

LUCKNOW

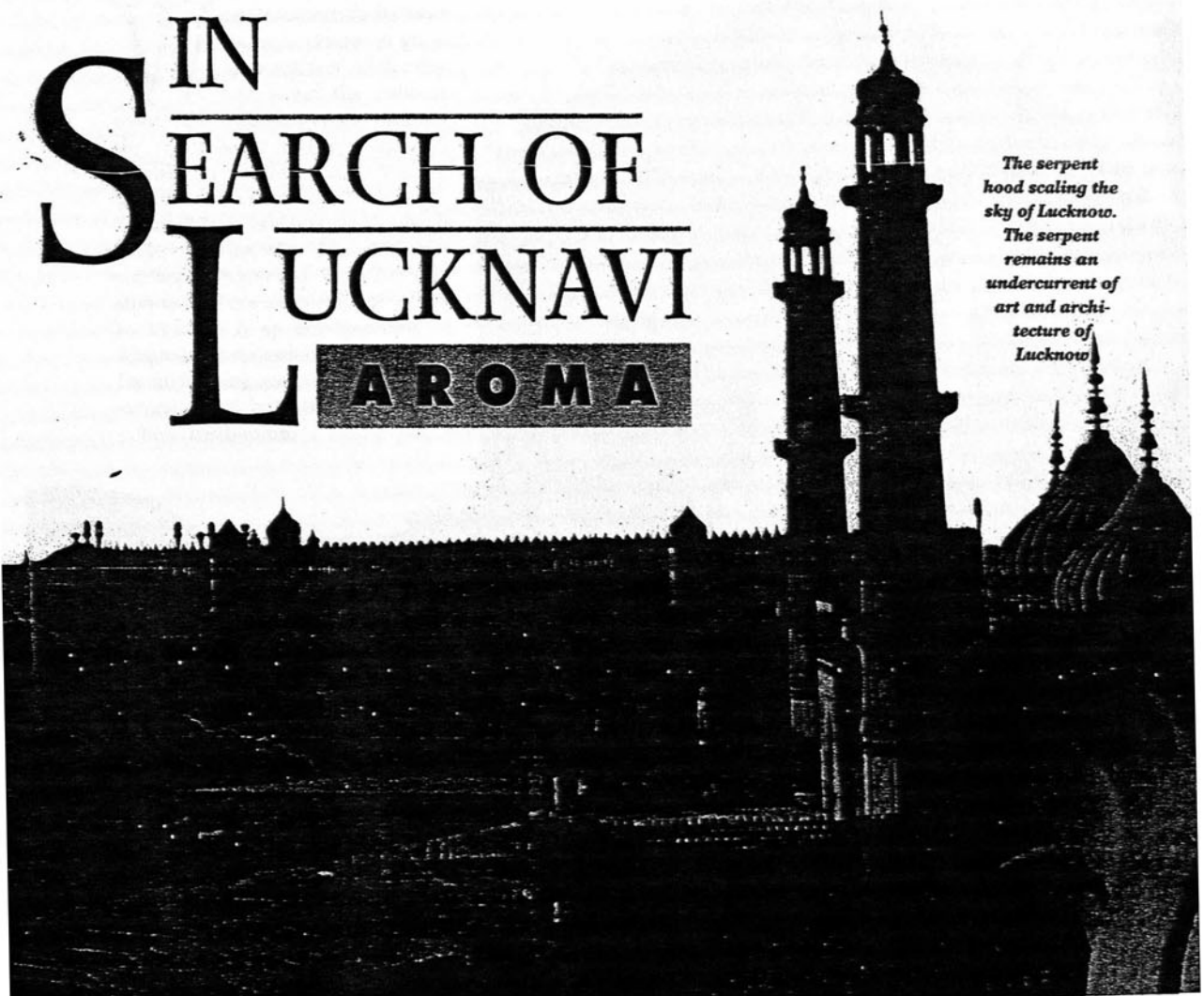
SAVOURS

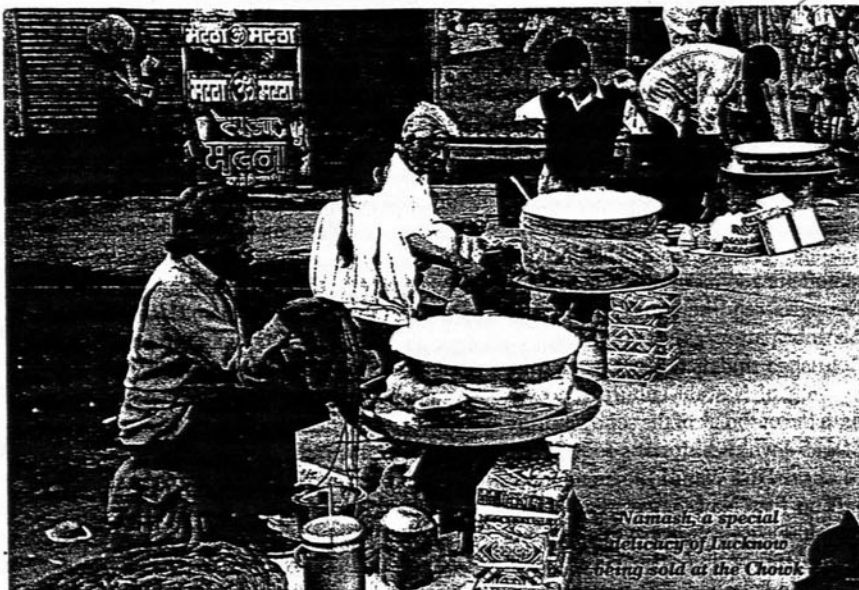
Text and Photographs:
Dr. Gautam Chatterjee

*Travel through the city of Lucknow
with the author and savour the socio-
cultural amalgamation evident in its
architecture, culture and cuisine.*

IN SEARCH OF LUCKNAVI AROMA

*The serpent
hood scaling the
sky of Lucknow.
The serpent
remains an
undercurrent of
art and archi-
tecture of
Lucknow*



