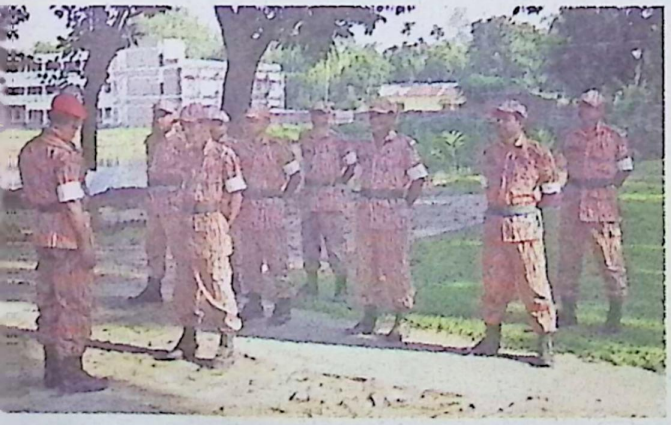
other side of 50, 'doesn't want to say just now.' You'll understand it's hardly likely this culinary inventor was going to divulge the entirety of his secret recipe for kheer, that sweetened, thickened milk used in several Bangladeshi dishes.

He did say however – a little tip – that there's no sugar in it and the slower the milk cooks the greater the sweetness retained. Kumar-kheer requires six hours of boiling and stirring.

There's history in that fire – in Kurigram town it's universally acknowledged the finest *kheer mahan*, that type of sweetmeat, comes from Ulipur. And in Ulipur the recommended shop name is likely to be Pabna Sweets. Sunil, originally from Belkuchi Upazila in Pabna, has passed on business and culinary secret to his thirty-year-old son Sanjid. They've been making *kheer mahan* for twenty-five years – indeed, Sunil says he invented it.



Three generations of the Kumars, Sanjid with his son on the left, Sunil on the right at home amidst the day's *kheer mahan* production. PHOTOS: ANDREW EAGLE



Morning roll call at Ulipur fire station – don't worry, guests don't need to attend.

Kheer mahan, the finished product, is an elongated ball of that fresh, unripened curd cheese called *chhana*, made in a process similar to ricotta. The milk is boiled, curdled with a small amount of whey, and the resulting coagulated curd is collected, wrapped in cloth, strained, beaten and kneaded until it becomes firm and smooth. The lengthened ball of *chhanna*, when draped in the attire of the Kumars' kheer, takes on an altogether new dimension of delicious.

It won't surprise you that *kheer mahan*, both the Kumars' and the many versions from other kitchens, are sold all across Ulipur. You'll see in the main street an oversupply of *kheer mahan* vendors.

Sunil Kumar first learnt the sweetmeat trade at a shop in Dinajpur where he refined his skills on all manner of sweets – *cham cham, rasgulla, rajbogh, chhana jalebi* – before he got creative. His innovation starts with an idea that slowly cooks and curdles in his mind – then there are experiments before the new variety emerges. These days his imagination has grown big – you'll understand as he explains his 'atomic bomb' project. A single piece of this industrial-sized sweetmeat, perhaps in the shape of a fish or a boat, can weigh several kilograms. His first atomic bomb involved a 2.5 kilogram *chhanna* armament sent to Dhaka for somebody's birthday.

His son Sanjid meanwhile dreams to expand the business that currently sells 15-20 kilograms of kheer mahan per day. The problem is finance – and Sunil's atomic programme suffers similarly from a lack of capital.

Yet according to Sunil the most important factor in running a successful sweetmeat business is cleanliness – high hygiene standards bring customers back.

Back at the fire station you'll be hearing of the rough driveway and the five turns down narrow laneways that the truck has to negotiate before reaching the main road. Vital seconds are lost and it's disheartening for the fire fighters, well-equipped and ready to be on-truck within thirty seconds. They've written letters but it came to nothing.

And the leading cause of Ulipur fires? It's cows kicking over the mosquito coils their owners thoughtfully placed in the barn of an evening to keep livestock well-rested and comfortable. Cows don't understand much about fire.

Meanwhile Sohel – another fire fighter – is on his way back to the station from a home visit in Rangpur. He's excited, his head is buzzing because his colleagues have told him to expect a new 'team member' on his arrival. Who could it be?

Now that you're satisfied with a good helping of *kheer mahan*, a final word of warning: it might be best not to mention Ulipur's atomic bomb programme – it's not a good world we live in – weapons of mass destruction – there are those who wouldn't hesitate to launch a military strike before discovering that Ulipur's atomic programme is milk-based. ■