

Datestamp: 03/04/2012

Daniel Peach embarks on culinary quest

Since October, Asheville's Daniel Peach, 22, has been cooking, eating, learning and loving his way through India. Peach, a sous chef at Chai Pani, wanted "to explore her cuisine and language," as well as pursue a "spiritual pilgrimage," he wrote via email.

Peach has been cataloging his adventure through stories and photographs on his website, <http://danielwhereis.blogspot.com>.

He wrote to the Citizen-Times about tasty "UFO-looking" fried food, how Indian mothers are advancing his career and how this quest has changed his life.

Question: What prompted your trip to India? What were your goals when you planned the trip and how have these goals been accomplished or changed since your arrival?

Answer: Before working at Chai Pani, I had been interested in Indian spiritual philosophy through the Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads and various texts on yoga. When we opened Chai Pani, Meherwan's (owner Meherwan Irani's) mother came and taught us how to cook.

I felt an immediate familiarity with the food and from then have been very interested in the culinary majesty of India. The food here is incredible.

I wanted to learn hands on how they make it and why they make it the way they do.

Lastly, I came to work on my Hindi, which I studied with an Indian friend and a book for five months before coming.

I have definitely accomplished my goals in the last 4 1/2 months. I have seen lots of temples and holy places.

I am actually writing this from Varanasi, which is one of the oldest cities on earth and the holiest of holies in India.

I spent some time the Kriya Yoga ashram in Rishikesh, a month at Meher Baba's place in Maharashtra (where Meherwan's mom Amrit lives), and a week at Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu. They all have been great experiences, but a lot of the yoga/meditation sectors of Indian spiritual practice have been highly commercialized for profit.

Being here has just reinforced the idea that traveling to far away places for spiritual reasons is silly; it's an inner practice.

As for Hindi, I can almost speak fluently, which has been a huge help while traveling here and allowed me to cook in some awesome places.

Which brings me to food.

The culinary part of my tour has become the forefront, and I have learned an enormous amount. I worked in a sweet shop in Rishikesh for a couple of weeks, cooked at a hotel in Amritsar, made lots of meals at home with Moms and Grandmas and tasted food from deep South India to the mountains up north.

I can't say enough how delicious some of the food here is and how creative people have been over the last thousands of years in India to come up with some of the things they eat.

Take for instance the dahi vada. You take urad daal (a type of split lentil) and soak it overnight, then grind it into a fine paste and let it ferment. Then you make balls and deep fry them and let them cool. Then you soak this in a spicy and sweet beaten yogurt and when serving top it with cumin powder, chili powder, and tamarind chutney.

How in the world do you come up with that? That's India.

Q: Do you have a favorite day or excursion so far? A favorite meal?

A: A great excursion was on Makar Sankranti.

A friend of mine and I were invited to a village called Arangaon to celebrate with the locals. They gave us tika (the colored powder on the forehead) and sweets, then we all had chai.

Then the girls did henna on my friend's arm and showed us clothes, stuffed animals, hanging baskets and hairstyles they had made.

Then we had pooran poli (wheat flatbread stuffed with lentils and jaggery) and a festive meal of fried bread, various vegetable concoctions and chickpea flour dumplings in a yogurt curry.

After that we all hung out together singing songs, laughing, and talking with the neighbors who came by to receive sweets and blessings from our hosts (which is the tradition on Makar Sankranti).

The best thing I have eaten in India is a dish called sev-dahi-puri. I had it at Ramakrishna's in Pune.

Its these poofed fried, crispy, UFO-looking things with potatoes and chickpeas inside, covered with a thick, sweet, flowery yogurt and topped with thin chickpea noodles, tamarind chutney, mung bean sprouts, peanuts and cilantro.

Read the full interview at CITIZEN-TIMES.com.

Caption: Daniel Peach

Publication: Asheville Citizen-Times

Section: E

Source:

Edition: 1

Page: 5

Book: E

Byline: Carol Motsinger, Cmotsinger@citizen-times.com

From: STAFF

Day: Sunday