
FROM CURRY TO CLICKBAIT: FOOD PORN, GASTRONOMIC EXOTICA, AND THE POSTCOLONIAL POLITICS OF TASTE IN DIGITAL MEDIA

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Abstract: In today's digital culture, food often travels faster as image than as meal. We scroll past dishes we may never taste, yet we feel them—through colour, texture, and sound. This paper, *From Curry to Clickbait: Food Porn, Gastronomic Exotica, and the Postcolonial Politics of Taste in Digital Media*, explores how online food imagery turns taste into performance and emotion. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Netflix transform the everyday act of eating into a spectacle of pleasure and difference. What we call “food porn” captures this shift: the dripping sauce, the steaming curry, the slow-motion pour—each crafted to excite the eye and stir desire. Seen through a postcolonial lens, this visual culture carries the legacy of the empire. Western creators often frame South Asian cuisines as exotic, chaotic, or “authentic” curiosities, echoing the older patterns of Orientalism where the East was staged for Western pleasure. At the same time, the digital world also hosts acts of reversal. Creators such as Firoz Khan, the Village Cooking Channel team, and chef Asma Khan reclaim this aesthetics to tell stories of memory, migration, and pride. Their work transforms spectacle into care, using the same sensual language to build connection rather than distance. The study draws on thinkers like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Arjun Appadurai, and Sara Ahmed to read food as both affect and ideology—as something that stirs feeling while shaping meaning. In this space, appetite becomes political. Food porn is no longer only about craving; it is about who gets to be seen, who tells the story, and how history lingers in every image of spice and steam. Between parody and pride, platforms like Instagram reveal both the repetition of colonial gazes and the quiet power of self-representation.

Keywords: *food porn, digital media, postcolonial gaze, gastronomic exotica, affect, representation, cultural memory*

Introduction

Food has always meant much more than simply keeping us alive; it is memory, power, and performance. Over time, what and how we eat has been linked with who has power, whose stories get told, and the rules we choose to live by. The smells and tastes that fill our table often carry echoes of empire and migration—from British merchants savouring south Asian curries as souvenirs of power, to families sharing homemade flavours as reminders of lost homelands. Even today taste shapes our lives in a way that goes beyond flavour, helping us connect and sometimes even define ourselves and others. This paper examines food as

a postcolonial medium, tracing the evolution of taste from colonial conquest through global migration to today's spectacles of food porn.

Across historical moments and cultural geographies, eating has been deeply a political act, entangled in the system of class, empire and gender. As Arjun Appadurai states in his essay *Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia*, Food operates as “highly condensed social fact, “encoding a complex set of social and moral propositions” (495). In this sense, to taste is to locate oneself in a moral and material world of exchange. Within this sensory economy, food becomes not only nourishment but narrative, a language of memory, mastery and desire. From the colonial spice routes to algorithmic feeds on Instagram, the politics of taste reveals how culinary practices mediate power between colonizer and colonized, now complicated by the technological empire of digital media platforms where food has become a clickable spectacle embodying both cultural translation and algorithmic seduction.

When British merchants first encountered the dense aromatic world of South Asian spices, the act of tasting became a form of conquest. “Curry”, as a culinary invention of colonial modernity, condensed an immense diversity of regional cuisines into a singular, marketable trope- an aesthetic shorthand for East itself. Throughout the nineteenth century, cookbooks and ethnographic manuals taught colonial subjects and British households alike how to “manage” the foreign through recipes. The Victorian curry powder, a standardized mixture of cumin, coriander, turmeric, and pepper, turned the multiplicity of Indian flavor into a uniform commodity that could travel and endure (Appadurai 495). In this translation, taste was stripped of geography and ritual, reassembled for trade and nostalgia. The colonial table, heavy with imported spices and porcelain, was not merely a site of eating but a performance of mastery.

Postcolonial migration dispersed south Asian, Thai, and Middle Eastern cuisines into metropolitan hubs. Here, “exotic” cuisines promised cosmopolitan adventure, their authenticity marketed through décor, menu language, and the smiling brown waiter whose accent completed the experience. Arjun Appadurai calls this circulation of food “gastro-politics,” a field where power and desire meet in everyday consumption (496). Taste no longer simply reproduced hierarchy; it also offered access to symbolic mobility—the Western diner could perform worldliness by consuming the unfamiliar. Yet the semiotics of difference remained: spice signified heat, risk, and sensuality; blandness implied purity and control.