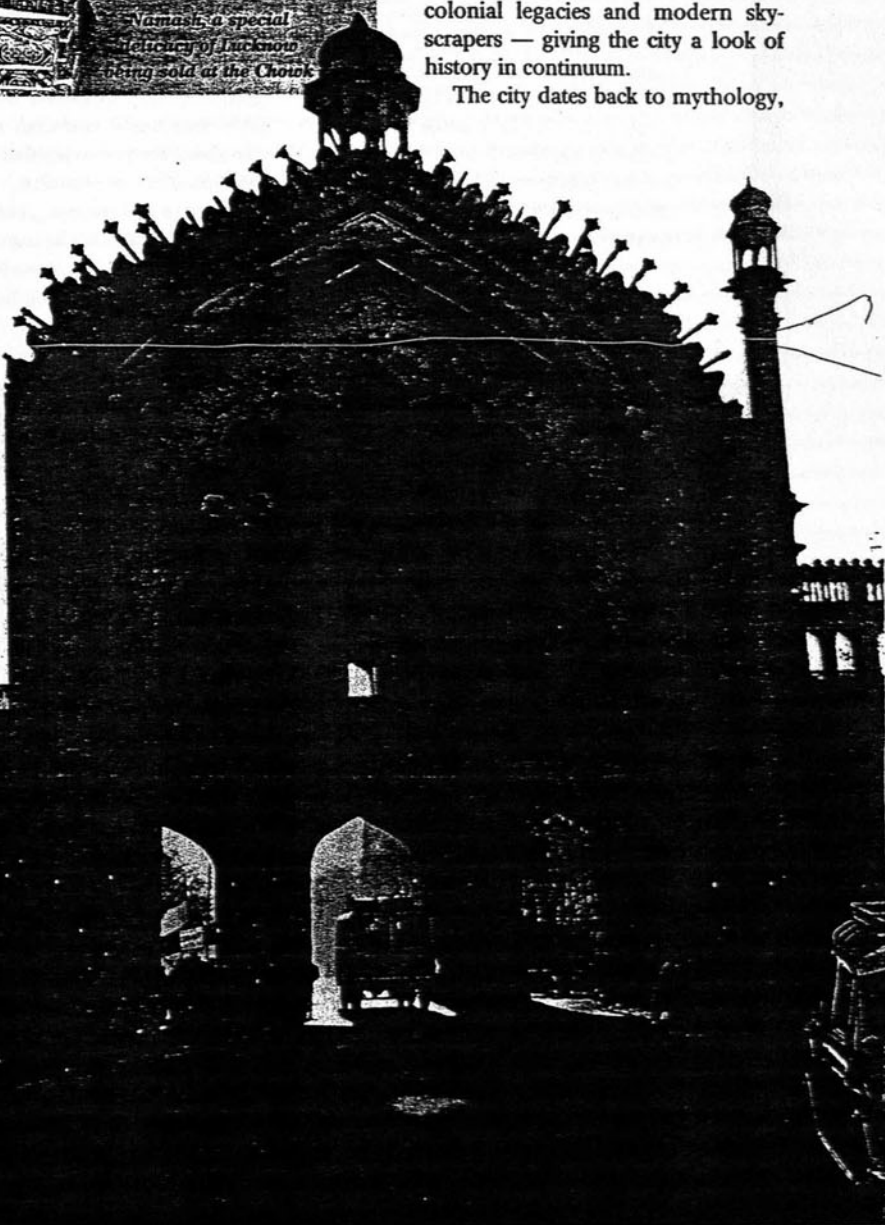


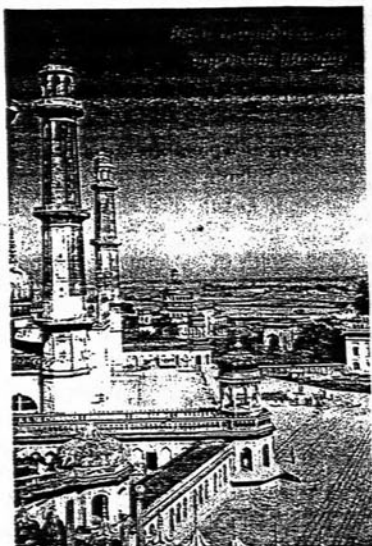
While Ram Naresh Sharma behind the wheel negotiated turns through the crowded roads, Naved defined the city with four fantastic words. He said Lucknow can be best understood with the words: *Nabab* or *nawab* (the erstwhile rulers), *aadab* (the sense of etiquette), *kabab* (the excellence of cuisine) and *shabab* (which not only means zenith of sensuous beauty but also theatrical aesthetics encompassing dance, drama and songs). Suddenly, I realized that I had got an entry point to fathom the fabulous city with these four wonder words.

While driving to Hotel Gomti I noticed the varying architecture of different periods — Nawabi regality, colonial legacies and modern skyscrapers — giving the city a look of history in continuum.

The city dates back to mythology,

When 'Discover India' sent me to Lucknow to get a 'gourmet feel' of the city and sense the cultural continuum, I decided to cast aside all the voluminous research material available everywhere and go with an 'empty mind'. I stepped out from the Shatabdi Express at historic Charbagh Railway Station where Naved Zia was waiting to receive me. The Charbagh station itself is a unique building built in 1914. It is an amalgamation of Mughal and Rajasthani school of art. Its engineering not only excels at the creative level but also has acoustic control mechanism.





to the epic, *Ramayana*. It is said that Rama had given his brother, Lakshmana, the plot of land on the bank of River Gomti and consequently it was named Lakshmanabadi. In time it became the present day Lucknow.

Naved explained that the four wonder words come to the fore in the evenings so I set out just as the sun was setting over the Gomti behind the silhouette of Lucknow. It was here through several thousand evenings that Nawabi patronage and regal culture flourished and here again the final evening of Nawabi culture caved in with the outbreak of the sepoy mutiny of 1857 which historians today refer to as the First War of Independence.

