

Design Resource

Irani Cafes of Bombay

Exploring Cafes of the City

by

Rajarshi Ray

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/irani-cafes-bombay>



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2. Elements of the Cafes
3. Popular offerings at the Cafe
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Introduction

Irani and Parsi cafes are seen chiefly in the southern parts of Mumbai. However, such cafes are also found in Pune and Hyderabad. But these cafes from Mumbai are fading out very rapidly. Known mostly at one point of time for the famous Irani chai and brun maska, these cafes or restaurants also offered Irani dishes like dhansak, Sali boti, custards amongst others. Started in the British era, serving continental food, these restaurants changed their platter post Indian independence and switched over to offer Irani food and Mughlai food, besides the regular offering of bakery items like cakes, patties, buns, etc.

Though Iranis and Parsis, in India are entirely different communities or groups, both of them are Zoroastrians. Thus a lot of cultural similarities is rendered into the restaurants they run and the food they offer.

In an article in the Indian Express on “Irani cafés: Inheritance of loss”, Naomi Lobo has traced the background of these cafés: When the Zoroastrian Iranians came to India in the 19th century, they had no riches and were in search of a better livelihood. Mumbai (Bombay), at that time, was already home to another Zoroastrian community, the Parsis. A couple of Iranians worked in Parsi homes as caretakers and met in the evenings to discuss the life they had left behind, and their future prospects. One evening, a man served tea to everyone and charged them a small amount. The result: A business was born, of serving tea. And this was the beginning of an Irani café. Irani Cafes flourished in Mumbai followed by Pune and Hyderabad. Pune had its fair share of these cafes, which are today reduced to just a handful.

Also, another story says that Hindus considered corner shops as inauspicious locations as they were “goumukhi” in shape, that is like a cow’s face. The Parsis saw good business in these locations and thus began all the cafes.

• Who are the Iranis ?

Iranis docked directly at Bombay in a mass migration through the second half of the 1800s. Iranis either go by their generic surname Irani or by the last name based on the towns from which they hailed, such as Kermani, Yezdani, Khosravi, Faroodi and Jafrabadi. Some third-generation Iranis are still fluent in Dari, the dialect sans script that their forefathers adopted so that their rulers could not tell what they were saying.

• Who are the Parsis ?

Parsis set sail from their home turf of Pars to alight on Gujarat’s shores before moving, over time to the colonial trade and business hub of Bombay. Parsis adopted new names in India, usually based on the Gujarati word for their occupation – Vakil (lawyer), Mistry (carpenter), etc. Gujarati is the Parsis’ acknowledged mother tongue.

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Parsi residents enclave at South Mumbai
Courtesy : Author



South Mumbai
Courtesy : Author



Zoroastrian Symbol

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Elements of the Cafes

These cafes in Mumbai have a characteristic outlook and can be easily distinguished from others around them. The interiors are also very similar besides the platter that most of them offer. Though some of these cafes have evolved over time, still certain features stand out prominently, adding the character to the ambience.

Bent Wood Chairs:

The most feature seen in Irani and Parsi cafes are the bent wood chairs in black. These chairs are manufactured by steaming wood, bending it and letting it harden into curved shapes and patterns. The technique is very similar to making chairs using heavy cane.

Marble Top Tables:

The bent wood chairs are accompanied by white marble top tables usually square in shape. Due to maintenance issues these tables are nowadays being replaced by square wooden tables with a glass cover on top. A transparent piece of glass is used over a table cloth. The menu card of the cafe is sandwiched between the glass and the table cloth such that it is visible to the customer.

Chequered Table Cloth:

These are characteristic table cloths that are seen in almost all Irani and Parsi Cafes. The chequered cloth is very similar to the fabric worn by Iranian people. These checkers are mostly in Red though blue and green variants are also seen.

Chandeliers:

Not so common, but chandeliers are also part of Irani and Parsi restaurants. As a matter of fact these chandeliers were used to give it a “continental” flavour, as pre independence the customers catered to by these cafes were mostly Europeans.

