

Jhalmuri: a comfort food



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As you traverse the busy streets of Dhaka, a particular kind of hawker with a colourful cart will seemingly always catch your eye. He is seen almost everywhere. If you look around for him you will find him with his cart laden with a can full of spices, puffed rice, chanachur, sliced onions, some chopped up veggies, and a bottle of mustard oil. He is always busy- mixing the ingredients in the right proportions and giving the tin can a good shake every few minutes.

The jhalmuri-wala is mostly seen around schools, universities, parks, offices, bus terminals, train stations and ferries surrounded by curious customers. In Old Dhaka, the jhalmuri-wala is still often seen dressed in colourful clothes, wearing anklet bells and calling out to the residents. His dala is decorated with tomatoes and paper cones. He knows his measurements and is satisfied with his work. The smile on his face when he hands a cone full of jhalmuri to a child shows it.

Jhalmuri is a simple but delicious snack that can be put together within minutes. Without a doubt, jhalmuri is one of the most popular comfort foods in our country. Adults love it just as much as children do. Or maybe it's the other way around!

The puffed rice (muri) used to prepare the jhalmuri is mixed well with chopped onions, chillies, tomatoes, coriander leaves,

and soaked in some oil and shaken with a mixture of chanachur, ghugni, cucumber, some regular spices, salt, etc. The options for add-ons are seemingly limitless. Nuts, sliced boiled potato, lemon zest are added for an extra bang.

The add-ons vary from stall to stall. Some hawkers even add special home-made dips and condiments that are mixed with the puffed rice to give it an even spicier taste! It has to be served instantly for the muri to retain its crispiness. Otherwise, the moisture in the vegetables and oil gets to the puffed rice and makes it soggy.

Jhalmuri comes in handy especially during game nights, a hangout, a sleepover or a long drive. For us regular Bengalis, Jhalmuri is the perfect choice for that Bangladesh match. Game nights, binging on Monopoly require food that are easy to make and quick to devour, making as little mess as possible.

Homemade jhalmuri is always amazing. All you need to do is heat up a bowl of puffed rice, toss in some sliced veggies, few drops of mustard oil and a pinch of salt, toss in your bowl and serve! And for an extra homely savouriness add a few drops of pickle (achaar) and its oil - bon appétit is what I say!

By Tahmina Begum

And 'pop' goes my heart...

The restless movement from a popcorn vendor has always been a major reason behind the habit of craning my neck outside a car's window. As the young boy with messy hair calls out, "Pop-orn! Pop-orn!"

I immediately beckon him with an animated smile and soon enough what I have in my arms are a few bags with toothsome munchies that we all know as popcorn.

To many this is the ultimate comfort food; something that can satiate our hunger pangs while stuck on a road to somewhere, making way for some VIPs.

What is amusing is that while we all deem popcorn synonymous to movie theatres, there was once a time when these were available at every fairground and place of entertainment—everywhere but the theatres!



PHOTO: COLLECTED

The reason was simple enough; cinema halls considered popcorn unworthy of the image they desired to promote! The beautiful carpets and rugs were meant to attract a highbrow clientele and in that scenario popcorns seemed a little outcast.

The sound of people munching on popcorn in a cinematic experience was considered somewhat perturbing until 1927, which was a remarkable year not just for movie theatres but popcorn itself. Talkies had finally replaced the silent era and the demography of cinema-goers changing from urban elites to wider masses. Popcorn was now a 'luxury' everybody could afford!

Popcorn, in all possibility, can be a wonderful, wholesome snack. However, as is the case with most mass produced commodities, this has been upgraded with various 'ad-ons', which in fact takes the whole, wholesome aspect away from it.

The high fibre-content and a low calorie count, makes this the ideal comfort food,

only if you are willing to cut on the salt and stop adding that dollop of butter. But do not rule out popcorn just yet; there is a time for indulgence and a time for health check.

The crunchy popped kernels which were ubiquitous to theatres and fairs only once, are readily available at home thanks to the wonderful invention a.k.a the microwave! As long as you can strike the balance between 'health' and a little bit of 'extravagance', popcorn can be the easy-to-make lifesaver on a night of binge-watching your favourite Netflix release, or the favourite football club game on ESPN in the wee hours of the night.

However, the alternative way of having plain old popcorn, as in 'khoi' is by trying to make it at home. All you need is few table spoon of coconut oil, good quality popcorn kernels, salt and about ten minutes in hand while to craft this wonderful comfort food.

While, it may sound a little tricky to carry this out in a stove, it actually is quite the opposite. All you need to do is heat the oil; put three or four popcorn kernels into the oil. When the kernel pops, add the rest of the amount of popcorn kernel you need, put the lid on and remove the saucepan from heat for about 30 seconds.

After 30 seconds, return the pan to the heat and voila! The popcorn should start popping soon. You can always add melted butter near the end to include the intense, buttery flavour.

Conversely, butter is not the only 'ad-on' you should have in mind. Venturing far from the norms of your palate, you will come across savoury 'ad-ons' which is quite different than the usual butter or caramel we have but nonetheless very tasty.

I once came across such a distinction – popcorn with jalapeño, hot sauce and melted cheese. Far into northern America, this is claimed to be a popular street food. As the jalapeno sauce explodes in your mouth, the cheese together with the popcorn makes a wonderful combination I crave to have once again.

Quite honestly, the opportunity to experiment with popcorn is vast and options are endless. Give it a try. Let your inner cook explore the possibilities and simply fall for popcorn all over again.

By Mayesha Raidah

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