The first Nawab was Barhan-ul-Mulak (1724-39) who came from Persia for business but eventually settled in Faizabad. The fourth of his lineage was Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula who came to Lucknow in 1775. Refined behaviour, aesthetic sense and appreciation of art reached its zenith in the times of the Nawab of Oudh, Wazed Ali Shah (1847-56). However, the culturally glorious sun was to set finally with the outbreak of the sepoy mutiny of 1857.

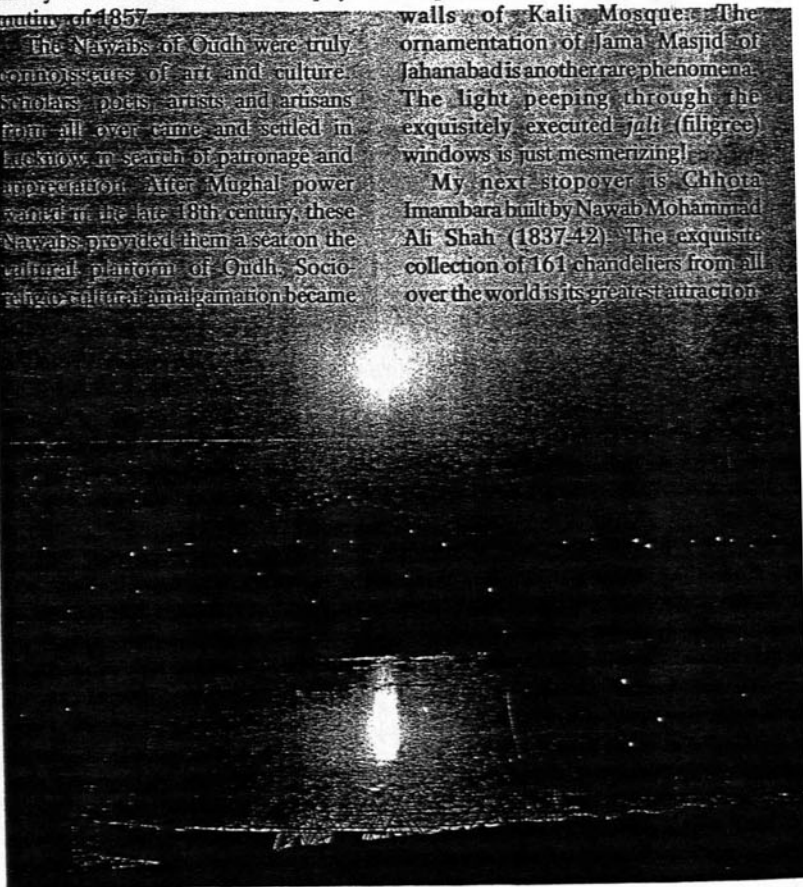
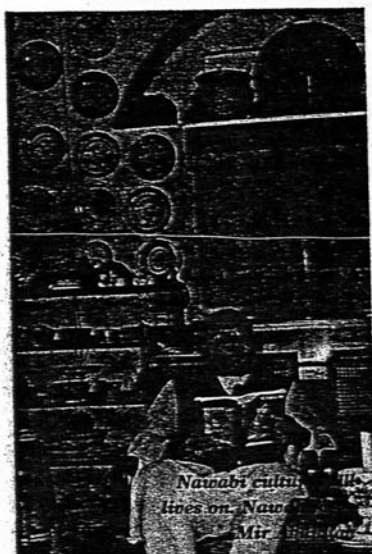
The Nawabs of Oudh were truly connoisseurs of art and culture. Scholars, poets, artists and artisans from all over came and settled in Lucknow in search of patronage and appreciation. After Mughal power waned in the late 18th century, these Nawabs provided them a seat on the cultural platform of Oudh. Socio-religious-cultural amalgamation became

the order of the day. Several historic palaces were built keeping in mind the 'space' of all arts at the holistic level enveloping motif, style and structure.

I entered the ancient city through Rumi Darwaza, a 60 ft. high gateway. It was built in 1786 by Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula and is a near replica of the ancient portal of Constantinople. One can get a magnificent view of the city from its top. The gate is unique as it has two different facades and names. The other side is known as Tambolik Gate.

