

FOR THE LOVE OF FOOD

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# Calcutta Stories – a tale well told

I got to know of Calcutta Stories through Facebook.

It is one of the newer restaurants in South Calcutta, celebrating the food of the people who came from all over and made Calcutta home.

Many of my friends were saying good things about it.

So one evening we decided to check it out.

Went down to Keyatala Road and found the place quite easily, thanks to the brightly lit sign outside.

What's with eateries and narrow staircases?

This had one too.

Climbed up to an empty room where very eager waiters ushered us in our seats.

The menu told us a happy story.

The story of immigrants in Calcutta.

Enough is said about the immigrant

culture of Mumbai and New York and

London and lately Paris, but not much is

ever said about the people who came to

Calcutta and made this home.

Tells me that with a few exceptions they were welcomed and have been able to be an integral part of the city and its culture.

No talk about the assimilation, none of the cultural diversity that Calcutta has to offer.

Only a general crib about how the demography of Calcutta has changed and how a good 'Bangali' measures his success by his distance with Calcutta.

Calcutta Stories highlights a lot of the people who made Calcutta what is it today.

Where would Calcutta be if not for the thriving Chinese population that created tanneries, became dentists and introduced us to noodles?

How would New Market be without the definite Jewish touch of Nahoum's?

Would biryani be the same for Calcutta had Wajid Ali Shah not set up domicile

here?

There are individual stories as well.

The story of an Albanian nun making this city her own.

The story of the European couple Mrs. and Mr. Flurys who gave Calcutta an institution.

The less celebrated story of the Hungarian trapeze artist, a certain Mr. Kalman who gave Calcutta possibly its first cold cut shop.

The even less celebrated story of one Allen of Scottish origin who, as a reward of loyalty, gifted his shop to a Bengali gentleman. The eponymous shop later moved from Chitpore to Shovabazaar and has become a destination for cutlets.

Calcutta Stories try their best to highlight the food that the immigrants brought in. Armenian, Jews, Anglo Indians, Parsis, Mughals, Punjabis.

Is the food brilliant? Different, yes. Outstanding, no. I had a Jewish platter and I tried an Armenian platter that had a



chicken tagine, a fish pulao and a baba ghanouj.

How did a tagine find its way in the menu? That is something I could not figure. To my knowledge, tagine is not of



Armenian origin.

The Jewish platter had alu makallah, baby potatoes pierced all over with a fork and then deep fried. A nod to the very Bengali alu bhaja or fried potato. The chicken chitanee was gloriously spicy and I was left with a feeling that may be this would have been a better dish with a robust red meat. It also had chicken shoofta. Basically, spiced chicken sheekh kababs.

Our appetisers were fish shoofta, which we were told, were the forefathers of the much celebrated 'maacher chop' or fish croquettes of Bengal.

We also had Moroccan cigars, chicken liver and browned onion wrapped in a cigar-like shape inside a pastry. I am firmly a non-offal person and could not go beyond a bite.

For me, the piece de resistance was

Sankya – a baked coconut pumpkin dessert. Apparently it is made with duck eggs. That I could not tell but I loved the creaminess, the silkiness and the jaggery that was the sweetener. A dish of Thai origin. Again, could not place that on the immigrant map of Calcutta but why split hairs?

Is it rich in stories? Unequivocally yes.

And just for the stories, it is worth going back.

Just to soak in the names of the dishes.

And to have the ginger ale out of an old fashioned glass bottle.

A recent search for Calcutta Stories' menu showed a lot of popular North and South Indian items as well.

May be that is needed to keep the place going.

May be there are stories too.

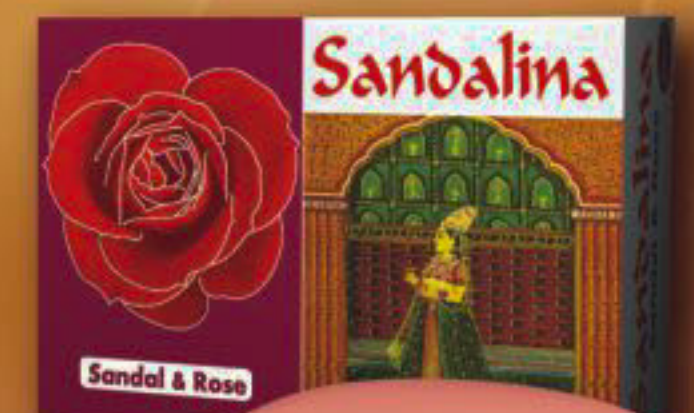
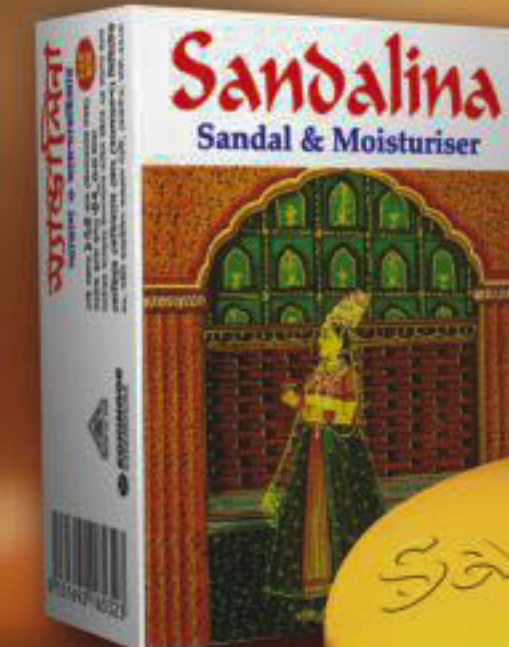
Photo: Kaniska Chakraborty

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