Pack of Value

Seventy-year-old Khalilur Ahmed has attended at least 30 *Mezbans* in his life. A trader in Chittagong, Khalilur's family has also organised quite a few mezbans. "We, Chittagonians value ties of kinships above everything. *Mezban* is a reflection of our togetherness."

The main dish of *Mezban* is its fiery and fantastic beef. The meat is braised with chef's secret combo of pepper, cumin, *garam masala* and other herbs.



Khalilur said it right: *Mezbans* are meant to be shared with family. It bears the age-old tradition of Chittagong hosting guests with great generosity and without drawing any line between the poor and affluent. In a *Mezban* everyone sits side by side and shares the same meat bowl.

The culture, practised for hundreds of years, also reflects the Chittagonians never ending respect towards their ancestors and their fear of God and the afterlife.

Even though the concept originated from the religious minded Muslim families, gradually it became a one-day food fair for the people of all religions. The mammoth arrangement of *Mezban* reflects the sense of unity and an egalitarian approach towards life. It also gives us the opportunity to socialise by going beyond our comfort zone.

Not every bird in a flock acts the same way. Chittagong has also experienced *Mezban* which can be called nothing but a money show. There are examples when affluent people has organised *Mezbans* in order to display the power of their wealth. There are those who indulge themselves in the unhealthy competition of "if his *Mezban* has 10 cows, I will sacrifice 20."

When people sidetrack the key objective of *Mezban* which is to respect the togetherness and to pray and commemorate the ancestors' departure, *Mezban* loses half of its beauty.

"It is a social gathering, the most cordial and welcoming food festival anyone could think of. It is important that we show our highest hospitability, not our money," Khalilur ends.

Beyond boundary

In a time when we are getting exposed to newer and hipper eateries almost every three months, *Mezban's* appeal remains timeless. Something Chittagonians could certainly boast of is that their chef's recipe is in high demand not only in other parts of the country, but also outside of Bangladesh.

Because of its popularity, Dhaka hosts quite a few Mezbans. Chittagong Samity-Dhaka has been organising this mass gathering since 80s. "We organise *Mezban* for around 30,000 people every year," informs Mohiul Islam Mohim, general Secretary of Chittagong Samity-Dhaka. "The arrangement involves a hectic preparation and dedication of all the organising committees. We form 11 committees who are given different responsibilities starting from buying the best cows, inviting all the guests to ensuring that everyone can enjoy their meal wholeheartedly."

Standard Chartered Bank (SCB), Dhaka also arranges *Mezban* for its corporate clients and every other stakeholders. Started in 2011, the SCB makes this arrangement for around six thousand people. "This is a meeting place which is not confined to any social classes or official ranks--starting from the junior officers to the managing director, everyone comes to share this meal. This initiative is highly appreciated among all the invited guests," informs Abrar Anwar, Managing Director of Client Coverage, SCB.

A festival worth going again and again

Mezban offers a way to bond with people over a spiciest meal. It is a real treat where no one will check on how much you are eating. *Mezban* is majestic, but it does not claim sophistication neither do you need to quietly put a serviette on your lap.

All you need is to grab a chair and become the beef lover that you perhaps are. ■