Half Floor in the Interior Space:

The interior space in many of these cafes has a half floor which is somewhat like a mezzanine. This floor provides additional seating deck and is connected to the main seating space on the ground floor. The two spaces are connected by wooden stairs.

Family Room:

These were small chambers to accommodate courting couples in the cafes. The chambers had typical wooden swing doors. The concept of family rooms became so popular in the 70s-80s that were even mentioned in Bollywood movies of the time including Raj Kapoor's film 'Bobby' starring Rishi Kapoor and Dimple Kapadia. In fact another Bollywood film 'Tum Milo to Sahi' shows a Parsi woman, played by Dimple Kapadia, trying to save her cafe from being bought over by a multi-national corporation.

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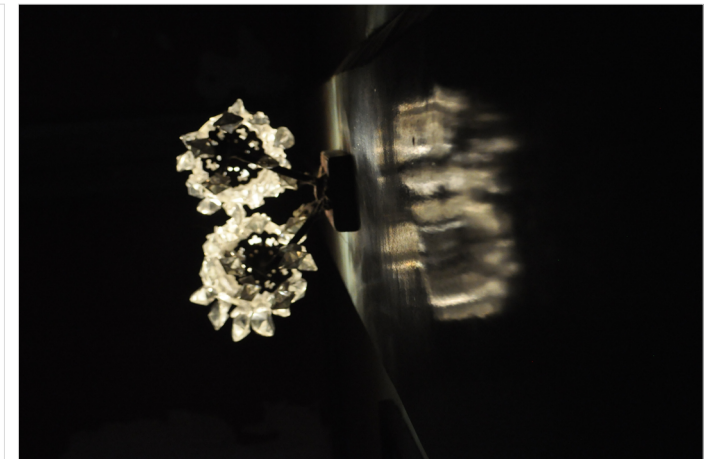
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Bent Wood Chair



Chandelier



Family Room See Inside Cafe Mondegar

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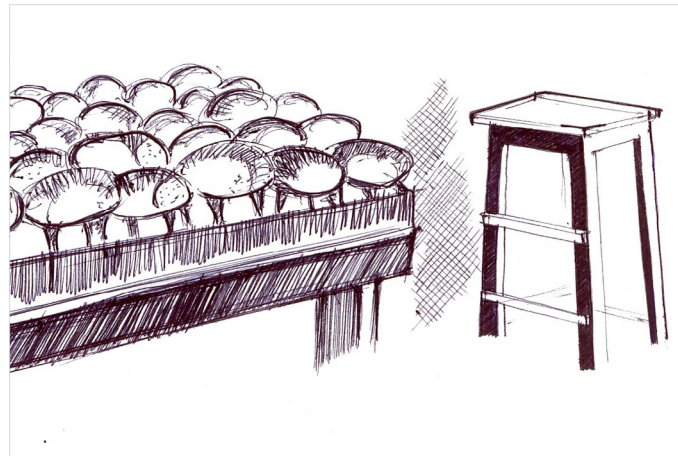
Popular offerings at the Cafe

Every culture has its own special cuisine and so does the Iranis. A lot of amalgamation has happened over the years, but there are still few dishes which Irani cafes are known for. In fact many of those recipes are said to have given birth to the local ones, like the brun maska is believed to be the great great grandfather of the Mumbai vada pav!

Brun Maska:

The most famous item available at an Irani or a Parsi cafe is the brun maska. A loaf of bread as soft as a baby's cheek is served, with the loaf cut into two halves with a layer of salted butter holding the pieces together. The term "maska" in Irani actually means butter, whereas the brunns or breads are typical of Irani bakeries. This is similar in concept to French breads. Round balls, crusty outside, soft inside, heaven all over when they are served fresh, warm, sliced with a generous dollop of butter slathered in.

The correct form to have brun maska is to dip it in the excruciatingly sweet and milky tea served in white cups which bore the sign of honest hardworking labour.



Fresh Apple Pie:

New lines of cake and pastry shops have made their way in Mumbai, but the apple pie has survived. Crushed apples draped in wheat flour are baked in wood burnt ovens to give its typical flavour, remains a favourite even today among people visiting Irani cafes.

