

Feeding the festival spirit

Across many cultures and religions, lavish feasts are at the heart of religious festivals. Foodie experts and VSO staff share their experiences with *Rachel Walker*.



SIKH FESTIVAL OF VAISAKHI

HARNEET BAWEJA
Gul & Sepoy and Gunpowder restaurants, London

Sikhism is simple in its philosophy. The basic principles are that you need to work for a living and share whatever it is that you have, especially food. Sharing food happens at Vaisakhi, which celebrates our warrior heritage, and also the spring harvest.

Vaisakhi is a time of fun, rather than prayers. There are processions through the streets with music, and sweets being distributed throughout the crowds, like *jalebi* (deep-fried sweet) and *halva* (pudding made from flour or carrot, sugar, milk and dried fruit). I grew up in Calcutta [Kolkata], so local delicacies are incorporated into the mix, like *semolina rasgulla* (syrupy dumplings).

The Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab in northern India, is one of the most famous Sikh places of worship – not just because of the amazing temple, but also because there are volunteers preparing *langar* – free vegetarian meals – every day to feed the hundreds of thousands of visitors. This sharing ethos is at the heart of Sikhism, and over Vaisakhi lots of temporary sites distributing *langar* are set up all over India.

In Calcutta, makeshift tents are erected near the Victoria Memorial, which can accommodate 5,000 people. There are prayers one side, hymns the other and an area dedicated to feasting. There might be *puris* (fried bread), vegetables and lentils that have been slow-cooked until they are perfectly broken down. I have a sweet tooth and get most excited by *kheer*, rice pudding made with cardamom and milk, with almonds heaped on top. It's a beautiful celebration, especially because everything is run by volunteers. It's so heartening

to see people who are willing to give their time without expecting anything in return. gulandsepoy.com, gunpowderlondon.com

ANJU RAHEJA

People and Operations Manager, VSO India

"A sumptuous feast is a defining characteristic of Vaisakhi celebrations. My favourite food is the delicious and amazing *chole bhature*. The winning combination of *chole*, chickpeas cooked in tangy curry, and *bhature*, huge, fluffy fried breads, is very hard to resist."

ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN EASTER IN ETHIOPIA

TAFE BELAYNEH
Zeret Kitchen, London

I was born in Zeret, a small part of northern Shewa, where much of the population is Orthodox Christian. Easter is the main holiday; it's more important than Christmas. It rarely falls on the same day that Easter is celebrated in Britain because the Ethiopian calendar is different. It has 13 months, and is seven years behind the Gregorian calendar.

Easter takes place in spring, when it's around 18°C in the Ethiopian Highlands, and crops are just coming into harvest. In the lead up, we do a 40-day fast during Lent. It's a way of weakening our bodies to become submissive to God, and focus our minds.

During Lent, the food we eat is strictly vegan – no milk or dairy. It depends how rigorously you fast, but we

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usually break fast in the late afternoon, after going to church. We might eat a small plate of *injera*, flatbread made from teff, with lentils or chickpeas, potatoes, carrots and cabbage. It's plain food – food for survival, not for enjoyment.

The fasting period lengthens as Easter draws nearer. My parents eat their last meal on the Friday before Easter Sunday, and then break the fast in the early hours of Easter Sunday, so families go to church just after midnight. There are candles, dancing, everyone is dressed in white – it's a wonderful ceremony.

Then the feasting starts at home, at around 2 in the morning, with a traditional Ethiopian dish called *doro*. It's a whole chicken, which has been slow-cooked with 12 eggs, and then jointed into 12 pieces. There aren't many side dishes. After a month-long fast, people just want

PREVIOUS PAGE: Preparing *jalebi* in Odisha, India
OPPOSITE PAGE: *Injera*, an Ethiopian flatbread made from teff flour, with pulses and vegetables
TOP: Frying *jalebi*, a crispy, sweet snack in India
ABOVE: Tandoori chicken wings

meat – no more lentils – so there might be beef or lamb.

As a child, it was especially exciting feasting in the middle of the night. We would drink *telba*, flax seed shake, to help our bodies digest the rich food. There isn't a strong tradition of sweets in Ethiopian cuisine, but meals usually end with a coffee. On Easter morning, we might add a bit of spiced, clarified butter. After all, the body has been slowly shutting down over the past 40 days, so it's a great way of firing it back up again. zeretkitchen.com >

LILI TEREFE

ICS Project Support Officer, VSO Ethiopia

Doro wot, a spicy chicken stew, is a traditional food eaten during Faskia (Easter) and is accompanied by *injera*, flat-bread made from teff. Home-brewed drinks such as *tella*, a dark beer from barley, or *teji*, honey wine, are abundant. The tantalising smell of baking bread and *injera*, the roasting of coffee along with the burning of incense, the smell of fire wood, the loud songs of church goers, the busy open markets and the noise of chicken and sheep on the streets during this time of year, enhance the holiday spirit and spur beautiful memories.