Alongside the Gomti one can see Shaeed Minar built in 1957 to commemorate the First War of Independence of 1857. The Sankat Mochan Hanuman Mandir built under Nawabi patronage is an extraordinary sight with about 60 tons (many tons were sold earlier) of bells of different sizes and shapes. People fasten bells in the temple premises once their wish is fulfilled. The belief continues and the number of bells increases! Cultural coherence and symbolic coexistence is the catch word of Lucknow. One sees the 'star and moon' symbol atop temples and a hooded snake on the walls of Kali Mosque. The ornamentation of Jama Masjid of Jahanabad is another rare phenomena. The light peeping through the exquisitely executed *jali* (filigree) windows is just mesmerizing!

My next stopover is Chhota Imambara built by Nawab Mohammad Ali Shah (1837-42). The exquisite collection of 161 chandeliers from all over the world is its greatest attraction.



There is a diamond cut pigeon where *Bismillah-e-raheman*...is written on the border and also an upside down *Om*. This unique feature depicts the artist's respect for both religions — Hinduism and Islam. Another wonder is Abdul Kayam Punjabi's creation in a miniature frame encompassing 375 pages and 6,660 stanzas. There is also a *tazia* (a tower-like structure) in a small glass bowl which is made of several lakhs of miniature ivory pieces. This artist was paid in those days some Rs.2,30,000 for this unique creation.

The greatest wonder of Lucknow is the Bara Imambara which was built by Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula. A remarkable feature of the Imambara is the absence of any pillar support to its 50 ft. high main hall and labyrinth of intricate balconies and passages called the *Bul Bhulaiya* (Puzzling Tunnels). Facing the Imambara is an imposing mosque.

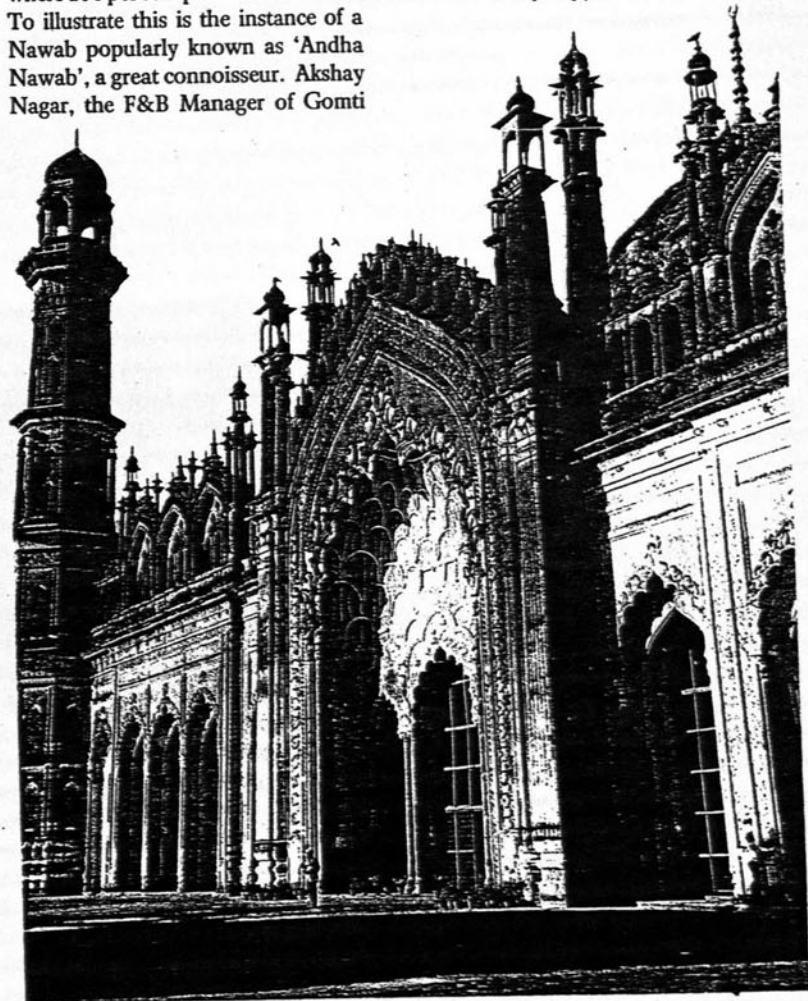
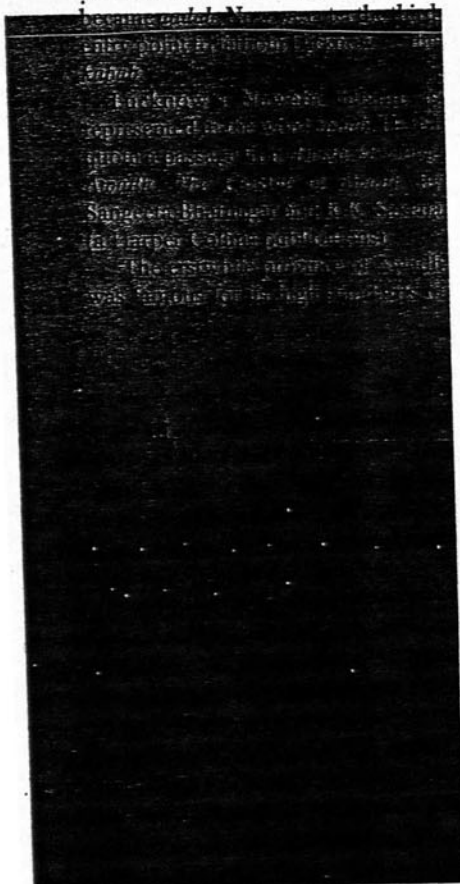
The building was built over a period of 10 years and the cause was philanthropic — to save the subjects from the famine of 1784 by providing employment. Here lies the essence of Nawabi psyche. Nawabi culture and refinement at the behaviour plane