The idea of “food porn” may sound playful, but it reveals something deeper about our relationships to pleasure, image and longing. In the late 20th century, cookbooks and glossy food photographs became sort of fantasy, food was staged not just for eating, but for being admired. Media critics like Rosalind Coward noticed food styling, especially women's magazines, turned meals into objects of desire while keeping women in the kitchen. This was not about good recipes, but identity all got tangled together in public view.

Social media took this into another level. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, food ceased to be ephemeral. The meal that once dissolved in digestion now lived perpetually as an image, loop, or thumbnail. The hashtag #foodporn, which first trended in the late 2000s, marks this shift. “Porn” in this context does not denote explicit sexuality but rather an aesthetics of excess—slow motion, hyper-color, and intimacy without touch. In these mediated bites, viewers experience what Brian Massumi calls “affective intensity,” a sensation prior to cognition (Massumi,35). Jean Baudrillard calls this kind of image a “simulacrum”- where a copy is even more attractive than the real thing, and we end up craving the photo, not the meal itself. These digital feasts often feel more real than what’s actually on our plates’. The evolution of “food porn” in theory thus mirrors the transformation of global modernity itself. Food porn represents the convergence of affect, commodity and coloniality. When a viewer comments under a Kerala cooking video, “This reminds me of my grandmother”, the effect transcends geography, consumption becomes connection. These digital traces constitute what Alison Landsberg calls *Prosthetic memory*, allowing individuals to experience histories and sensations not their own.

The politics of digital gastronomy therefore cannot be read solely through domination. They must also account for circulation, appropriation, and re-creation. In one Chef’s Table episode featuring Asma Khan, the London-based Indian chef speaks directly to this tension: “I cook the food of memory, not of empire.” Her story reframes visibility as resistance. Against the colonial trope of curry as chaos, Khan’s slow, deliberate plating and storytelling produce what Homi Bhabha calls a “counter-narrative of the nation”—a way of speaking through hybridity rather than against it (Bhaba, 140). The same complexity surfaces in diaspora creators. Accounts like **@lovelaughmirch** on Instagram share recipes not for global validation but for remembrance. A clip of lentils simmering might carry the caption, “This is what my grandmother’s kitchen smelled like.” The post may look simple, but it’s a quiet act of preservation—a refusal to let memory be flattened into a trend. Such creators turn the algorithmic spectacle inward, transforming performance into intimacy. Their food is not meant to astonish but to comfort. Tamil village cooking channels, for example, use drone cameras and bright visuals to show vast outdoor meals and communal cooking. Instead of just catering to global viewers, these stories claim space for heritage and belonging. By mixing familiar digital rhythms- quick cuts, close-ups, hashtags with authentic local traditions, cooks build community and reclaim control over how their stories are seen.

Food porn invites us to feel, but critical engagement asks us to *taste*—to sense history in the heat of the image. When viewers learn to see the “clickbait curry” as both aesthetic and historical, the screen transforms from a surface of desire into a site of reflection. The sizzle of oil or shimmer of syrup can still delight, but that delight becomes layered—with memory, with critique, with care.

The story of food porn is not just about digital indulgence. It's about how we imagine the Other through taste. The colonial table and the digital feed are not separate worlds; they are part of a continuous history of representation and consumption. In both, food mediates power and intimacy. What has changed is the medium: from spice routes to fibre-optic cables, from handwritten recipes to viral reels. In that continuity lies both danger and hope. The danger is that we repeat colonial habits—consuming differences without listening. Food pictures can help us feel home, or long for somewhere we have never been. They can repeat stories of power and difference, or help create new spaces for empathy and creativity online. These contradictions are at the heart of our food culture today— and in every frame, they remain as complex and layered as the flavours themselves. Perhaps that is what it means to move from curry to clickbait: to trace how taste travels, mutates, and returns. Food porn may commodify culture, but it also documents connection. It reminds us that appetite, like history—is never neutral. What we consume, and how we look, matters.

