

Treasures of Bangladeshi cuisine

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In the Bengali menu, what are the items which are truly ours? What delicacies do we make which are the best in the world? What are the foods which should carry a special label, such as the Geographical Indication (GI)?

Before making any attempt in answering these questions, it would be wise to appreciate the foreign influences in our cuisine.

The Bengali palate, one may not be wrong in saying, is rather 'open-minded'. The people of this land have always adapted non-native flavours. The influx of foreign peoples and powers throughout history meant influences on the local cuisine: adaptations and additions and new vocabularies.

The Portuguese, to illustrate, may be credited with introducing different fruits. "They introduced fruits and vegetables, many of which today are so much a part of Bengali cuisine that it is almost impossible to imagine a time when they weren't," Niaz Zaman wrote in her book, *Bosha Bhat to Biryani: The Legacy of Bangladeshi Cuisine*.

She further wrote, "It is also highly likely that it was the Portuguese baker whose bread led to the creation of the 'shahi tukra'...."

Meanwhile, there is a huge Persian influence in our menu and so is the British influence, perhaps one of the most important of which has been tea.

Volumes can be written about the myriad influences, but let us not delve into that right now, and instead shift our focus to the treasures of our cuisine.

By 'treasures', we are not restricting to just those foods which are uniquely ours, but to those delicacies too, which we have mastered and are now famed for.

Biryani could be a good case. It is an import. Nevertheless, Zaman believes that the typical 'kachchi biriyani' cooked in Dhaka "... is the best biriyani in the whole world."

According to Zaman, Dhaka's 'morog pulao' is something which can be said to be truly ours. "You cannot get the Dhaka 'morog pulao' anywhere else in the world," she stated. "The 'morog polau' of Old Dhaka did not come from Persia. If we want to claim something as ours, it should be 'morog polau'!" Dhaka pilafs do not throw the water away; instead, the chef allows it to get absorbed during cooking. Additionally, the 'morog pulao' requires something special: 'malai' or cream of

Zaman said.

The chef plays his magic in the kitchen. Mother Nature, on the other hand, has endowed us with many treasures in her flora and fauna.

Our hilsa - defined by its geography - is reputed to be of superior quality than those from our neighbouring countries. There is something in the geography and environment of Rajshahi, which makes it possible to cultivate mangoes that are unparalleled in taste and quality.

indication (GI) is a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that origin."

The GI label has the potential to bring myriad benefits, to the farmers or producers of that product in that region and to the consumers who want to buy that product of that region. Unscrupulous businessmen cannot falsely claim that their products too are from the same origin and of the same quality, whilst it is possible for those



bodies should come forward and apply to get a product registered," said Engr Md Azim Uddin, Assistant Registrar, DPDT, Ministry of Industries. "The government is also trying to bring out products of fame and reputation from each district of Bangladesh in order to identify the things which could be registered for GI."

Of course, the GI law is not just for food, but surely Bangladeshi cuisine is one of the areas which can benefit from this. We would like to believe that hilsa's application is only the start!

The fusions and imports which we have mastered on one hand, and the delicacies which are uniquely ours on the other, make up the best in cuisine. Identifying and understanding our biggest assets in the culinary realm can be big step towards preserving, protecting and promoting Bangladeshi cuisine.

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Culinary campaigns

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We have a great 'product', but are we promoting and selling enough? Promoting a country's cuisine is akin to promoting the

country's culture, heritage and diversity. From tapping tourism potential to upholding our legacy, promotional activities and campaigns bring a lot of invaluable benefits.

How do you go about promoting Bangladeshi cuisine? Of course, there are no simple answers, but an accumulated effort from different stakeholders and parties would surely help our cuisine make a better mark in the culinary map of the world.

Presenting Bangladeshi cuisine to tourists

Trying out local food ranks high in a tourist's things-to-do list. A satisfied tourist is not one who has simply visited scenic places, or one who picked up souvenirs from local shops - a satisfied tourist would also have tried the food which the locals eat.

"Worldwide, gastronomy is a big part of tourism nowadays," Syed G Qadir, Managing Director of the travel agency Wonder Ways Ltd., said.

