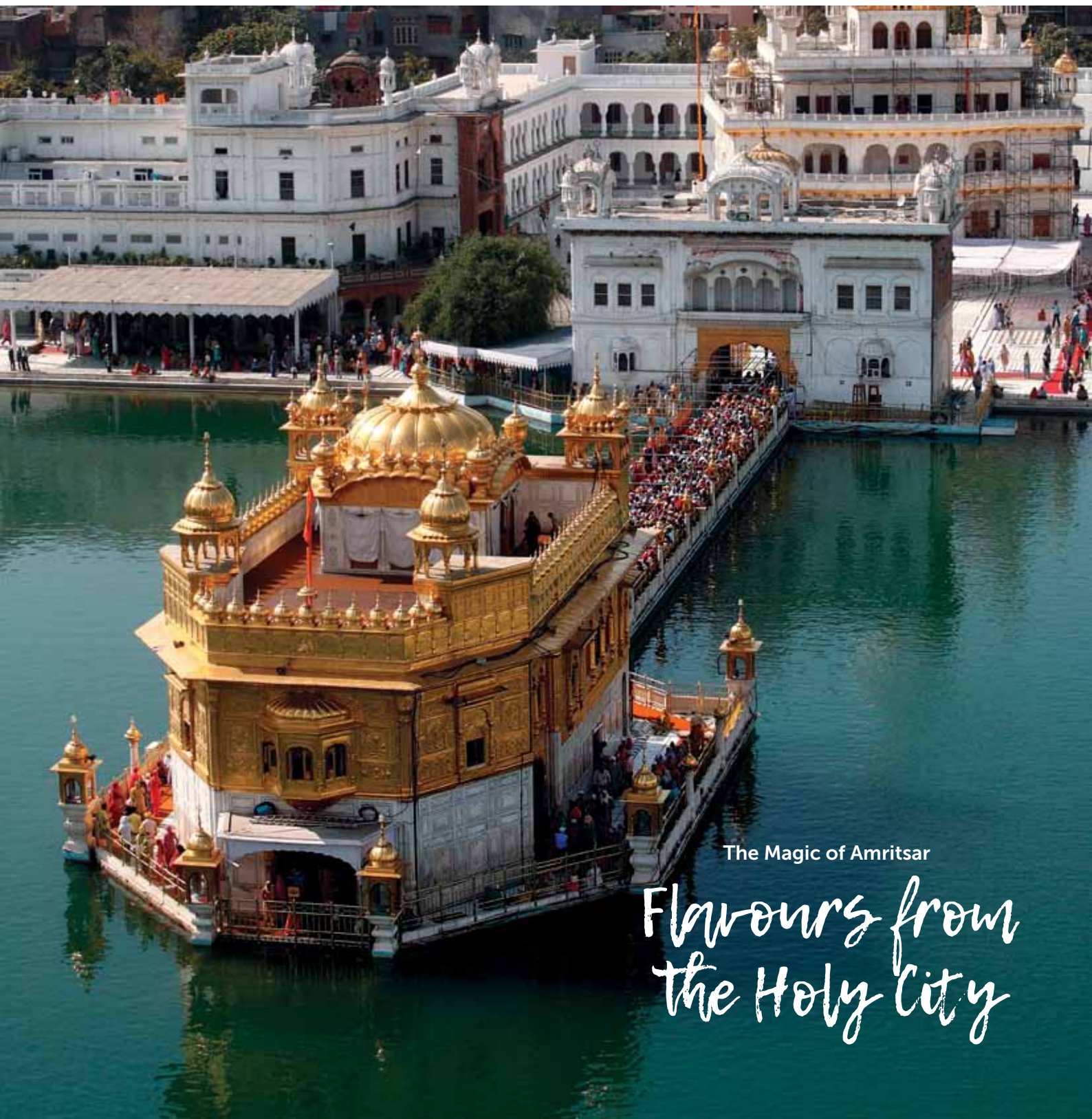
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The Magic of Amritsar