The postcolonial politics of food porn, then, rest on a simple question: can pleasure and awareness coexist? Can we look at a bowl of curry online and see, simultaneously, its beauty and its burden? To do so would be to reclaim taste from the empire of the algorithm to make viewing, not just an act of desire, but an act of understanding. At the same time, the visual economy of digital platforms complicates such resistance. Algorithms privilege brightness, motion, and saturation—the very traits that align with exotic aesthetics. A reel showing the slow bloom of oil in a wok gains more traction than a static image of a quiet meal. This technological bias reinforces what Stuart Hall describes as the “circuit of culture,” where production, representation, consumption, and regulation continually reproduce dominant meanings. The code of visibility itself is colonial, rewarding spectacle over subtlety. Still, moments of rupture exist. During the pandemic, when home kitchens replaced restaurants, social media feeds shifted from opulent spreads to humble routines. Hashtags like #LockdownCooking and #QuarantineBiriyani turned food porn inward. The performance of taste became a language of survival and solidarity. The global audience that once consumed “exotic” street food watched South Asian mothers share dal recipes as care instructions rather than spectacles.

The contemporary politics of taste, then, oscillate between spectacle and sincerity. On one side lies the algorithmic seduction of #foodporn, where curry glows under cinematic lighting; on the other, the affective realism of digital intimacy. Both are products of postcolonial modernity. Food, like the empire that first globalized it, continues to mediate power through pleasure. The difference is that today's empire is not territorial but technological; its colonies are our desires, establishing a new “empire” of multicultural capital.

The Many Faces of Food Porn

When people hear the phrase food porn, they might wonder what it really means. On the surface, it just sounds like beautiful pictures of food. In truth, the term is much more than

a hashtag or a buzzword—it describes a way that food, history, and technology are tangled together today. When we look closely, especially at how food from non-Western countries is shown in digital media, we begin to see how the pleasures of looking are bound to longer histories of power.

Food carries more than just flavour, it carries memories, social meanings. And stories about where we come from and who we are. Food porn” is the most prevalent of several current terms that use the term porn to indicate an aesthetic of excess, such as “organizational porn,” “real estate porn,” “ruin porn,” and “disaster porn.” These examples reveal the generative use of “porn” as applicable to a diverse group of topics that seek to disassociate from pornography’s explicit sexual associations while alluding to its production qualities and focus on vivid details to evoke strong reactions in the viewer. This extension of “porn” is widespread: we have organization porn, where perfectly tidy rooms and color-coded closets give us that satisfying, almost addictive sense of order; real estate porn, with its glossy photos of dream houses designed to make viewers fantasize about a perfect life; and even disaster porn, where dramatic images of catastrophe captivate viewers, sometimes uncomfortably. In each case, the “porn” suffix highlights how media uses intense imagery and storytelling techniques to captivate senses and emotions. The pleasure comes from excess—exaggeration of beauty, order, or drama—that speaks directly to our craving for sensory stimulation. It’s this framework that helps us understand food porn not just as a food trend but as a cultural practice linked to desire and consumption in the visual age.

Food porn stands at the intersection of the visual culture- where the food’s appearance is crafted for maximum sensory impact. The dripping chocolate, slow pull cheese, and intense colours all contribute to a sensory experience that feels immediate yet unattainable. It plays with desire, and imagination, turning food into an object of fantasy more than just nourishment. Food porn emerged in the late 20th century alongside advertising photography, but digital media amplified it into an economy of emotion. Every click, share, or “like” becomes a microtransaction of desire. In this system, the effect itself becomes capital. The algorithm flavours the exaggerated and the colourful because those images keep viewers engaged.



Figure 1; Oreo Chocolate Drip cake (Instagram)

The legacy of the empire still shapes how food is portrayed and promoted online. When dishes like curry, biryani, or street snacks go viral, they often carry traces of how such foods, and the people who make them, have been simplified for global audiences. Western vloggers often film these foods with awe, focusing on the heat, the crowds, or the chaos. Their videos are less about the food itself and more about their reactions. The dramatic editing and language turn everyday eating into a spectacle of difference. This kind of portrayal continues an old pattern that Edward Said described as Orientalism, the tendency to show the East as strange, colourful, and excessive. They use the visual tools—the slow-motion drizzle, the rich colours, the close-ups—but their purpose is different. They show where the food comes from, who cooks it, and what memories live in each recipe. A mother stirring dal, a street vendor sharing his secret spice blend, or a young chef talking about her heritage—these moments are more than just food videos; they're expressions of identity and belonging. Through them, these storytellers push back against older ideas that treated their cuisines as mere curiosities. What emerges from this mix of global and local styles is something new. It's what Homi Bhabha calls hybridity—a space where new identities take shape through encounters rather than imitation. In these videos, food is not simply displayed; it speaks. What was once framed as exotic now feels intimate and

proud. The same visual language that once reinforced the empire is being reshaped to build connection and community.