gastronomic etiquette. This culture is still found preserved in the sanctum sanctorum of the erstwhile landed aristocracy of Lucknow and a few adjoining districts that formed part of Awadh; and of course the famous *bawarchis* (cooks) who, with tremendous discipline bordering on religious fervour, still follow the traditional style of cooking handed down to them by their ancestors. Credit goes to them for not compromising on the quality of the food prepared by them despite pressures of time and money."

I talked to Mr. R.K. Saxena, Principal of the Institute of Hotel Management, Lucknow. At the institute special care is taken to keep up the heritage of Lucknavi cuisine which is losing its ground in modern times. Mr Saxena said, "It is due to lack of patronage and the financial aspect that Lucknavi tradition is losing its ground because this is an area of cuisine where 100 per cent perfection matters." To illustrate this is the instance of a Nawab popularly known as 'Andha Nawab', a great connoisseur. Akshay Nagar, the F&B Manager of Gombi



Above: Sankat Mochan Hanuman Mandir with its wish fulfilling bells
Facing page below: When the sun sets Nawabi culture comes to the fore
Below: Exquisite ornamentation: Jama Masjid of Jahanabad



Hotel said, "once the Nawab entered the kitchen, just inhaled the aromas around him and asked the cook, *Miyan aapke chawal behosh ho ganye hai?* (Mr. has your rice fainted that it has become so soggy?)."

The two *kababs* that top the list of Lucknavi heritage are *Tunde ka kabab* and *Kakori kabab*. Saxena explained that in Mughal times the *Seekh kabab* prepared from minced beef was very popular. Later influences and innovations came from Kakori cooks who prepared *kababs* from minced lamb which were more tender and sumptuous and respected Hindu sentiments as well. Kakori is a small hamlet near Lucknow famous for its history of freedom struggle. Thus Kakori lives on in history and the heritage of *kabab* as well.

The delicate Lucknavi aroma is prepared with several hundred spices and it takes hours to prepare one dish. During a luncheon meeting at the famous Oudhyana restaurant of Taj Hotel, I asked the General Manager, Mr. K.E. Karkaria, how these Nawabs digested such rich food. Mr Karkaria replied that "the kitchens of the Nawabs used to be controlled or headed by a *Hakim*, a Unani doctor. They were family physicians who knew the ailments of the generations of Nawabs so they prescribed antidotes or curative elements to be added in the recipe."