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Fresh Apple Pie

Irani Chai:

This is a signature item at Irani or Parsi cafes. The tea is prepared with extra milk and masala, to get its typical taste. Irani chai is usually served with Brun maska. Sometimes referred to as the “khadi chammach ki chai” because of the extra sugar added to it, which could make a spoon stand in the cup.



Irani chai

Dhansak:

Dhansak is a popular dish, which combines Parsi and Gujrati cuisine. In Parsi homes, Dhansak is traditionally made on Sundays owing to its long preparation time. Dhansak consists of lentils, vegetables, spices, cumin seeds, ginger, and garlic together with meat and either gourd or pumpkin. Within the Parsi community, dhansak usually contains goat meat(mutton); it is rarely made with other meats, or without meat.

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Dhansak

Berry Pulao:

It is a signature item at the famous Britannia Restaurant. It is a dish similar to biriyani, which is cooked with barberries. This berry which is added is also known as Zerish berry.



Berry Pulao

Caramel Custard:

Among the desserts offered at Irani cafes, caramel custard tops the list. As a matter of fact, there are many restaurants offering Parsi or Irani food which boast about the quality of caramel custard.

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Caramel Custard



Custard

Khari Biscuit:

As the name suggests these are salty biscuits which were a typical offering at an Irani cafe along with the chai. These biscuits are made with plain flour, ghee and salt, of course worth trying at an Irani cafe.



Khari Biscuit



Chocolate Mousse

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Revisiting the origin of Parsi Restaurants

On a visit to Britannia Restaurant in Ballard Estate, sometime in December 2011, a chat with Mr. Boman Kohinoor, opened up a lot of stories behind the Parsi and Irani cafes in Mumbai. Mr. Kohinoor, a second generation owner of the restaurant opened his heart out over a glass of Fresh lime soda. The conversation is reproduced below in an abridged form.

The Kohinoors:

Boman showing his postcards



Mr. Boman Kohinoor



The Kohinoors

Postcards:

Front side of postcard



Back side of postcard



Front side of postcard

Design Resource

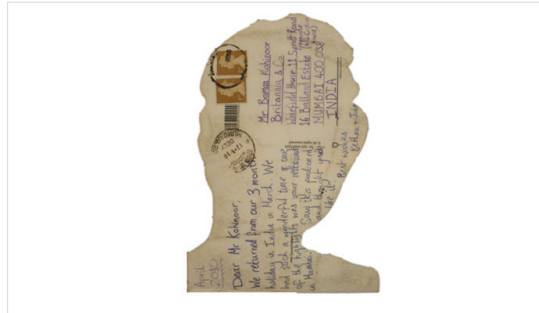
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Backside of postcard

Britannia & Co. Restaurant:



Britannia and Co. Restaurant

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Britannia entrance



Britannia sigange



Menu at Britannia

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Bastani and Co. :



Bastani and Co.

Kyani and Co. Restaurant:



Kyani and Co.



Inside Kyani and co.



Menu at Kyani



Fenestration. J



Fresh lime soda

An Interview : A chat with Mr. Boman Kohinoor, Britannia Restaurant in Ballard Estate.

- **Rajarshi:** Some cafes are called Parsi cafes and some are called Iranian cafes. What is the difference?
- Mr. B. Kohinoor: There is hardly any difference. The Iranis and Parsis and the Parsis and Iranis have mixed. The Parsis have come to India from Iran 1275 years ago, and the Irani Parsis have come to India (like my grandfather) 130 or 140 years ago. But we belong to the same community, so the restaurants are practically the same.

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• **Rajarshi:** What are the very special or specific dishes that are offered on the menu as Parsi food ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: Authentic Parsi food or you may say mix of Parsi and Irani food. So authentic Parsi food is Sali boti that is mutton pieces cooked in special Parsi gravy and it is garnished with Sali and eaten with Parsi chapati. Garam garam naram naram Parsi chapati.

• **Rajarshi:** What is Sali ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: Sali means fine chips, kind of finger chips. Fine chips are called Sali.