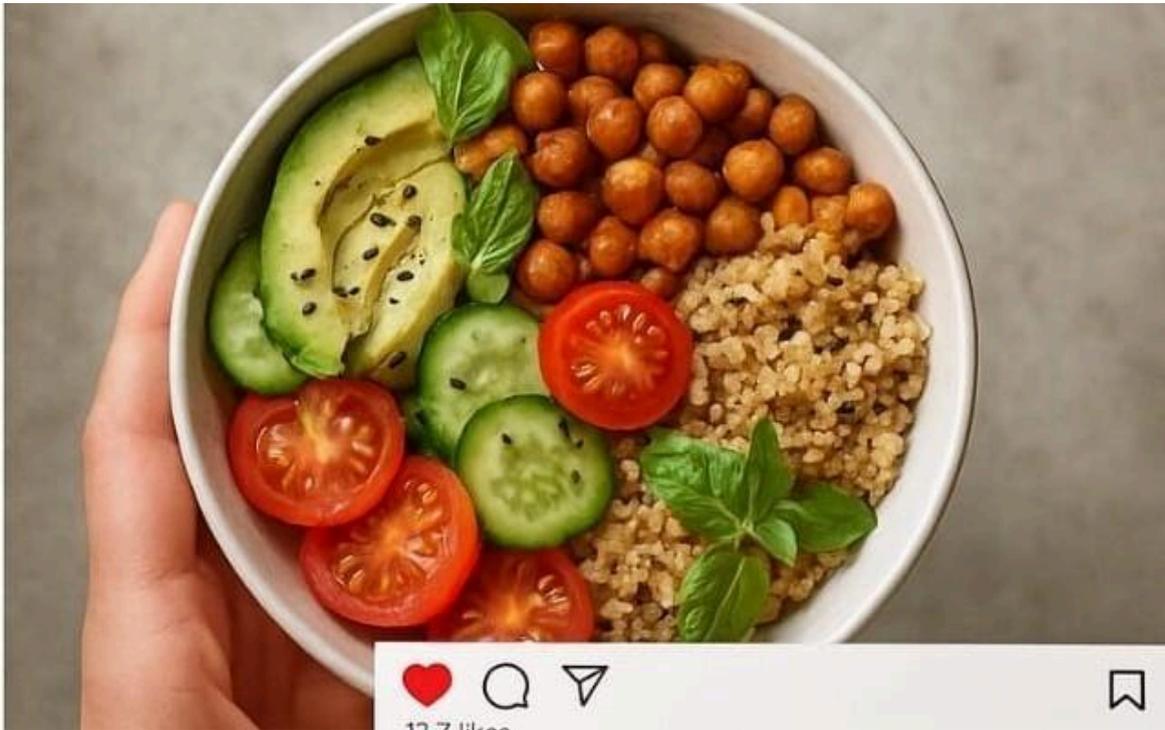


figure 2; cooked chickpeas, sliced cucumbers halved cherry tomatoes and fresh basil leaves all placed over a bed of fluffy quinoa

In the 18th and 19th centuries, European colonizers used food to define both the self and the Other. The East was imagined as a place of sensual excess—of overflowing spice, heat, and desire. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, observed how this language of “flavour” structured the Western imagination of the Orient: sensual, mysterious, and often excessive. Colonies were edible fantasies. The spice trade, cookbooks, and early travel writing all constructed the colonized world as a place that could be tasted but never fully known.

That history lingers. The colonial gaze, once expressed through exploration and travel writing, now finds a home in the digital frame. When a Western YouTuber walks through a crowded Indian market calling it “crazy” or “wild,” the old narrative returns, wearing the sleek mask of entertainment. YouTube channels like *Best Ever Food India*, discovers India’s tastiest treasures, often visit India and other countries to highlight street foods, using words such as “amazing”, “unbelievable”. While meant to express excitement, these terms turn local cuisine into spectacle and emphasize difference rather than genuine understanding.



Figure3: Roti kadi from Chennai. Still from Best Ever Food Review Show (YouTube, 2020), showing the host eating South Indian meals with his hand alongside a local guide in a small restaurant. The banana leaf meal includes rice, sambar, and fried dishes typical of Tamil cuisine.

The moment of the foreigner eating with his hands has become a recurring trope in global food-travel content. It performs humility and curiosity but also dramatizes difference. The local guide becomes a teacher and translator, while the foreigner's body becomes the focus of the camera's attention. The laughter that follows, the host's self-deprecating humour, the local's amusement, and the viewer's delight—turns this simple act of eating into spectacle. It is not the food itself but the host's reaction that anchors the scene.

