

CELEBRATING 400 YEARS OF DHAKA

Changing delights of Dhakai delicacies

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

The morning dawned amid loud crow of cocks. Rotiwalahs (bread makers) prepared their tandoors one after another with flames dancing over... There were not many clocks to know the time... Rain or shine, the sizzling flames of tandoors in the alleys announced the start of the day... As long as my memory goes, the Dhaka dwellers always relished freshly baked bakarkhani for breakfast...

This is how Hekim Habibur Rahman in his book "Dhaka pachash barash pahley" (Dhaka 50 years ago) painted the mornings in Dhaka and the first meal of the day.

Published in 1945 originally in Urdu the book gives detailed accounts of the variety of food items savoured by the Dhaka natives during his days -- from 1880s to 1940s -- along with delicate ways of food preparation and the stylish presentation.

Hekim described the thin, crisp bakarkhanis that melts in the mouth, soft shirmal and naan roti, the spicy fragrant biriyani, pilau, the legendary shutti or persande kebab, handi kebab, boti kebab, taash kebab, shami kebab, nargisi kebab, kofta and korma, spicy yoghurt drink burhani, the sheer-e-faluda, firni, jarda and many more scrumptious items that tantalized the hearts of everyone.

During the long historic course of 400 years, Dhaka's cookery has gone through many transformations.

Historian Prof Muntasir Mamoon recounts some of the memories from his childhood. "During my childhood in 1950s and 60s a zest of what Hekim described left its trail with some kind of transformation," he said.

"We used to start our day with glasi made with paya (a broth made from leg bones of goats or cows). Bakarkhani or chapatti accompanied glasi. Bakarkhanis always came fresh from the tandoor. We loved morog polao for lunch while biriyani was a dish of the evenings," Prof Mamoon



From left, Bakorkhani and Sutikabab, two famous delicacies of old Dhaka.



noted. "Young boys and girls loved to munch on kutti biscuits fresh from tandoor. Kutti just made its debut few years back. And the piping hot malai tea worked as energiser."

Prof Mamoon observed that Dhakai food does not have a distinctive identity like many other cuisine. Within the course of time the Persians, Turks, Arabian, Armenians, Portuguese, British and others came to this part of the world either to conquer or simply for business. They all brought culinary delights from their part of the world.

"What we know as Dhakai food today is actually a fusion of these culinary heritage with a blend of local recipe and spices added by the cooks and housewives," he said.

"The delectable names that we hear are basically introduced by the aristocrats of those era. Most of these items are very much meat based. Their recipes were slowly adapted by the mainstream population as they became affordable later," Prof Mamoon said.

Delwar Hossain, one of the

editors of Banglapedia and a researcher for Asiatic Society gave details of the many influences Dhakai food went through during the last 400 years.

He categorises four different eras that left their marks in Dhakai cuisine. First, there was the Buddhist and Hindu era when people preferred vegetables. But it was before the establishment of Dhaka. The Aryans after that introduced meat to Dhakai cuisine. They also brought ghee or clarified butter to this continent.

Then came the Mughal Sultanate period when the Turks, Persians, Arabs, Afghans, residents of parts of the central Asia came along with bakarkhani, shirmal, biriyani, pilau, kalia, korma, dolma, variety of kebab, bundia, sheer-e-faluda. This was followed by the British coming up with their club food, Hossain informed.

Tashkabab is possibly an Armenian food. The bakery culture is an influence of the Portuguese. Kashmiri food also had its influence on Dhakai cuisine through the Nawabs.

Religious establishments and

army barracks of different colonial periods played a role in introducing multicultural recipes, Hossain mentioned.

"However, the identity of Dhakai food spread out during the past 400 years or more is slowly becoming indistinct. People who inherited the recipe no longer exist. Recipes have gone extinct or distorted. People's taste has changed over the years," said Prof Mamoon.

Ramadan brings back bits and pieces of the memory along with some of the traditional items. People from different parts of the city still go to Chawkbazar in Ramadan to savour the remnants of traditional delicacies that old Dhaka still has to offer, he added.

Zarina Sayeed, 58, a resident of Gopibagh still recalls the aroma of her mother's cooking that used to attract the neighbours. "I grew up in Chawkbazar area. In those days the food gave out a pleasant aroma during preparation. Fragrance of my mother's cooking used to find its way to the streets and houses of our neighbours."

The aroma is absent in today's Dhakai food, lamented Zarina

who used to operate a cooking school for girls in 1970s from her Gopibagh home.

"Essentials and ingredients required for cooking such dishes found in the market these days are mostly adulterated. Dhakai cooking also requires time and patience. People these days don't have that much time to spend in the kitchen. So the recipes are vanishing slowly," added Zarina who tried passing on her knowledge to the next generation.

Today the city dwellers crave for pizza, burger, French fries, cola drinks, sandwich, chicken wings, rolls, icecream and more. The new part of the city has countless new restaurants offering variety of exotic dishes.

"This is basically an influence of globalisation which remixed many recipes and eating habits in Dhaka. This is the present trend and it is ongoing," said Delwar Hossain.

