

READER'S CHIT

Joys of Jamaica

Do not confuse the title with Jamaica, the island country in the Caribbean. This Jamaica is a neighbourhood in Queens, the New York City borough, which often claims to be one of the most ethnically diverse places on earth.

Jamaica is a neighbourhood where you spot 'desi' men and women speaking Bangla on the streets, women wearing shalwar kameez buying grocery from Bangladeshi-



owned stores, and where Bangladeshi restaurants sell everything from shingara -samosa, to naan-paratha, halua, kebab, and biryani. Also available are traditional sweets, 'bharta-bhaji' and an incredibly wide variety of spicy and aromatic fish, and meat preparations that are bound to satisfy the taste buds of any Bengali.

I first explored Jamaica in 2013 on a New York City trip with my husband and nine-month old daughter. As I strolled along Jamaica's Hillside Avenue, I turned my head to see anyone who spoke my mother tongue. It felt like I was at home except that in Dhaka you do not turn your head to find a voice, if it speaks Bangla.

It was a hot and humid summer day and a middle-aged Bangladeshi man was selling mangoes in front of a shop and shouting "mango, mango, sweet mango, very sweet mango!" I smiled; there was something amusing about the way he was trying to draw his prospective customers' attention!

A group of young Bangladeshi men were smoking and chatting loudly on the pavement – they reminded me of how young men gather around small and often dingy tea

stalls in Dhaka. There were rows of shops that piled all sorts of fruits and vegetables outside on the pavement. Passersby stopped to check the price, smell and texture of mangoes, persimmons, strawberries, eggplants, spinach and bottle gourds.

After we thought we had had enough of walking with an infant in a stroller, we set foot in Sagar Restaurant, which is



perhaps the most popular Bangladeshi eating place in Jamaica.

Many Bangladeshi immigrants visiting New York City make time to eat at least one meal in this famous 'desi' restaurant.

We had heard of Sagar from our friends and relatives in NYC and we thought that our trip to the Big Apple would remain incomplete without a meal at this popular eatery.

A waiter wiped a table clean for us and had us seated. We ordered mutton biryani and a preparation of chicken. It was the first time in five years that we ate anything that had an authentic Bangladeshi flavour. Although we ate biryani at various South Asian restaurants in different U.S. states, they never tasted like the ones prepared in Bangladesh by Bangladeshi chefs.

We have visited Sagar many times after our first visit. We go there every time we are in NYC, we go there to eat lunch or breakfast over paratha, halua and savoury milk tea. The restaurant's interior now looks much better than it did in 2013, which makes it more inviting than before.



After a delicious meal, we stepped out of Sagar to explore the other 'desi' establishments. It was then when we spotted a shop by the name Premium Sweets. Inside the shop, shelf after shelf displayed traditional Bengali sweets. I saw laddoo, monda, sandesh, mohonbhog, roshogolla, kalojam, chomchom, doi, and much more. There were different kinds of sweet and savouries too, similar to the kinds sold at the confectionary stores in Bangladesh. Our faces broke into grins at the sight of so many 'desi' delicacies under one roof.

Today, we try to pay at least one visit to Jamaica whenever we are in New York City. Be it for breakfast at Sagar Restaurant, or a box of sandesh from Premium Sweets, or meat and frozen Bangladeshi fish from Mannan Supermarket, Jamaica is a neighbourhood that reminds me of my home country, its people, and its good food.

By Wara Karim

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