In colonial travel writing, the foreigner's body was a metaphor for discovery—tasting, enduring, mastering the unfamiliar. Here, the same logic unfolds in digital form: spice and texture become tests of openness; the viewer's satisfaction comes from watching the host adapt, struggle, or delight. The algorithm rewards this spectacle of reaction. The host here,

though central in the frame, becomes the learner. In that inversion lies a possibility of reversal: a moment where the colonial gaze falters, replaced by shared amusement. Still, the structure of mediation—the camera, editing, and platform economics, tilts power back toward the global North. The millions who watch this video do not hear the smells, textures, or histories of the food; they see only the reaction shot. The digital empire of taste converts intimacy into entertainment.

As Sara Ahmed writes, emotions “stick” to objects and circulate through economies of feeling. In this case, the emotion is curiosity, tinged with pleasure and superiority. The viewer feels connected to the host’s adventure but detached from its context. What appears as empathy is often appetite—the desire to experience otherness without consequence.

Thus, this frame from *Best Ever Food Review Show* encapsulates the contradictions of global digital food culture. It performs cross-cultural friendship while rehearsing colonial ways of seeing. It democratizes access to local cuisines while centralizing the outsider’s body as mediator of authenticity. And it turns a shared meal, an act of intimacy, into a spectacle optimized for algorithms. Western food media—programs like *MasterChef*, *Chef’s Table*, and *Somebody Feed Phil* often frame non-Western cuisines through the language of discovery and moral uplift. South Asian, African, and Middle Eastern foods appear as sensory overloads, to be explored, tamed, and appreciated by cosmopolitan hosts. The repetition of this narrative reaffirms who gets to look and who is looked at. Pleasure thus becomes political. The camera’s affection hides its authority.

Despite all the hierarchy’s food becomes the voice of resistance too. The digital media has opened new spaces for self-representation. When local or diasporic creators tell their own stories, they reconfigure the meaning of visibility. The same platforms that amplify exoticism can also amplify authenticity and dignity.

Asma Khan, featured in *Chef’s Table* (Netflix, 2019), embodies this reversal. Her restaurant *Darjeeling Express* in London is staffed entirely by women—many migrants and home cooks. The episode devoted to her is visually sumptuous, yet its effect is gentler than spectacle. Khan speaks of “the food of memory, not of empire.” Her kitchen challenges two histories: colonialism’s appropriation of Indian food and patriarchy’s silencing of women’s labour.

Khan’s visibility also reframes pleasure. Viewers experience not hunger but warmth, not desire for consumption but admiration for community. Visibility becomes advocacy, turning the camera into a witness rather than a voyeur. The difference is not only aesthetic but political. The colonial gaze that once reduced Indian food to “curry” a homogenized flavour for Western palates—is replaced here by a feminine gaze of care. The show resists the logic of *gastronomic exotica*, refusing to turn spice and abundance into spectacle. Instead of fetishizing the foreign, it humanizes the familiar.

The episode's cinematography supports this inversion. Rather than sweeping drone shots or fast edits, the camera stays close to the cooks' bodies. Wrinkles, sweat, and smiles are shown without embarrassment. Pleasure arises from recognition, not from dominance. In contrast to digital *food porn*, where beauty often depends on disembodied surfaces, Khan's kitchen restores the presence of labour. Every dish carries the mark of hands that have known repetition and care. The visual pleasure is still there, the gleam of oil, the golden crust of samosas—but it is grounded in relationship. This re-centring of labour and intimacy challenges both patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. Within professional gastronomy, women, especially immigrant women—rarely appear as authorities. Khan places them at the centre of the frame. The act of cooking becomes a feminist performance of reclamation: the invisible workers of colonial households now narrate their own stories. The imperial kitchen, historically a site of servitude, becomes a site of authorship. The politics of representation thus unfold through emotion. The viewer feels warmth, safety, and respect rather than the voyeuristic excitement typical of global food television.



Figure 4: Asma Khan in front of her Darjeeling Express, Soho

Netflix's global platform packages her story for a transnational audience hungry for authenticity. Yet the series resists turning that hunger into exotic consumption. The camera does not "translate" her heritage into simplified cues for outsiders. The dialogue remains bilingual, and the aromas are described through personal memory rather than culinary

taxonomy. The platform mediates, but it does not distort. In this sense, *Chef's Table* offers a model of how corporate media can be repurposed for ethical storytelling.