Flavours from
the Holy City

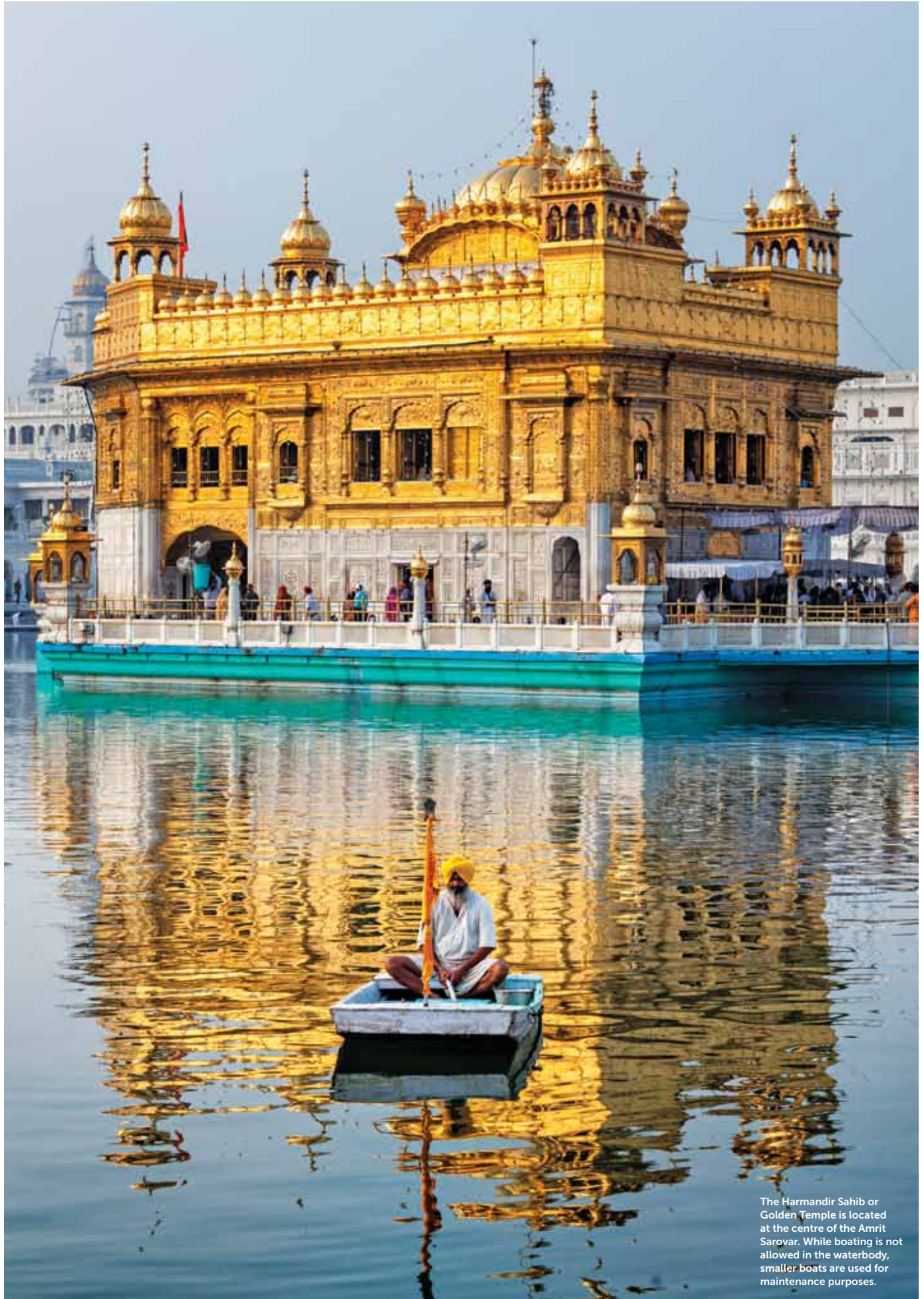
A Culinary Sojourn in Amritsar

From the spicy *choley kulche* and buttery *keema parathas* to the creamy *lassis* and decadent *jalebis*, foodies are in for a treat in Amritsar.

WORDS Punita Malhotra

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Poori (deep-fried Indian flatbread) served with *choley* (spicy chickpea curry) and pickle or *kaddu sabzi* (pumpkin curry) is one of the staple breakfast dishes in Amritsar. It is served in many street side stalls in the city.



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The Harmandir Sahib or Golden Temple is located at the centre of the Amrit Sarovar. While boating is not allowed in the waterbody, smaller boats are used for maintenance purposes.



1. Amritsari *machhi* (sole fish fillet marinated with spices) served with lemon and chopped coriander leaves is a must-try in the city. 2. A street vendor sells *moong daal laddoo* (deep-fried dumplings of green gram paste). These fritters are usually eaten with pickles. 3. Stalls selling *achaar* or pickle are a common sight in the lanes of the city.

It was 11.30 pm on a Saturday evening, when our spirited 16-member tribe trooped out of Amritsar railway station into the northern Indian city synonymous with the iconic 16th-century Sikh house of worship and legendary cuisine. My instinct was nudging me - this one would go down memory lane as a palate pilgrimage par excellence.

