

The Thackerays enjoy a Maharashtrian *Thali* at the *Maharaja Suite* at The Leela, Mumbai

Jai Ho!



It may be difficult to get this ever-busy politician to meet over lunch, but once Uddhav Thackeray makes the time, he is relaxed and unhurried and lets you see the different sides to him; husband, father, friend, "A normal guy," says **FARZANA BEHRAM CONTRACTOR**, who shares a happy afternoon with him and his family.

"Wait!" said Uddhav Thackeray, to the young and somewhat nervous butler, who was turning to leave after serving him a cup of coffee. "This doesn't look too right," he continues, after stirring the South Indian filter coffee. "It's too light. Can you get me another kind, do you have a Jamaican one, *Blue Mountain* or something...?"

When Uddhav asks, Uddhav gets. In record time, the aroma of the world's most expensive coffee was wafting through the *Maharaja Suite* of The Leela, the lovely hotel which the Nairs own and which the most suave of hoteliers, Rajiv Kaul runs with super duper efficiency, as he does the entire chain.

Uddhav Thackeray's demeanour, as we went through this coffee tableau told me a lot about him. He knew what he did not want, he knew what he wanted. He made up his mind in a jiffy, he expressed himself softly, ➤



but authoritatively. And yes, of course, needless to add, I saw he has good taste.

It was an afternoon well spent, with the Thackerays. There was also Rashmi, Uddhav's wife and Aditya, their elder son, all of 21, but wise beyond his years.

I was meeting them over a nice, Maharashtrian *thali* meal, specially being prepared by Chef Surender. While the stewards were busy readying the banquet fit for a Maharaja in the dining area of the suite, where we eventually had a superlative lunch, we got talking about

the best subject in this world; food!

Looking at both the husband and wife's faces, smiling and radiant, I couldn't help but blurt out my first, most impromptu question, "What do you people eat, that makes your skin glow so much? Nonplussed, but just for a fraction of a moment, Uddhav replied, "Oh, that. That is not because of food. That is because of tension. I have a lot of that, and I enjoy it. You must enjoy tension. Then you get skin like mine!" From that moment on, till he left I was treated to

an heavy dose of first rate humour. And I figured that is the real cause of the happy and shinning faces. They do laugh a lot, let their hair down.

Uddhav Thackeray is a busy man. There are days when he eats lunch at 6 pm, which means he skips dinner and then there are days when he does eat breakfast, but at lunch time. But when he isn't as busy, he likes to eat dinner by 10 pm, preferably at home.

And what kind of food do they eat? "Maharashtrian, mostly," says Rashmi,



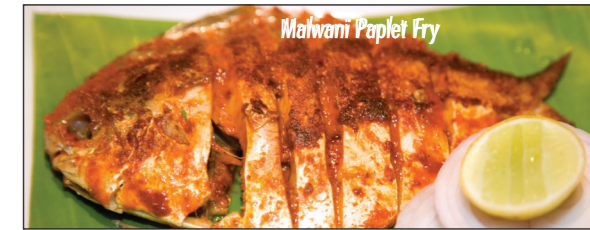
Uddhav Thackeray's sense of humour is infectious