The emotional core of the episode Khan's reunion with her mother in India—deepens the argument about affect and postcolonial memory. As the two women cook together, the screen fills with gestures of repetition: cutting vegetables the same way, tasting for salt, adjusting flame. These repetitions signify continuity across displacement. The “pornographic” pleasure of the image steam, spice, shine—is reattached to belonging.

Khan's media presence also troubles the assumption that global success requires Western validation. By maintaining her regional idioms and refusing to anglicize her menu, she asserts culinary sovereignty. Critics have noted that Darjeeling Express's popularity among Londoners arises not from novelty but from honesty—the sense that the food tells the truth of its makers. That honesty translates on screen. When Khan speaks about her team—“These women cook with their hearts; they are feeding the world the way they feed their families”—she transforms hospitality into ethics. Food is a feeling, she says. Food talks about memories. .

Asma Khan's visibility marks a crucial counterpoint to shows such as *Best Ever Food Review Show*. Where the latter frames cultural difference through adventure and reaction, Khan frames it through memory and care. Both rely on sensory pleasure, but the direction of pleasure changes. In *food porn*, pleasure flows outward—from the object to the consumer; in Khan's narrative, it flows inward—toward recognition, gratitude, and repair. This difference illustrates how visual pleasure can either reproduce or resist colonial desire.

Khan's story asks what it means to look with care. The beauty of her kitchen—its colours, textures, and sounds—reminds viewers that sensuality need not imply exploitation. When filmed ethically, food retains its bodily appeal while acknowledging its histories of labor and loss. The episode's final shot—a communal meal shared by the entire staff—embodies this reconciliation. The camera pulls back, showing plates passed hand to hand. No single figure dominates the frame. The pleasure belongs to the collective.



Figure 5: A spread of Indian dishes at Asma Khan’s restaurant Darjeeling Express, London. The image shows rice, roti, dal, lamb curry, paneer, pickled vegetables, and raita arranged in ceramic bowls, photographed with soft lighting.

Digital food media across South India has produced remarkable examples of how local voices use global platforms to tell their own stories. Among them, two stand out for their humanity and craft: the Tamil Nadu-based *Village Cooking Channel (VCC)* and the Malayalam-language creator Firoz Khan, whose *Village Food Channel* documents the flavours of rural Kerala.

Both use the same tools that mainstream “food porn” relies on—drone cameras, vibrant colour grading, slow-motion pours—but they redirect that aesthetics toward community rather than consumption.

In Tamil Nadu, VCC’s group of elderly and middle-aged men cook large meals outdoors, often under trees or beside fields, preparing biriyani, fish curry, and sweet payasam in giant pots. Their videos end with acts of sharing—feeding children, visiting old-age homes, or donating earnings to local causes. The spectacle of abundance becomes a gesture of generosity. Viewers across continents, many from the Tamil diaspora, describe

their content as comforting rather than exotic. What global audiences see as rural simplicity, local viewers recognize as pride.

Further in Kerala, Firoz Khan's *Village Food Channel* expands this aesthetic into a more personal, narrative-driven form. Filming in Malayalam, Firoz cooks traditional dishes such as *kappa biriyani* (tapioca biriyani), *karimeen pollichathu* (pearl spot fish roasted in banana leaf), and *pazham kanji* (traditional kanji) in lush natural settings. His voiceovers are calm and reflective, often mixing humour with gentle storytelling. Each video opens not with high-energy music but with the sounds of Kerala—cicadas, rain, and wind. Unlike the loud editing of mainstream food content, Firoz's pacing feels organic. The viewer watches the fire being lit, the ingredients washed, the curry thickening slowly. He occasionally pauses to explain the dish's regional history or how his grandmother used to cook it. The emphasis is on continuity, not novelty. The affective tone of Firoz Khan's work lies in sincerity. He rarely addresses the global viewer directly; his intended audience seems to be his neighbours, elders, and fellow Malayalis. Yet his channel has reached millions of views worldwide. Migrants from the Gulf and elsewhere comment that his videos make them "smell home" or "hear their childhood." This emotional resonance transforms what might be called food porn into something softer: a visual language of nostalgia and rootedness.

Both Khan and the Tamil Nadu team balance spectacle with authenticity. Their high production values attract global algorithms, but the content remains anchored in local ethics. They understand that the camera can objectify, so they use it to affirm. This careful negotiation between visibility and vulnerability defines postcolonial agency in digital media.

