

SPECIAL FEATURE

Bangladesh cuisine part 2-- delectable and diverse

PREPARATION OF FISH DISHES:

In addition to the iconic Hilsa, the other varieties of fish that are popular in Bangladesh include, Rui, Katla, Ayre, Chitol and Pangash and a wide variety of smaller fish species like Koi, Pabda, Shorputi, Rupchanda, Tengra, Telapia, Kachki, etc. These varieties of fish constitute the principal palate of the Bangladeshi cuisine. Preparing the most delectable dishes with these is an art, and makes our cuisine special. Shorshe Ilish (Hilsa), Ilish Patura, Magur machher jhol, Koi machher tok mishti bhuna, Kachki machher chorchori, Rupchanda bhaja, Muri Ghonto, Rui machher dopeyaja, and Chitol machher kofta are among the most popular fish dishes.

Bangladesh also has its share of patisserie items--sweets and desserts. These are broadly listed below.

PITHAS

Pithas are the principal form of patisserie item and a part and parcel of traditional food culture of Bangladesh. Pitha is a Bangla word that refers to rice cake. Although it is not part of the daily menu, its popularity is universal. Some pithas are strongly associated with the harvest festivals such as Nabanna and Poush Parban, while others are equally popular all year round.

The most common ingredients of pitha are sunned rice or wheat flour, molasses/gur or sugar, coconut and oil. Sometimes fruits – mostly jackfruit, palm, coconut and banana are also used in preparing some kind of pithas. These pithas are named after the fruit they are made with. Some pithas are nationally known and familiar to all. Meat and vegetables are also used in preparing some pithas such as Puli pitha and Shabji (vegetables) pitha.

The most common and popular pithas that are well known throughout Bangladesh are Chitoi pitha, Patishapta, Pakan pitha, Bhapa pitha, Andosha, Kulshi pitha, Pata pitha, Jhuri pitha, Muthi pitha, Teler pitha, Puli pitha, Beni pitha, Dudher pitha, Gokul pitha, Chui Pitha, Rosher pitha etc. Most of the pithas are seasonal, prepared specially in winter because the major ingredients are available only in this season. Pithas are usually sweet but there are also savoury varieties.

SWEETS

Sweetmeats of Bangladesh are mostly milk based and consist of several delights including rosho-golla, shondesh, rosh-malai, golap-jaam, kalo-jaam, chom-chom, jilepi, amritti, shonapuri, kacha-golla and many others. The other



popular sweet items include khaja and goja, barfi (mostly made from coconut), morobba (sweet pickle of some vegetables). There is also the wide range of halwas made from papaya, carrot and but-er dal (chickpeas). Phirni (rice pudding), jarda(rice based) and shemai (vermicelli) more or less complete the range.

The most popular snack is Muri, or puffed rice. It is eaten either by itself or with dried molasses. It is a routine item in the rural household.

DRINKS

Green coconut water is the favourite when served fresh. Sugarcane juice is also commonly available in the season as a refreshing drink. Lebur (lime) sharbat, prepared with water, sugar and lemon, is a very common drink all over Bangladesh and is sought after during the hot and humid days of summer. Lassi is a refreshing yogurt drink served mainly in the urban areas. Borhani is also a savoury yogurt served as a drink mostly at weddings.

FESTIVALS

Although Bangladeshi culture consists of many festivals due to its cultural and religious diversity, their culinary

influence is limited mainly to Pahela Baishakh, which is the Bangla New Year, and the two Eids.

Pahela Baishakh is the first day of the Bangla calendar and it is also the first day of summer. On this particular day the whole country is caught up in a festive atmosphere. A special dish prepared to honour this day, in the recent years, is panta-illish. This dish consists of rice soaked in water and fermented overnight, and served with slices of fried hilsa fish, roasted dry chilies, onion and pickles.

The two Eids are the biggest religious festivals for the majority Muslim population. The celebration of Eid ul-Fitr, coming after thirty days of fasting, has become a most important part of the culture of Bangladesh. This is the most festive time of the year for most people. Eid specialties are Shemai, Phirni, Chotpoti, Shami Kebab, Pulao, Korma, Rezala, Roast, etc.

The second Eid, Eid ul-Adha, is similar to the first in many ways. The only big difference is the Qurbani or sacrifice of domestic animals on this occasion. Beef and mutton based dishes become overwhelming favourites during Eid-ul-Adha.

FRUITS

Traditionally, fruit is not considered a big part of cuisine in Bangladesh and is not served with daily meals. However, a diverse variety of fruit grows and is available all over the country—like the national fruit Jackfruit, Mango, Litchi, Guava, Blackberry, Banana, Papaya, Coconut, Pummelo, Lemon/Lime, Rose apple, Custard apple, Koromcha, Bel/Wood apple, Tamarind, Pomegranate, Longan, Olive, Date palm, Wax apple, Water-chestnut, Pineapple, Watermelon, Bilimbi, etc.

One can talk endlessly about the diversity of the Bangladeshi cuisine and the variety of its forms of preparation. For me as an enthusiast of all things culinary, and possessed as I am with an irrepressible passion for traditional Bangladeshi flavour, I would seek to preserve the taste of Bangla cooking while refining the presentation of the dishes. I believe the ingredients should speak for themselves and when the end product is outstanding, saying less can mean more.

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