The joviality of the auto-rickshaw drivers added to our happiness and excitement, as the chatty caravan of over-crowded carriages rumbled off to the hotel. Luggage stowed away into our rooms, the unanimous vote was to flag-off with a homage to the Golden Temple, Amritsar's most iconic landmark. Bundling up into multiple auto-rickshaws, some of us sharing the front seat with the driver, our exuberant entourage reached the destination with wide-awake gusto. The kilometre-long walk through the revamped Heritage Street from Chowk Phowara to Old Town Hall towards Jallianwala Bagh and Harmandir Sahib complex, spelt harmony with its uniformly-designed pink facades and neat shopfronts, interspersed with pretty statues and fountains. Shoes stacked safely and feet washed clean, we stepped through the arch into the hallowed complex. My lips inadvertently curved into a gentle 'wow' at the first glimpse of the gilded, ornamental structure shimmering gracefully against

the dark skies. As we basked in the luxury of the people-free perambulation, I could feel my pace slowing down and peace sinking in. A handful of devotees were scattered around - some dipping into the holy waters and some waiting for the 4 am *darshan* (holy sighting), while *sevadars* (devotees who lend their services) continued with their chores tirelessly. We, on the other hand, had to catch the last *langar* (community meal).

Langar

The stars were on our side. Within minutes, we were sitting cross-legged on the humble floor mats, facing our empty steel *thalis* (plates) and eyeing the first of the

approaching servers. Generous quantities of *kadhi* (a yoghurt and gram flour-based gravy with vegetable fritters), *dal* (lentil) and vegetables were being ladled, and I signalled when the portions were enough for me to finish. Wasting of food is discouraged here as the meal is referred to as *prasada* (an offering made to the divine). Imitating the others, I humbly extended my palms to receive

"Years ago, refugees from Punjab had carried the sanjha chulha (rural kitchens) to the far corners of our country to provide inexpensive and homely food to those who could not afford it."

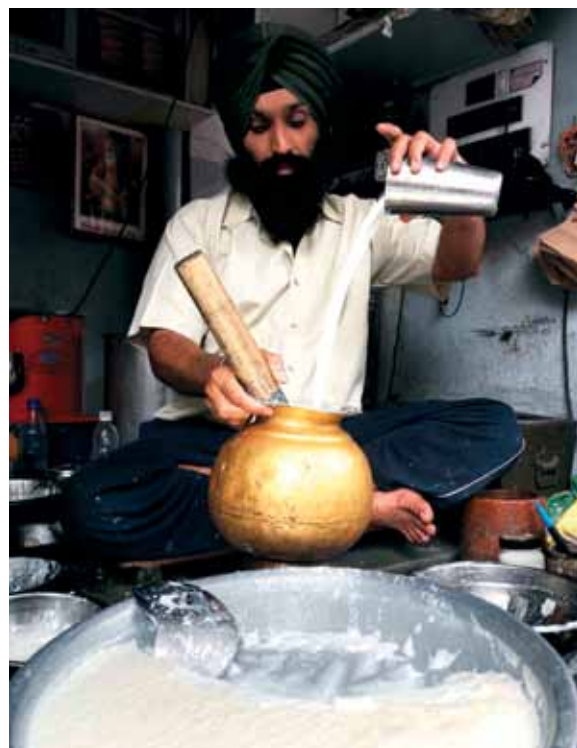
the *roti* (baked Indian flatbread). Silently, we savoured the simple, flavourful meal, acutely aware that we were mere numbers in one of the biggest community kitchens in the world, where an average 75,000 devotees are fed daily!

This tradition is said to have been initiated by Guru Nanak Dev ji and established by the third Guru Sri Guru Amar Dass ji. Between mouthfuls, I could picture the kitchens, where cauldrons of lentil bubble endlessly, air is always thick with the aroma of spices and volunteers tirelessly peel, chop, cook and serve thousands, clean the plates and keep the area spotless. When we collected our footwear from the storage area, we found they had been cleaned! The holy shrine had made an impression on my mind, in more ways than one.

Kanha Sweets

Day two, and the group was all charged up for a culinary explosion. It was agreed that satiation on a Sunday morning meant *aloo poori* (deep-fried flatbread served with a soul-filling and flavourful curry of potato). Our prowl for this legendary breakfast led us to Kanha Sweet on Lawrence Road. Considering it is one of the most popular breakfast joints in the area, mornings are always a rush. The long queue meant a 20-25 minute wait broken by impatient

neck cranes, eyeballs pinned onto tray-loads of crispy, puffy *pooris* being carried inside and errant group members sneaking away to devour syrupy *rasgullas* (an Indian sweetmeat consisting of a ball of curd cheese cooked in sugar syrup). Finally, when our names were announced, we swept in breezily, as if floating on clouds of privilege. Plates of crispy, chewy breads topped with spicy-tangy *aloo* and accompanied with sweet *kaddu sabzi* (a yummy vegetable curry prepared with pumpkin) took less than five minutes to be served and we dug in instantly. "*Ek ek plate aur chalegi na?*" (Will you have one more plate?), asked the waiter. Heads nodded in unison for second helpings. There was also no resisting the proposal for hot *kesari suji halwa* (saffron-flavoured dessert prepared with semolina) either. Gluttony was in full flow and guiltlessly, we blamed the atmosphere.