The Chowk in Lucknow is another

unique place where *namash* is sold. This is an exclusive delicacy sold by roadside vendors. It is cream prepared from milk flavoured with saffron and topped with dry fruits and silver foil. It is a winter speciality to be taken in the morning. Today there are some 15 vendors at the Chowk and each one sells around 50 kg of *namash* a day!

An important stopover at the Chowk is Ram Asrey Sweet Shop. They are licence holders since 1885. They prepare sweets out of only clarified butter. Prakash Kulfi is another joint famous for its *kulfis* (kind of ice cream) and has been around for about 40 years.

To fathom the depth of Nawabi culture I was a privileged guest of Nawab Jafar Mir Abdullah who recalled that in the olden days there used to be cooks who specialized in innovation and aromas. He explained that they would prepare a dish that appeared to be a sweet dish but while tasting it one would realize it was salty! This type of cuisine was part of the fun and games in close family gatherings during marriages. He added that there were about 264 spices used to prepare a single dish called *Tunde ka kabab*.

Nawab Jafar Mir Abdullah is also a collector of Nawabi antiques. He has in his possession thousands of utensils

and other *objets d'art*. He has a rare collection of *paan daans* (betel leaf containers) as the etiquette of *paan* chewing is part of the culture of Lucknow. Satish Paan Bhandar near the stadium is specially renowned for its *paan*.

At the Institute of Hotel Management I came across a recipe book of Sheikh Ahmed Ali Daroga, *Bawarchi Khana*, published in Urdu in 1935. It gives a list of bread preparations. There are hundreds of types of *rotis* (bread) existing in Lucknavi cuisine.

It is interesting to note that Taj Hotel Lucknow has employed 75 year old Gulam Rasul Bawarchi to continue with the work of Lucknavi tradition. Some of the specialities here are *Galawati kabab* (papaya) and *Mutanjan* which is a mutton, sugar and rice preparation that takes 12 hours to prepare according to Executive Chef, Shivanand Kain. Some unusual dishes are *Aande* (egg) *halwa* and garlic *kheer*.

My last gourmet treat was at Gomti Hotel. And while concluding the *kabab* chapter here I felt like singing *super-cali-fragilistic-espeali-docious* which means very sumptuous!

The last but most important aspect of Lucknow's cultural heritage is *shabab*. Since ancient times Lucknow has remained a seat of culture. Even today there is a strong cultural current.

NAWABI CHANDNI

The Moonlight Nawabi Dinner Course

Nawabi Chandni is a legacy of heritage days. Food is served in white dishes on a full moon night. One can order these special dishes at Hotel Gomti run by U.P. Tourism.

Appetizers: Badi-Begum-ka soup. A rich soup made of pure *badam* (almond) milk extract and white sauce garnished with almonds.

Main Course: Murg Lucknavi. A traditional dish from the treasury of Nawabi cuisine.

Chicken marinated in ginger and garlic paste with a gravy of

Murg
masalam
Lucknavi



cashew nuts, onions, cloves, green cardamoms, nutmeg, milk and fresh cream. A few drops of *meetha ittar* and *sone ka warak* (super-fine sheet of pure gold foil) are used as garnishing to maintain the true Lucknavi tradition.

Gosht Sulemani: Boneless mutton cooked over slow fire in a gravy flavoured generously with ginger and garlic, raw papaya paste and yoghurt.

It is garnished with cashew nut and coconut paste and topped grandly with *chandni ka warak* (fine sheet of pure silver foil).

Aaftabi Kabab: This vegetarian delight is made of grated cottage cheese, boiled potato, egg, cheese sauce and special aromatic spices. It is cooked in a clay oven called *tandoor* and served with green corianda chutney.

Desserts: *Shahi Kheer*, a type of rice pudding but it is a high calorie rich dessert where the milk is thickened and cashew nuts, raisins, pistachios and a bit of clarified butter and sweet *ittar* is added as flavouring.

(Contributed by Akshay Nagar, Manager F&B, Hotel Gomti, U.P. Tourism, Lucknow)