Some Diaspora creators talk about the intimacy of food. Smaller creators on Instagram, such as @lovelaughmirch and @saranshgoila, practice a quieter form of resistance. Their feeds depict home kitchens, simple meals, and personal stories. The tone is intimate, not performative. Captions often recall family members or sensory memories—"My nani's kitchen smelled like this. "Followers respond not with hunger but with emotion: "This reminds me of home. "Memory lives on our tongue", she says . These exchanges illustrate effect as connection rather than commodity. Pleasure here does not erase context; it restores it. Such creators reclaim the digital kitchen as a place of belonging. By slowing the pace and grounding their content in narrative, they resist the algorithm's demand for excess. These creators take the sensual, visually seductive language of food porn and turn it into something human and caring — an aesthetic of love, nostalgia, and connection instead of consumption or domination.

Eroticizing Food: Sex, Sensuality, and Western Influences

The language of food has always been borrowed from the language of the body. Dishes are described as "tempting," "decadent," "sinful," and "indulgent." These words do not simply express taste; they evoke touch, pleasure, and guilt. This overlap between appetite and

sexuality is neither new nor accidental. Food's representation today often crosses over into the language and imagery of eroticism. This is no coincidence. Like sex, eating is an embodied, sensory experience tied to desire, pleasure, and intimacy. Media producers know this and use similar cinematic techniques to create food content that looks and feels sensuous. Close-ups of food dripping with sauce, slow cuts of butter melting, and slurps and sizzles combine to evoke pleasure akin to sexual excitement. This "porn" suffix signals the fantasy aspect of these images—idealized, hyperreal, and often unattainable.

Historically, food and sex have shared metaphors—fruit as temptation, spices as aphrodisiacs—and today this overlap continues in media and culture. Yet this eroticization is not neutral. Feminist critics warn of risks in sexualizing food, including reproducing sexist or racialized stereotypes. For example, the depiction of "spicy" food often racializes cuisines and peoples as wild or dangerous—a colonial trope resurfacing in digital form. At the same time, many female and diaspora creators reclaim the sensual food narrative, using it to celebrate autonomy, creativity, and cultural pride rather than objectification. This reclaiming challenges dominant norms around who controls desire and representation.

Western media's dominance in shaping global food porn aesthetics often means that these sensual frameworks carry Western cultural assumptions and gaze dynamics, sometimes marginalizing or fetishizing non-Western cultures. Food's representation today often crosses over into the language and imagery of eroticism. This is no coincidence. Like sex, eating is an embodied, sensory experience tied to desire, pleasure, and intimacy.

Consider Instagram's #foodporn feed, where dishes are often described as "sexy," "dripping," or "irresistible." The captions mirror the language of flirtation. The images, heavily filtered and color-saturated, treat food as body—highlighting texture, sheen, and curve. The pleasure promised is not nourishment but stimulation. Even the scrolling gesture mimics the rhythm of seduction—anticipation, touch, satisfaction, and repetition. This aestheticization of appetite finds its most explicit form in pages like @donutdaddy, an Instagram account that stages doughnuts as objects of erotic humour and desire. Each post shows close-ups of glossy doughnuts, often held by hands in suggestive poses or dripping with icing. The camera lingers on shine and shape, mimicking soft-core visual codes: dim lighting, slow focus, and intimate framing. The captions double the innuendo—phrases like "gooey perfection" or "come get sticky" deliberately blur the line between appetite and lust.

@donutdaddy's success illustrates how digital platforms commodify not only food but feeling. Its followers are drawn not by hunger but by humour and affect, the thrill of looking at something "naughty" but harmless. Here, the eroticism is playful rather than predatory. The posts are self-aware; they parody both pornography and influencer culture. The doughnut becomes a stand-in for the body, but the exaggeration exposes the absurdity of desire itself. The account thrives on irony, demonstrating how food porn can also be reflexive, even critical.

Yet this irony depends on the same visual conventions that once supported colonial fantasies—the fetishization of surface, the translation of pleasure into possession. What has changed is the object: instead of women or colonized landscapes, it is now the doughnut, the burger, or the molten cake.



Figure:6. clips from Instagram creator @donutdaddy. Each frame turns food into a sensual performance: a shirtless man pours liquid over two watermelons; a hand squeezes citrus and drizzles juice; fingers crush a cherry, releasing thick red pulp. The lighting is cinematic, the framing intimate.