And what better outlet for promotion of a country's cuisine could there be than offering foreign tourists the firsthand experience of local food? Travel agents, when setting the itinerary, can therefore play a huge role in presenting Bangladeshi food to a worldwide audience.

"European and American tourists are keen on trying our food. Some of the things they enjoy are the curries, daal,

eggplant items, and fish," Qadir spoke from experience. "When a tourist signs up with us, we make sure to introduce them to our food and restaurants."

And there are big brands in our country which attracts tourists and consequently play a role in promoting Bangladeshi cuisines. Eateries like Kasturi and Star Kebab are flagship brands, and travel agents and tourism campaigns ought to highlight them.

It might not be a bad idea to have a broader spectrum of Bangladeshi cuisine in Dhaka for tourists and locals to enjoy. Chittagonian food - with 'mezbaan', 'kaala bhuna', etc - has successfully made a strong foothold in the capital city, thanks to the several Chittagonian eateries, which not only serve great food, but also provide decent ambience and service.

Other regions of the country have their specialties, and indeed there are a tiny number of eateries serving them, but the number is far too few. Bangladeshi cuisine is diverse; this diversity should be presented and promoted well.

Travel agencies can indeed play a big role in promoting our cuisine. "There have been efforts to highlight Bangladeshi food among tourists, but the best result would come if efforts are conducted in a more structured and organised way, with all relevant stakeholders coming together," Qadir opined.

Another important issue is hygiene. "We are very conscious about picking the right restaurant. Water is a serious concern for tourists; bottled water is the way to go," Qadir explained.

Promoting healthy and tasty
On one hand, there is concern about

hygiene, which, in the long run must be dealt with effectively and not just for tourists but for the general public as well.

"We should sell our cuisine on the point that it is healthy as well as tasty," Niaz Zaman, a revered author, academician and an expert on Bengali culture and folklore, said. From a long list of fish items to rice and the way we cook it to a wide array of vegetables and vegetarian delicacies, being a healthy and tasty cuisine provides ample opportunity for promotion.

More fests - both here and abroad
Fortunately, holding food expositions or food festivals is not unheard of in our country. The restaurants in hotels sometimes seem to be in a frenzy of arranging culinary events. Many of these so-called festivals feature a particular cuisine, be it Thai or Arabian. From time to time there are fests which focus on Bangladeshi cuisine. Holding more such food festivals can help in spreading awareness regarding the country's cuisine.

However, restricting these festivals to our country may not be enough. One of the ways of reaching foreigners and educating them about our cuisine would be to hold Bangladeshi food festivals abroad. "Just like hotels fly in chefs from another country for a food fest featuring that country's cuisine, it would be helpful if hotels in different parts of the world similarly invite our chefs to hold culinary events," Qadir suggested.

Bengali celebrations; Bengali food and the 'panta bhaat' debate!
A bulk of the fests which promote Bangladeshi food occurs during special dates and events, such as the Bengali

New Year, Durga Puja, etc. Such dates provide a fantastic opportunity to promote our cuisine to both locals and foreigners.

Let us take Pancha Bhaat as an example. The New Year celebrates all things which are Bengali, including food. During breakfast, it has become extremely popular to indulge in 'panta bhaat', hilsa, bharta, etc. Eating panta bhaat for breakfast in Pancha Bhaat is usually met with a lot of criticism, as naysayers argue that while it is traditional food, it is not a celebration food for Pancha Bhaat at all. There is also the common perception that panta bhaat is the 'poor man's breakfast'.

We asked Niaz Zaman about this issue. "I do not think that it is mockery," she informed. "Pancha Bhaat is a Bengali celebration, and it is a perfect occasion to celebrate Bengali cuisine."

Zaman believes that such occasions like New Year and Nabanna Uthsab invoke private organisations and homes to have traditional Bengali food on the menu - which in turn is a great way of upholding our cuisine.

The most important thing is to remember that awareness begins at home. If you cook traditional Bengali food, if you serve Bengali food to your guests from abroad, and if you suggest celebrating Bengali occasions at your office, you are essentially educating yourself, your children, and your friends and acquaintances about your country's cuisine. Educating about our cuisine means promoting it.

Change starts with you!

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