"We cater to weddings and other ceremonies. At one wedding we supplied 6000 pieces of *paan*," boasts Taslima Akhter. "We have a lot of famous people among our regular customers such as film stars Ferdaus, Anwara and Chompa."

The store is air-conditioned and well organised: When you enter you are greeted with a welcoming smile. Taslima hands you the menu and if you are a newcomer she will recommend something that suits your mood and taste. Once you have given the order, she slips to the "*paan* maker" a token that is specific to a particular item. The tokens also help with accounting: it's easy to figure out at the end of the day how many *paans* have been sold and what kind.

Mohammad Akbar is to *Paan-Supari* what a master chef is too an upscale restaurant. Sitting in lotus position, wearing a cap when he starts folding the betel leaf, you know that you are in for a treat. He has learned the art from "Ustad" Ibrahim and has been working here for 9 years. "Although *paan* has some health hazards, our sweet *paan* has none. Ingredients such as *Gulkan* (made from the petals of the rose), raisins, coconut flakes, honey, cherry, almonds and dates are good for your health." Tripti Kar, a former resident of Dhanmondi, who enjoys a sweet *paan* from time to time, says it is light and does not leave a bad taste in your mouth.



The *paan*-maker is to *Paan-Supari* what a seasoned chef is to an upscale restaurant. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Inside the cozy shop, Akbar folds betel leaves for a steady stream of customers from 11am to 11:30 pm. "We sell about 100 to 200 pieces every day. On a busy day the sale may reach even 500." Behind where he sits hangs a portrait of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and his beloved wife Mumtaz, both admirers of sweet *paan*. Legend has it that when Mumtaz swallowed the red saliva produced by *paan*, people could see the blood-like saliva going though the veins of her throat. That's how fair she was, people say. Our *paan*-maker, unaware of the legend has at least one connection to all this: He shares his name with Akbar the Great, the Mughal emperor and grandfather of Shah Jahan.

A lot of young women who try it for the first time want to make their lips red. "For that I put *khoyer* (cured tobacco), *chaman bahar*, lime, and betel nut in it."

The *Borhani* and the mouth freshener are bottled and packaged with the company brand name on them. Unless you see their operation, it is hard to believe that something like *paan*, usually sold at small roadside stalls in Bangladesh could be so well presented to its admirers.

So who came up with the big idea? "Although *paan* has for hundreds of years been a part of our culture, it has met a demise in the urban life," says Kona Reza, CEO of *Paan-Supari*. "I wanted to introduce it to the young people." Reza is an entrepreneur and wife of Faridur Reza Sagor, managing director of Impress Telefilm Ltd and Channel i. In 2008, *Paan-Supari* participated in a trade show titled "Made in Bangladesh Trade Show" in New York. She herself folded *paan* for customers of different nationalities like Americans, Canadians, Chinese, Indians, Pakistanis and expatriate Bangladeshis who all loved it. "It was an amazing experience to be able to represent my country with something as simple and traditional as this. If someone looks at it as merely a business, it will not work. You have to have a passion." She says her biggest satisfaction is that by working at the four branches of the store, 40-50 people have been able to raise their standards of living for their family members. "Most of them have been able to send their children to schools and colleges. Ibrahim's son goes to a university."

She hopes to open outlets in the domestic airport in Dhaka and Jamuna Future Park soon. "We also want to expand into other cities like Sylhet and Chittagong. The biggest challenge I face is all spices and ingredients have to be brought from India."

Paan-Supari has happy employees, the most valuable asset a company can have. "When our madam (Kona Reza) comes to visit, we feel happy. She treats us like family," says Akbar. And who doesn't know that happy employees mean happy customers?

Shawkat Ali stops by *Paan-Supari* at Dhanmondi two or three times each week to pick up the sweet treat for his wife. It is a two-hour round-trip drive from his house in Shyamoli. "The happiness I see in Ayesha's face just after she has eaten a sweet *paan* is worth all the trouble." ■