These images demonstrate how digital food culture translates sensual pleasure into performance. The human body and food are entwined within the same aesthetic logic: shine, wetness, close-up texture, and rhythmic motion. The camera caresses the subject, lingering on drips, pressure, and skin. The intention is not nourishment but stimulation—a visual flirtation with appetite. Here, the “pornographic” quality of food porn becomes explicit. The visual cues, bare skin, slow motion, suggestive gestures—borrow directly from erotic cinematography. Food becomes a proxy for the sexual body: watermelons

replace breasts, cherries mimic flesh, and citrus squeezing mimic's touch. These gestures do not conceal their double meaning; they invite it. Pleasure is aestheticized and commodified, stripped of context, repeated for likes and views. In this sense, the account literalizes what most food media implies—that desire can be sold in pixels.

The performance of the male body in these frames also complicates the traditional male gaze. In classical pornography, women's bodies are framed for male consumption; here, a male creator performs desire for a mixed, largely digital audience. His self-objectification is playful, ironic, and monetized. This inversion does not erase power—it redistributes it through spectacle. Desire becomes gender-neutral, market-driven, and endlessly reproducible.

At the same time, these frames crystallize the broader argument of this paper: that digital media reanimates colonial and capitalist structures of looking through pleasure. In colonial travel writing, tropical abundance—ripe fruit, flowing rivers, fertile soil—was eroticized as feminine and available. In these videos, the same metaphors reappear in a new guise. The fruit glistens, overflows, and bursts under pressure. The colonial gaze has become algorithmic: it no longer travels across empires but across screens. Yet its logic remains, the world as something to be consumed visually, its value measured in stimulation.

In contrast, when creators like Firoz Khan or Asma Khan film food, sensuality remains but serves different ends. Firoz's close-up of steam rising from kappa biriyani or Asma's shots of biriyani being served by women in *Chef's Table* evoke touch and warmth, yet the tone is not erotic but affective. These images invite empathy rather than domination. The gaze here is participatory, not possessive. In this way, food porn mirrors the contradictions of the digital age: it is both exploitative and self-aware, intimate and empty. Its power lies in its capacity to make viewers feel something intense and immediate while remaining detached from real contact. That is why the genre endures—it satisfies the emotional logic of modern consumption.

Conclusion

In the endless scroll of digital media, food has become one of the most watched, desired, and shared subjects in the world. It glows on screens, inviting the eye before it ever reaches the tongue. Yet beneath this beauty lies a repetition of older ways of seeing. The camera that celebrates taste often carries the same habits that once shaped the colonial gaze, deciding which foods are exotic, which bodies are authentic, and which stories are worth telling. What was once written through empire is now rendered through algorithms.

This paper has traced that continuity: from the imperial table to the Instagram feed, from the ethnographic lens to the YouTube vlog. In each case, food becomes more than nourishment, it becomes performance, spectacle, and symbol. The eroticism of food porn, the sensual display of dripping sauces and glistening fruit, echoes the language of colonial desire, where the unfamiliar world was rendered edible for distant eyes. Yet within the

same digital spaces, we also see acts of resistance. Asma Khan's kitchen, Firoz Khan's village meals, and countless home cooks on social platforms transform this gaze from possession into care. Their work reminds us that pleasure, when grounded in respect, can be a form of empathy.

The sexualization of food, the act of turning it into spectacle, is not inherently exploitative. What determines its meaning is the direction of the gaze: whether it isolates or connects, objectifies or understands. The same visual grammar that can trivialize culture can also honour it. When the camera lingers on hands that cook, on laughter shared over a meal, it records not consumption but relationship. In these moments, the image feeds rather than empties.

Food has always carried memory, migration, and emotion. In the digital age, it also carries mediation—pixels, filters, and algorithms that shape how we taste with our eyes. The challenge is not to reject this mediation but to humanize it. The future of food media lies not in denying its sensuality but in reclaiming it as ethical sensuality: a way of seeing that delights without diminishing, that savours without erasing. If the empire once organized the world through maps and spice routes, today's empires of attention organize it through screens. But just as taste can cross boundaries, so can empathy. To look at food with care—to see labour, memory, and love within its presentation—is to resist the flattening force of spectacle. The digital table, then, holds a choice: it can reproduce old hierarchies, or it can invite us to eat together differently. When food is filmed not as conquest but as connection, not as fantasy but as feeling, it reminds us of what sustains us. The ethics of looking begins here, with appetite made conscious, with beauty anchored in belonging. Only then does the shimmering surface of digital food become what it has always promised to be: a shared image of being human.

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