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1. *Lassi* (a sweet or spiced Indian drink prepared with a yogurt or buttermilk base and water, and topped with *malai* or fresh cream) is the best way to beat the heat in Amritsar. 2. For a traditional Amritsari meal, try the buttery Amritsari *kulcha* (stuffed flatbread) that is served with *choley* (spicy chickpea curry), flavoured rice with cubes of cottage cheese and chopped onions in vinegar.

Pal Dhaba

For the perfect evening snack, head to the 50-year-old Pal Dhaba. Boasting a few benches, this landmark *dhaba* (a roadside food stall) is a family-run establishment riding on authenticity and not innovation. Relish hot cups of chai and *bhoona chana* (roasted chickpea). Meat lovers can feast on steaming hot *paaya* (gelatinous broth made with lamb trotters) and hearty *keema parathas* (shallow-fried flatbread stuffed with minced meat tossed in spices and condiments). The latter is a renowned Pal specialty.



Makke di roti (an Indian flatbread made with corn flour) and *sarson da saag* (a flavourful gravy dish made with mustard leaves, spinach, goosefoot leaves and aromatic spices) is an iconic delicacy of Punjab and some of the best variants of this meal can be had in Amritsar.

Kulwant Dhaba

Back at the heart of town, we solemnly wandered through the complex of Jallianwala Bagh. Noon approached soon and we made our way to the famous Kulwant Dhaba for the most coveted lunch of all. Piping hot Amritsari *kulchas* (small Indian bread prepared with flour, milk and butter, typically stuffed with meat or vegetables) in *aloo*, *gobhi* (cauliflower) and *paneer* (cottage cheese) versions, accompanied by the prized *choley*, were polished off within minutes. And we weren't even that hungry!

Animated debates ensued to decode the recipe of the delicious *choley* and convince the health-conscious among us on the values of rubbing extra butter on the already richly-greased *kulchas*. "*Kal ghar ja ke salad kha lena* (Have a salad when you go home tomorrow)," we joked! Behind us in a tiny serving corner, two men were furiously plating away, while food was being delivered continuously in cane baskets from a kitchen upstairs. Years ago, refugees from Punjab had carried the *sanjha chulha* (rural kitchens) to the far corners of our country in a bid to

provide nutritious, inexpensive and homely food to those who could not afford a home or a kitchen. Their labour of love lives on, and we were witnessing it first hand.

Makhan Fish & Chicken Corner

No one needed convincing about the choice for dinner. It would have to be the famous Amritsari *machhi* (fish) at one of the most respected *dhabas* in town, Makhan Fish & Chicken Corner. In 1962, when two the brothers, Sucha and Sardar Surjit Singh launched this unknown dish with their father, they probably had no clue that they would have such a cult following in the years to come. The star delicacy, and the most sought-after one, here is the sole or *singara* fish

"The langar (community meal) of Amritsar's Golden Temple is one of the biggest community kitchens in the world."



1. A street vendor packs *amriti* (an Indian sweet made of deep-fried batter soaked in syrup). These delicacies are sold by weight. 2. A sweetmaker arranges *motichoor ke laddoo*, a sweet treat made of fried, tiny gram flour droplets known as *boondis*, which are soaked in sugar syrup and moulded into balls.



fry - a spicy-double-fried delicacy coated in a chickpea batter mixed with freshly-ground spices like *garam masala* (a spice mixture used in Indian cooking), crushed *dhania* (coriander) seeds, *ajwain* (carom), red chilli powder, lemon juice, chopped green chilli and salt.

Crispy hot, fresh on our plates, the perfectly-cooked fish was bursting with flavours!

Gurdas Ram Jalebi Wale

Hogging had not just been the highlight, but the theme of the day, and there was one last item on the agenda - dessert at an old-time *mithai* (sweet) stall at Katra Ahluwalia. Eyes glued, we followed the hypnotic moves of the expert hand creating delicate swirls over boiling hot oil and then dipping them into *sheera* (sugary syrup) till they turned translucent golden. We finished a good few plates of the treat until someone spotted a familiar hazel-coloured heap of globular gorgeousness. And the *gulab jamun* (an Indian sweet consisting of a ball of deep-fried cottage cheese boiled in a sugar

syrup) took centre-stage with its lusciously tender, melt-in-mouth perfection. "Too good!" we declared in unison, electing the family favorite sweet of the day.

Tummies full and souls satisfied, we trudged back to the hotel. We had to catch the train back early next morning. But the culinary crusade was far from complete. It would take us a few more trips to this holy city to savour every delicacy it had to offer, and this was just the beginning. 📍



GETTING THERE

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