Sukha Mutton



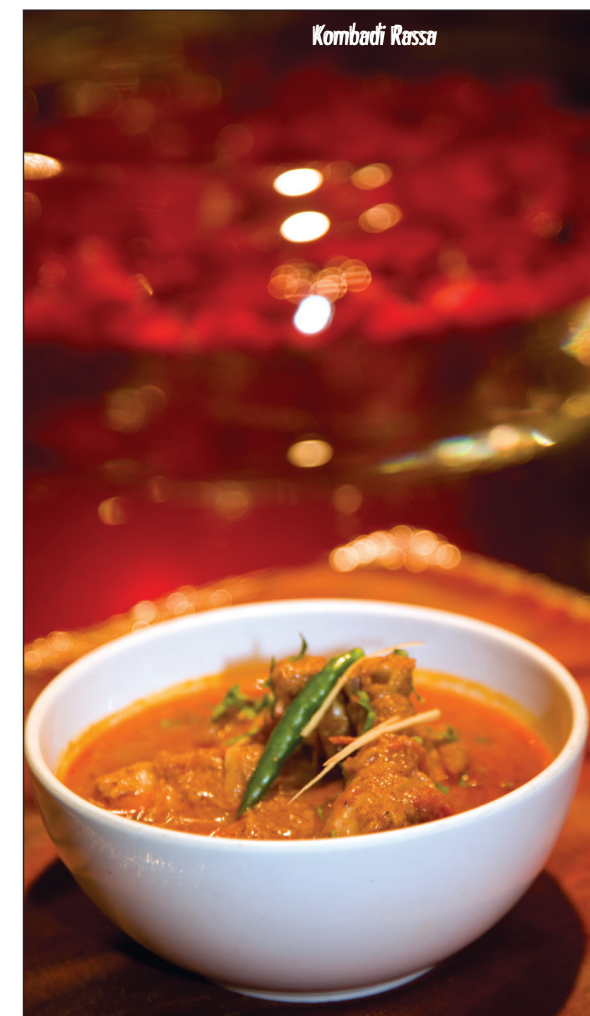
Bomibil Rawa Fry



Malvani Paplet Fry



Kolmbi Koliwada



Kombedi Rassa

"With an international mix, life has now changed," adds Uddhav. And Aditya smiles a big smile. It's clear the young ones in the house, hold sway. Aditya has a younger brother, Tejas, who studies in class 10 at *Bombay Scottish* and between the two many a pizza finds its way home.

"Well, it's not just they who like pizzas and other fast foods, we do too," says Uddhav. "There are so many nice food establishments around Bandra from where we can order all these tasty things and we do; like *McDonalds*, *Pizza Hut*, even sandwiches from *Subway*, which we all enjoy. So let's say if we have some home cooked food for dinner we may complement it with one of these things, no problem." "It's called globalisation, we adapt," pips in Aditya. Obviously the sense of humour runs in the family. Those who know the senior-most Thackeray, meaning Balasaheb, personally, will know that's where these two have acquired theirs. Sharp wit, humour and repartee are quite the hallmark of the patriarch, who is touch wood, in great form these days, gearing up as he is for the coming civic elections.

However, though Uddhav is happy to eat at home, (freaks out on Basa fish, Thai style and Crab in Black Bean Sauce) they do go out a fair deal. Chinese and Continental are a family favourite. And *Frangipani* at The Oberoi, is where they go frequently. "But you remember *Flora*, at Worli, that was our haunt when I was younger, reminisces Uddhav. "Sweet corn crab soup was an all time favourite. We used to go there to celebrate all kinds of occasions and election victories. Chef Leo used to really look after us."

Talking of younger days, I learn Uddhav was fond of non-vegetarian food. Though as a child and in school his mum, the late and lamented Meenatai would pack a tiffin for him which had *roti-sabji*. After he grew a little older, he stopped the tiffin would binge on *vada pav* and *missal*. And after that, while in college, his affair with non-vegetarian food started; he lived on *kheema pao*. That's when he also started to eat burgers, frankfurters, salami. All of which were available at the *Mafco* van outside hotel Oberoi on Marine Drive. The only allowance Uddhav made >

for vegetarian stuff was to eat *Caesar's Salad*, more likely because it had some nice shredded chicken on it!

But the one thing Uddhav hasn't given up eating and never will, is *missal pao* and *bhaji pao*, which is sold outside Sena Bhavan, Uddhav's Shiv Sena party headquarters at Dadar. "Oh, that's great, even my friends are hooked on that. The man who makes it is called Ravi Vasaikar," says Aditya, "And the *imli chutney* and *lasoon chutney* is so

tasty," continues Rashmi. And I decide immediately that I have to go taste all this very soon.

The first and last time Uddhav went on a diet was about 15 years ago, when he hit 92 kgs on the weighing scale. For six months, he ate only steamed and boiled vegetables and no rice at all. He went down to 74 kgs.