• **Rajarshi:** The same thing that was served with the Chicken Cutlet ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: Ya.... For Sali boti or Sali chicken ... the chicken or mutton is garnished with fine chips called Sali. Now the other item, which is our signature item, the Berry Pulav, it is a special type of biriyani.

• **Rajarshi:** Is it a special item of Britannia cafe or is it a Britannia special?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: No no no.... it is a Britannia special. It is a combination of Irani Parsi or Irani Indian Biryani.

• **Rajarshi:** I see a dish here called Mishti Doi ... is it a Parsi dish ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: It is a sweet dish to be taken after lunch. Mishti Doi or Caramel or Rum Ball or Chocolate Mousse is the desserts served after lunch. Whoever likes orders it.

• **Rajarshi:** Ya, but Mishiti Doi is a Bengali item....

Mr. B. Kohinoor: Ya true it is a Bengali item, we are preparing it here. We have copied it from there.

• **Rajarshi:** Why suddenly a Bengali sweet item in a Parsi menu ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: Because customers here often ask for curd, so we like to offer them the Mishti Doi. We have copied it from Bengal. So the Europeans and all people like it very much. But of course this comes next best, the best is Caramel Custard.

• **Rajarshi:** The desserts are prepared here only, even the Bengali Mishti Doi ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: Ya, all desserts are prepared here.

• **Rajarshi:** Why the name Britannia ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: My father wanted to start this restaurant, when this restaurant was renovated and decorated; he wanted to get quick permission from the British commissioner, to start it straight away. Those were the days of the British, so he thought of giving it a British name, so that the British municipal commissioner at that time being British on seeing the name Britannia he will grant permission immediately. That was the British era, so that is why he gave the name 'Britannia'.

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• **Rajarshi:** You had another Parsi restaurant called Bastani and Co. Which you had to close down. Why?
Mr. B. Kohinoor: That used to sell no dishes like food but only give snacks. Like Pattice – chicken, mutton, vegetarian and sandwiches, puddings, bread butter brun maska and chai. It was like a tea coffee and snack bar.

There were 4 – 5 partners. When they grew old they retired from business. So myself and my brother, we continued. Now when those people retired their children used to come and trouble us. They would not come to help but they would come to trouble us. They wanted more money, etc. Some were not even eligible for it because in Parsi religion adoption is illegal.

One Irani gentleman who was married did not have children. He brought up one small Irani girl. When the old man died, the girl came and said, “I am adopted by that gentleman, so you take me as partner”. But we said No, your mother will be our partner. So we took the mother as our partner. Then when the mother died she came again and started troubling us. Another partner when became old retired from business. He is much older to me. He has sons. He asked one of the sons to come and help, but he would not come. But every month he used to come and trouble us. He went to court claiming it was his father’s business. So we had to go to court. We went for arbitration.

Both of them were wrong. Adoption was illegal. So the girl who was adopted by that gentleman lost the case. She went to the High court there she lost again. So her share was gone and came to other Parsis.

Then one gentleman was our partner who was benami. Somebody else had invested money and put his name. During British time it was legal but afterwards it became illegal. So the gentleman went to America where his son was there. He appointed one gentleman to come and claim the share. We said he is a benami and is not eligible. So he also went to court and he also lost.

The third one, a very old man, 92 year old. One of his son took his power of attorney. He came and said I do not want to continue but dissolve the partnership. This went on, the arbitration, till about 8 months ago. And I have become very old now, 88 -89 years. My brother is 80 and he would not come to help. So nothing doing. We closed that place, which is close to Metro Cinema. Its 7 years now that it is closed. Now we have put it up in the market for sale.

• **Rajarshi:** We checked out some other Irani restaurants in Bombay like Kyani cafe...

Mr. B. Kohinoor: Ya. Kyani cafe same like Bastani cafe opposite each other. And they are serving tea, coffee, cold drinks and snacks. That’s all.

