MCDONALD'S Maharaja Mac does not figure in The Economist's Big Mac index. Being made of mutton, and not beef, it challenges the premise of purchasing-power parity: that a Big Mac is identical the world over, and therefore should cost the same in all countries. The McDonald's formula, hugely successful as it is, was always going to have to be adapted to a place where killing cows is sacreligious. But burger joints are not the only ones that need to be careful: other western firms tempted by India's growing middle class have had to be sensitive to the country's very definite tastes.

McDonald's, which now has seven restaurants in India, was launched there a year ago. It has had to deal with a market that is 40% vegetarian; with the aversion to either beef or pork among meat-eaters; with a hostility to frozen meat and fish; with the general Indian fondness for spice with everything.

To satisfy such tastes, McDonald's has discovered that it needs to do more than provide the right burgers. Customers buying vegetarian burgers want to be sure that these are cooked in a separate area in the kitchen using separate utensils. Sauces like McMasala and McImli are on offer to satisfy the Indian taste for spice. McDonald's promises to introduce a spiced version of its fries soon.

McDonald's Indian experience has not yet been greeted with rejoicing. Although its expansion has been faster in India than some other Asian countries, such as Indonesia, it has hardly been rapid. Yet, at least the firm has avoided the disasters of some other big American names. A few years back, violent protests in Bangalore in southern India over the quality of its food temporarily closed KFC, which sells fried chicken. Three years ago, Kellogg made a splash pitching breakfast cereals as a healthier alternative to the heavy Indian breakfast. Indians were unimpressed.

Kellogg, facing mounting losses, is now selling to a westernised niche market instead.

Foreign companies have got three things wrong in India. They overestimated the size and disposable income of the much-touted Indian middle class. They underestimated the strength of local products in the markets they were entering. And they overestimated the value of their reputation. Indian consumers seem unimpressed by the glamour of the western brands; food companies are scaling down their plans accordingly.

Others are playing it safe. For years, Wimpy has restricted itself to only a few outlets. Burger King has stayed out of the market altogether. Three years after Heinz went into India by taking over Glaxo's food business, it is still chewing over the idea of introducing Indians to the joys of tomato ketchup. An extra pinch of spice might do the trick.