

Eat Street Evolution

It often starts with the aroma or the vendors' consistent calls for you to "try some out." You look left and right for the source and finally spot the small van or cart loaded with a bunch of loyal foodies right beside the street. The reasonable price makes you venture for a taste and before you know it, you find yourself eagerly waiting for that time of the day when the "mama" would set up his cart, and you can enjoy the delicacies again. That is when you realise that you have become a regular.

And if you think this phenomenon is something new- an adaptation for the busy city dwellers who just can't make time for anything- you couldn't be more wrong! Yes, the love for street food is an age-old one.

Starting from the crisp jilapis in the Mughal Empire to the elaborately cooked egg rolls in the British era, street food in Bangladesh has always been a culinary wonder etched in every lane and locality of the country.

A walk through time

Late 19th century and early 20th century had Kabuli-walas from Afghanistan who would bring nuts and dried fruits from their homeland. They would then make halwas using their secret Afghan recipes and go from door to door in search of the perfect customer who would savour the delicacies as much as his own people back home. The Kabuli-walas left as the British era came to an end. The Bengalis had to create something of their own, and milk ice-creams and ice lollies for just Tk1 were made to beat the summer heat became rather popular. The children indulged in lemon candies and sweets, while many of the older crowd stuck to olive and mango pickles or just a seasonal fruit salad with salt and pepper.

By mid 1970s, the milk ice-creams turned into kulfis and the pickles turned into delicious chutneys. A hype among the youth back in the '70s and '80s, a tamarind chutney shared among friends was the only way to celebrate the end of school for the day. The little ones would feast on candies called lozenges and thinly cut crispy potato chips, which were sold in small paper bags. The hawkers would throng around busy places such as Balaka Cinema Hall and New Market with jhalmuris, bhelpuris and hot patties, and while the '90s introduced the chicken fry to us, it is actually the 21st century where the miraculous street-eat revolution happened.

The classics

What even is a Bengali without their undying love for fuchka and chotpoti? Almost every single locality has its special "mamas" with the best fuchka. Whether it is a line of stalls like that around Dhanmondi lake, or one little cart in every area, each of them constantly competes to make the crunchiest outer shell or the best tok. Some carts have even improvised on the classic fuchka, using a spiced mashed potato as filling instead, and finishing it off with grated



eggs.

Another hot favourite has always been the halim. Unlike the fuchka stalls, halims are not available on every street corner but the stalls that do sell them are rather famous, and often have their own variation that makes them unique. No, it's not just beef and mutton chunks. Stalls in Old Dhaka also have puris and cow-brains in them, which is quite celebrated among locals.

Whether it is, a whiff of the potato-stuffed shingara or the mutton samosa, fried items are still loved among people of all ages. Although its popularity has been declining among the older crowd who are unable to consume deep fried items due to health reasons, the beef and chicken chops, the crunchy peyajus along with the soft fluffy puris, are still what the majority takes home for an evening snack after a hard day's work.

A drink, please!

Whether it is during short office breaks or to enjoy a lazy evening catching up with friends, a steaming cup of tea from your local tong is another constant without which life would seem rather incomplete. While previously, vendors were limited to just the typical black or milk tea, variations now include ginger tea, lemon iced tea,

honey tea, and to cater to the Bengali love for spice- masala tea!

And if you think that you only have sugarcane juice and lemon juice to beat the heat, think again! From seasonal varieties such as watermelons, jackfruits, oranges and mangoes to constants such as bananas, grapes and apples, street juice bars now have plenty of options for you to choose from. In fact, some even sell aloe vera juices and strawberry juices. If you are not a juice fan, you have milkshakes, lassi and even zeera pani to choose from. However, these stalls are still comparatively rare, and are mostly found in university areas or around playing fields.

The cart culture

The biggest evolution of the street scene was probably the introduction of the cart culture just a few years back. Thanks to the numerous carts at Shimanto Square in Dhanmondi, you can get tacos, teriyaki chicken, pizzas, shwarmas, ice-creams, kebabs and practically every kind of food you could think of as street food. With a smaller production cost, these carts are able to provide top quality food at a much cheaper price than restaurants and cafes,

thus rapidly gaining popularity. Carts that are able to grow a loyal fanbase even end up opening their own restaurants later on, just like Takeout did.

Local rarities

Being the hub of Bengali cuisine, Old Dhaka also has a few local rarities such as mush-room fries and onion patty rolls. As part of a typical Old Dhaka breakfast, many stalls around that area also sell kebabs like gurda and kheeri, passing on the recipes from generation to generation. Along with this, Elephant Road has full roasted chicken available at around Tk 300 and even an improvised version of an egg sandwich, where the bread is also deep fried in an egg mixture.

Areas around Mirpur and Badda have stalls selling dishes with over 13 types of pickles- sweet, sour, spicy- which you are allowed to mix and match for a different taste. But, it is not only Dhaka which has great street food. Stalls at Kolatoli beach in Cox's Bazar deep fry whole crabs, prawns and scorpions, thus allowing the tourists to enjoy fresh sea-food and listen to the waves all at the same time.

Standing the test of time

Believe it or not, there are still some goodies that survive as absolute constants in this ever-changing world of food. Yes, the peanuts sold in all the parks, bus stands and at traffic signals is one such example. Some have shrunk in size due to declining demand, but can still be found because of a few loyal customers. The seared corn is one such delight to fall into this category. Dry foods such as muralis and kotkotis remain somewhere in between making a comeback every once in a while during festive seasons and then gradually fading into the background again.

Like every other trade, the food industry has obviously not been a static one. And to keep up with the changing taste of the customers, vendors have had to constantly innovate, thus ultimately causing a revolution in the street food scene. Should one be expecting even bigger changes in the coming years? Possibly! Over time, the street food culture is only going to get more dynamic and one sure can expect more "Shimanto Squares" to sprout up.

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