He says he weighs more than that now but I couldn't tell. He looks pretty fit and says he eats everything, but



Kothimbir Wadi



Batata Vafana Bhaji



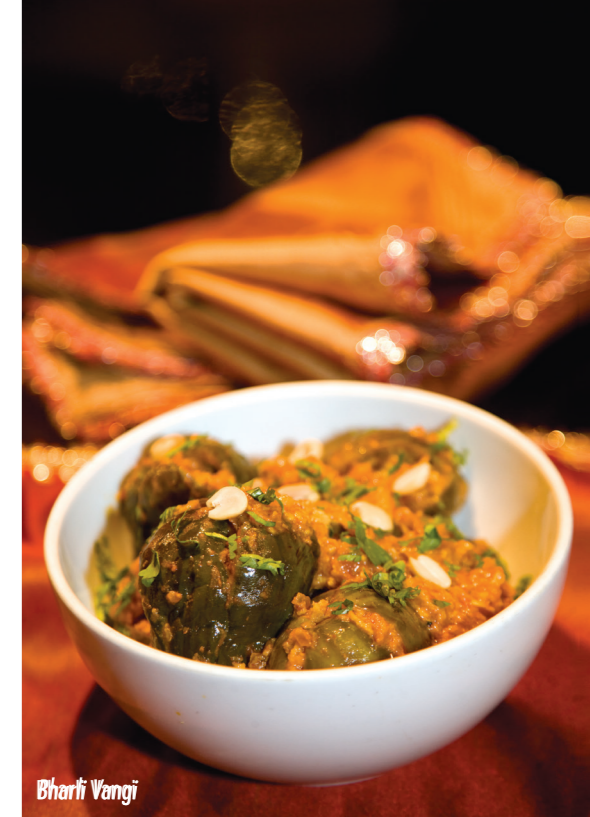
Humour, charm, beauty...it's all in the family

sensibly and in balance. "In those days our *fundas* were different. Now there is more awareness and so we have adapted to a healthy lifestyle." Rashmi takes over, "Like for breakfast we eat *dosa*, *poha*, *usal*, *upma* made from *nachni*. We will have *thali peet*, twice a week. For lunch there is always one sprout; *matki*, *masoor*, green *mung*, *chowli* or *val*. At dinner, there is always some green *bhaji*, like *sepu*, *laal mat*, *palak*. Also *jowar*, *bajra rotis* or *bhakri*." In which young Aditya rolls on lavish quantities of cheese spread!

Cheese seems to be another family weakness. *Brie*, *Gouda*, *Edam*... and this is in Aditya's domain. It is he who picks up all the gourmet stuff. From *Godrej Nature's Basket*, *Gourmet West*, from *Indigo Deli*. He drives himself around, but has two bodyguards at all times, seated in the car. "Poor you" say I, but Aditya seems not to mind. He says, these bodyguards are like his friends, and he is very comfy with them. "Except when his girlfriend comes along she will have to share the space with them," Rashmi teases her son. To which the son says, "I have to find one, first!"

Well, this is one normal family and refreshingly candid. There may be no dieting in their household, but the head of the family fasts. Every Tuesday, until 8.30 pm, Uddhav does not eat anything except a very small portion of *Saboodana Kibichdi*. This is Ganpati and Kuladevi day, and he observes this fast religiously. Like his mother used to. But Rashmi does not fast, not really. She is not rigid about these things, though she may do so on *Vat Poornima* day. "See, I eat light veg food three or four days of the week and that's to me, like fasting," she reasons, and rightly so. But she hates the fact that she has a huge sweet tooth and cannot resist desserts. And while everyone is talking about fasting and not fasting, Aditya proclaims he doesn't fast. "I don't disrespect, any day," he says in mock seriousness.