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• **Rajarshi:** We also checked a place called Free India Restaurant, who have a Zoroastrian symbol in their shop, but now being run by non Parsis. So what is the fate of these Parsi cafes? Are they dying out?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: No no. For example now, my son says I don't want to run. I am tired of this. Then we have got some other competitors. They are called Udupi shops. So they come and they take on royalty. So it is our shop given on royalty to them. So they keep our tradition and continue with Tea and Idli sambar and all those things. As a south Indian cafe they continue.

• **Rajarshi:** How do you look at the new cafes like Cafe Mondegar or Cafe Leopold who have transformed from the traditional Irani cafes ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: They are now Beer bars. They were not like this before. But they have survived. If they had not converted to beer bars, they would not have made profit and like other shops they would have also now closed down. Now, the reason for closing Irani restaurants. There are several reasons. One reason is that when our sons, they become engineers, they become doctors, they become lawyers, they think it is below their dignity to run a restaurant. So they go away and old people cannot run. So ultimately we have to sell. This is one of the reasons.

The second reason was in the 60s and 70s, Iran, where we come from, my ancestors, prospered during the time of the king, the Shah of Iran. And the property prices were rising. So they would sell their restaurants, go back and start constructing on their lands.

The third reason was that we were heavily burdened with taxes. Income tax, sales tax, profession tax. Then came the eating house license. Then we have to pay for disposing garbage, which during British time was free. Then during those days we had to pay nominal eating house taxes, say Rs. 100 a year. Now you know how much I paid last month? Rs. 30,000. Taxes and levies went up. How much can we increase on our food? We are very liberal, we go on marginal profit. And then when we have to pay so much tax, we would naturally sell off our property. Real Estate property has gone up. So we would get more money. My son, who has done Commerce, says if we deposit the money in banks we would get 10%. So calculating thus we make double the profit.

There are buyers, so he wants to sell it off. These are the reasons why these cafes are closing down.

• **Rajarshi:** Recently in an interview with Hindustan Times, you have said that if you get a good bargain you would sell off this place.

Mr. B. Kohinoor: See, I was a partner in four restaurants. This is the only one which has remained. And I have got sentimental values. This was found by my father, and I am not prepared to sell it off. But you see that gentleman at the counter; he is my son. He wants to sell it because he is getting good money. He is putting in labor and he is not getting returns. Real estate prices have gone up, so he wants to sell.

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I am 90 years old now. I will vanish from family affairs. He asks me to sell it, take as much as you want and give the rest to me. Why do you want to work at the age of 90? He is 50 years old. I have another one who is 48 years old, and he is the chef of this restaurant. The younger one is the chef. The older one is managing finance. And I am running between both of them.

• **Rajarshi:** What was Britannia restaurant like when it was started ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: This place was started during the British regime. My father was selling continental food. No masala. No Indian food. No dishes like Masala biriyani or masala food. Only continental type and non spicy. Then slowly after independence we started Mughlai and continental. After that we withdrew the continental and started the Parsi and the Mughlai. This is what we are continuing.

Actually the Parsi dishes were started by my wife. She was a Parsi of the ancient times. My grandfather came 140 years ago. But I married a Parsi girl from my community, who came long back.

• **Rajarshi:** Would you share your recipes with anyone ?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: There are two recipes we would never disclose. One is Berry Pulav and the other caramel custard. These two we won't part. The others we can give. The American ambassador had visited last month. He wanted the recipe for Berry Pulav. I said give me the formula of Coca Cola. No formula for Coca Cola then no recipe for Berry Pulav.

• **Rajarshi:** You have very nice rhyming lines with the food items. Would you please share once more with us?

Mr. B. Kohinoor: I have nice rhyming lines. One is about our favourite drink. That is "Fresh lime soda sweet, to beat the Mumbai heat!". And we have got one more, for Sali boti and Sali chicken; both are Parsi items to be eaten with bread or Parsi chapatti. So I promote our Parsi chapatti by saying "Hot and soft Parsi chapatti, garam garam naram naram".

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The Fading Cafe Business

An Interview: A chat with Mr. Afshin Kohinoor.

• **Rajarshi:** What is your feeling as the third generation running this restaurant ?

Mr. A. Kohinoor: Now I am running this restaurant single handedly. It is nice but it's very laborious. I come in the morning at 7'o clock here. When I finish for the day, I close the shop at 6'o clock in the evening. It's ok.... the show goes on.