HINDU FESTIVAL OF HOLI

VIVEK SINGH

Cinnamon Collection of restaurants, London

Holi is more of a social occasion than a strict, religious festival – there's no veneration, sacrifice or abstinence. In fact, what makes Holi so fun and accessible is that, unlike any other festival, there are no rules, just paint-throwing and celebration.

It's a chance for young people to play pranks on their elders, and for teachers and students, and families to celebrate together. It's an intergenerational festival and people of all faiths often celebrate among their local community.

Colour is always at the

heart of Holi. Now, most people throw dry paint, but when I was younger it was a different story. I grew up in a small coal mining community near Asansol in West Bengal, and there would be different stages of Holi – first we would throw mud, then grease, then metal paint, then wet paint and finally dry paint. There was a water tank in the garden, and my mother would send me to scrub down with sand before I was allowed back inside for a proper bath.

My parents got into the spirit and would be covered in paint. In the late afternoon, the community would come together. It might start with a family coming to our house for some puffed lotus seeds or shredded dates. Then both families would move on to someone else's house, then we'd all move on again together – until a big group settled in a park. There would be singing, dancing and more food. It wouldn't be a formal, sit-down meal, but a pot luck with samosas, chicken wings, bowls of *chaat* (savoury snack).

I'm incredibly proud to bring Holi to the City of London each year. I set up a little pod outside our Cinnamon Kitchen restaurant, and fly in coloured paint from India. Complete strangers go into the pod and pelt each other with paint – it really captures the spirit of the festival, particularly when strangers part ways, with a grin on their faces and get the tube

home covered in colours. Vivek Singh's cookbook *Indian Festival Feasts* (Bloomsbury) is out now.

PIYUSHA GUPTA

Livelihoods Project Associate, VSO India

Holi means fun, revelry and mouth-watering delicacies. My favourite foods include *thandai*, a sweet, creamy milk drink, and *gujiya*, a deep-fried sweet made with semolina, and *khoya*, dried fruits, and powdered sugar. My mother makes *gujiyas* every year for my entire family. I started cooking by helping my mother make *gujiyas* when I was 10-years-old.

EID CELEBRATIONS IN PAKISTAN

SUMAYYA USMANI

Food writer based in Glasgow

We have two Eids. The first one takes place after Ramadan, which is a month-long fast. The absence of food forces a period of contemplation, so Eid is a time of celebration and abundance. It's often spent visiting family, where the dinner table is always at the heart of proceedings. It doesn't matter what time of day it is – there's always tea, coffee, snacks, whole meals laid out, and relatives inviting you to eat.

Eid is a food-driven time of year. It's about indulgence, and rich dishes that you wouldn't usually eat. There are extravagant *biryanis* and, followed by heavy desserts – like a *vermicelli* pudding, topped with nuts, raisins and saffron. By the end of the three-day period it feels like you've more than compensated for the month-long fast.

The second Eid takes place straight after Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. It's

followed by a sacrifice, which is important because the festival is about thankfulness for what we have on our table. Traditionally families kept an animal at home, to teach attachment and sacrifice. In cities, families go to a butcher, who might organise for a goat, lamb or cow to be sacrificed on their behalf. The whole animal is divided into cuts, which are bagged up and then shared with neighbours or handed out in nearby villages.

There is a strong charitable angle during this Eid, and an emphasis on sharing food. I have vivid memories of my grandmother making big pots of *haleem*. It's a traditional dish made from lamb, mutton or goat, which is cooked with lentils or bulgur wheat for hours, until it takes on a porridge-like consistency. She would then divide it up among poor people and neighbours.

Since moving to Britain from Pakistan, I find that the best way to continue my identity is through the food I cook, especially festive food, because it's such a celebration of culture. I like to use local produce as much as I can, so there's a Scottish flavour creeping into some of my family recipes – it's the start of new culinary traditions. Sumayya Usmani is the author of *Mountain Berries and Desert Spice* (Frances Lincoln).

KHALIDA ZEB

People and Operations Officer, VSO Pakistan

Eid brings happiness and joy and it's when I look forward to visits from friends and relatives and vice-versa. Usually people cook *biryani*, rice with chicken, and *karahi*, mutton or chicken, with snacks like *channa chaat*, chick peas and potatoes with spices, samosas and *kheer*, rice pudding. The kitchen and house smells lovely the whole day. ★



LEFT: Holi celebrations at Barsana and Nandgaon, Uttar Pradesh, India