Yet many traditional dishes still survive within the labyrinthine alleys of old Dhaka. 'Hajir biriyani' at Alauddin Road still attracts thousands. Then comes Nanna Miah's morog polao available at Becharam Deuri.

Fakruddin's biriyani is still one of the top choices in weddings.

Bakarkhani may be a little lumpy and chewy these days instead of being crispy like the original ones but they still appear quite frequently inside the glass cases of many stores. Glasi is available in Star restaurant at Thataribazar and Al-Razzak in Bongshal while shutti kebab can be found in Royal restaurant, Lalbagh and Ananda bakery in Chawkbazar.

Dhakai delicacies that still tickle the taste buds are jali kebab, irani kebab, gorda kebab, fish kebab, beef-kima, beef chap, boti kebab along with Kashmiri paratha, nan-khatai, nan-ruti, moghlai paratha, beef-kopta, kalia, jhal kochuri, shahi halim, pilau, shingara, faluda, makhna, bundia, nimok para.

And the love affair with Dhakai food is not complete unless one savours the street food, considered as the common mans' buffet. Street food items like fuchka, chotpoti, ghogoni, velpuri, hawai mithai, jhal muri, roasted peanuts and maize, chhola are available throughout the year anywhere in the city.

STAR PHOTO

From top, biriyani, faluda and lassi rule the list of food connoisseurs in the old part of the city.

Middle class moving to superstores

DURDANA GHIAS

Traditional kitchen markets in the city have started losing a big chunk of their middle class customers to the growing number of superstores.

There was a time when shopping monthly kitchen items was a routine for most middle class families. But the picture is changing with the change of time. Many families now prefer shiny superstores to kitchen markets because of nice environment, fixed price, good weighing system, reliable items and other facilities.

"I rarely go to the kitchen market these days because I can buy almost everything from the superstores. I don't have to walk in the mud nor do I have to bar-

gain with the salesmen and I am getting the accurate weight. It is true that I am paying a bit more than what I used to pay at the kitchen market. But that is ok with me since I am getting a good service here," said a resident of Dhanmondi.

Many people feel at ease at department stores because they can buy varieties of items including essentials from one place.

"I like shopping at superstores because I can move my handcart comfortably and pick things myself -- from groceries to stationeries," said a housewife at Mohammadpur.

But majority of city dwellers still depend on kitchen markets. Because, many of them are renowned for their stock of fresh fish and vegetables.

"I buy vegetables from Karwan Bazar. There are no superstores in my area so I do not go there on a routine basis. Seldom I go to the superstores," said Nasima Khanam, a resident of Basabo.

Many women and girls who have to go for the monthly shopping prefer superstores because of their safe and hassle-free environment.

"It is uncomfortable to buy meat, fish and vegetables from the kitchen market in the midst of men and mud. But at these superstores girls and housewives can go there alone and even at night," said Saushan, a resident of Gulshan.

"Besides, all the items have price tags and you do not have to bargain," she said.

"Had there been no such place I would not have gone to traditional markets ever for buying meat, fish etc," she added.

Many like the superstores because it is hygienic and almost all kinds of food are well-preserved.

"There are all kinds of food and fruits available. Even at some stores I can buy sari, cosmetics, clothes and crockery. Sometimes you get rare fruits here which are not available in kitchen markets. Once I bought a raincoat from a superstore. It was far better than any in ordinary markets," said a young man while shopping at a superstore at Dhanmondi.

"Here I can compare and choose items of famous brands. In other markets I may end up buying fake and date expired

items but this is most unlikely in the superstores. But for fresh fish and vegetables I think the traditional kitchen markets are the best places. I have some bad experiences in buying these items from the superstores," said a service holder while buying vegetables at Karwan Bazar.

There are a good number of superstore chains in the city now but the main problem the customers face is the lack of parking spaces.

"Nowadays several superstores have mushroomed in the neighbourhood but many of them do not have any space for parking cars," said a customer at Shantinagar.

Faizul Haque, operation executive, Rahimafrooz Superstore Ltd, popularly known as Agora, the first superstore in the city, said from the very beginning they received a positive response from their customers.

"We started with a single outlet in Dhanmondi in August 2001 and since then we have been receiving a tremendous response from the people. Every day thousands of people visit our three outlets in the city," said Faizul.

"The idea came in order to help develop the society. Today there are many people who do not have time to go to kitchen markets. They can now go shopping at night. Besides, it is a hassle for the housewives to dodge round kitchen market. Here they can walk and buy safely and comfortably," he said.

About vegetables he said they collect them from their own sources in the villages.

"If things go alright then one day we hope most of the people will avoid kitchen markets. This is one step towards the westernisation of the urban," he said.

The other notable superstores in the city include PQS, Family Needs, Family World, Almas, Nandan, Pacific etc.



STAR PHOTO

Pushing the handcart and picking things at superstores are now a part of life for many city dwellers.



STYD ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Mindless parking of private cars and other vehicles block half of a lane in a busy street at Motijheel causing serious traffic jam. Reckless driving of public buses and unruly rickshaws just worsen the situation. This has become a regular feature in the area as most of the highrises lack enough parking spaces.