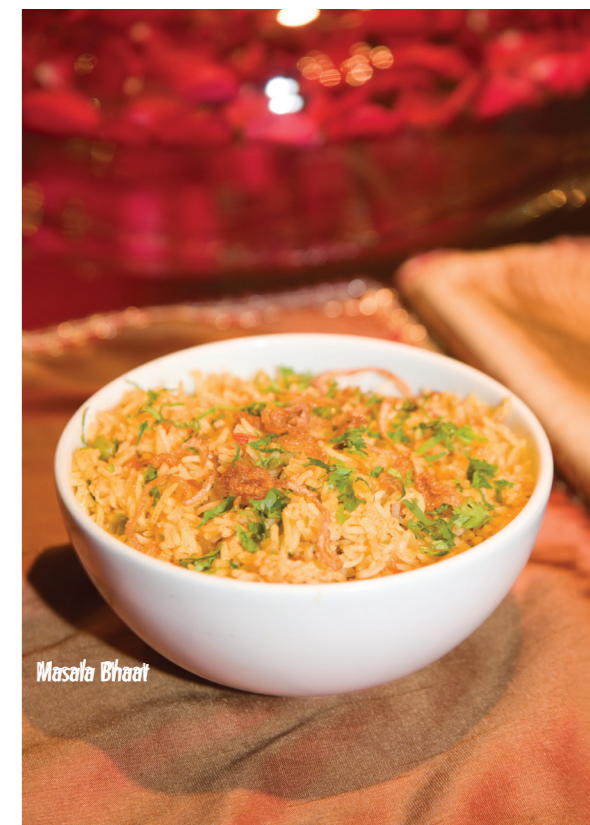
Diet and fasts aside, all three do make time for fitness. There is a treadmill at home and a cross trainer too, and father and son work on that. While Rashmi tries to walk at least half an hour every alternate days, Uddhav does so four times a week, for 45 to 50 minutes. "I don't know what ➤



Bharli Vangi



Dal



Masala Bhaat



Gulab Jamun



Sol Kadhi



Chef Surender Mohan, happy with the appreciation

is quality time, but at least this much I have to do. Otherwise my life is too sedentary. There is hardly any movement. From car to the office, office to home in the car, sitting long hours in meetings, what else?" says Uddhav, peering over his black rimmed glasses, through honest brown eyes and smiles.

"What about holidays?" I ask. "That depends on our children. It is they who are more busy than us, these days!" says Uddhav. But they do go somewhere every summer and winter. In India or abroad. In the country they love going to Goa and anywhere in Rajasthan, abroad it's usually Europe, often London. And when they are overseas, they become pretty adventurous with their taste buds. They try all kinds of food, including crocodile meat!

The palaces seem to lure the Thackeray family to Rajasthan, as also the forests of Ranthambore. We all know Uddhav's passion for photography, particularly shooting tigers, but what most don't, and I certainly didn't, is Aditya who writes poetry, also shares the

same interest. Except that the subject matter differs. "Yes, I have been shooting pictures since I was in class 3. But I like abstracts and light and shadow. So let's say, while Dad is shooting the tiger, I will probably be shooting its stripes or its tail." The boy can be endearing. And his sweet looks make him all the more so.

Aditya is fortunate. He is growing up in a time when the world is there for the taking. And he has a doting father, who is a tech-freak. Says the lad who apparently thinks the world of his father, "If there is any new gizmo in the market my Dad will know about it. Cameras, laptops, phones, iPads, you name it. And what is more, we learn all the applications from him. And did I tell you, he is also a doctor? He knows so much about medicine, it's amazing!"

If the son is a gushing fan, the father dismisses it saying, "Like my sons come to me, I used to go to my father for gifts. I remember there was a dream camera I wanted very much; Nikon F3. One day my father came to me and placed a

plastic bag in front of me. There it was, the F3! So these things go on."

Well these bonds are the very reason for our existence. What is life if it is not for the family? And Rashmi sums it all for me, when I ask her, what is it that she yearns for the most and would like to see happening more often. "I love it when we are all altogether. Wherever we may be. Like when we are in London and we feel so free. Where nobody recognises us and we can go for long walks in the Hyde Park, which we all love to do. It's special when I am with my husband and my boys. And it isn't just being in London, it can be right here in Mumbai. Sometimes late at night we all go to the Worli Sea Face and walk. That is also very, very special and I thank God for such small pleasures."

So if you happen to see this family of four taking in the breeze, laughing, talking, walking, with a posse of security trailing at a discreet distance, you know it is this *sukhi*, little *kutumb*, enjoying a bit of quality life. ✨



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