• **Rajarshi:** Do you plan to continue with this business ?

Mr. A. Kohinoor: No. I am going to continue only till my father is there. Once my father departs (God forbid), then I am going to close down this place, I am going to sell it off. I am not going to do it myself. Today he doesn't sign, my chacha doesn't sign. I want to sell this place and they say no, till we are around you are going to do it. So I say ok. You all also should work. And so they even come to work.

• **Rajarshi:** Would you want this restaurant to adapt to the new generation of restaurants that people want, something like Cafe Mondegar or Cafe Leopold ?

Mr. A. Kohinoor: You see, Cafe Mondegar and Cafe Leopold, they are basically running on alcohol business, beer business. Those are tourist places. But this place (Britannia) is totally running on mother's recipe. I am a food joint. And my mother's recipe custards, caramel custards, chocolate mousse, the berry puulo, the Sali boti. All these are my mother's recipe. There's a vast difference between Leopold Mondegar and Britannia.

• **Rajarshi:** Do you plan to offer something new on the menu to live up to the changing demands of the people ?

Mr. A. Kohinoor: No. This is the same compressed standard menu which was introduced by my mother in 1982. And this menu is going on till today. Prior to this menu there was a continental menu which was done by my grandfather during the British era.



Mr. Afshin Kohinoor

Courtesy : Author

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Other Prominent Joints

Yazdani Bakery:

This bakery on Cawasji Patel Street was opened in 1953 by Meherwan Zend, a Parsee baker. All the products in this bakery are handmade and baked in diesel ovens. The building where this bakery is housed was originally a Japanese bank. In 2007, Yazadni got a urban heritage award for its early 20th century building. Today, Yazdani bakery bakes around 6,000 Pav-bread buns a day.



Yazdani Restaurant And Bakery

B. Merwan and Co.:

Located off the railway station at Grant Road, B. Merwan and Co. is hardly an Irani cafe today except for the name. Started in 1914 this place has undergone rapid transformation and currently houses a stationary and grocery shop besides the cafe, which serves only tea and omelette to the hungry commuters. One can find bent wood chair from Czechoslovakia and marble table top brought from Italy almost 100 years ago. Craving for a makeover, with the old signages still in place, once can still find the old chandeliers and the family room, which are typical of the Irani cafe.



B Merwan and co.

Design Resource

Irani Cafes of Bombay

Exploring Cafes of the City

by

Rajarshi Ray

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/irani-cafes-bombay/other-prominent-joints>

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Cafe Leopold:

Mentioned extensively in Shantaram by Gregory David Roberts, Cafe Mondegar is located on the Colaba Causeway located across the police station. Established way back in 1871, it started off as a wholesale oil store, and over the years have variously been a restaurant and store, and restaurant and pharmacy. Today it is a multi-cuisine restaurant with a bar on the first level, and serves diverse cuisines like, Indian, Western, Chinese, South American, etc., and beer and alcohol. Cafe Leopold at one pint of time was well known for its dance floor.



Leopold Cafe Gobeirne

Cafe Mondegar:

This is one place where you mix music with beer. Cafe Leopold happens to be the other big cafe at the Colaba Causeway, near to its cousin Cafe Mondegar. This place even after the rapid transformation into a retro spot retains the warmth that one expects from an Irani cafe. The food offered is however far from the original Irani dishes. The interior walls of the cafe were painted by famous cartoonist Mario Miranda.



Wall art at Mondegar



Inside Mondegar

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Mistaken Identities:

Primarily around Colaba and Dhobi Talao areas there are few restaurants with names of Irani origin. As a matter of fact these places are owned by non Parsis, especially Muslims who have little hint, if the property was bought by their ancestors from a Parsi or an Irani Zoroastrian. Daryush and Free India are two such places which are mistaken by many as Irani food joints. Surprisingly, the local people call 'Free India' as an Irani cafe. Conversation with the current owner revealed that his ancestors were from Iran and they followed the Muslim faith.



Daryush



Free India

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