

# CHANGES THAT MAKE US #NOWINLIFESTYLE



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My Facebook home feed is full of pictures of Bengali food uploaded from all around the world, which paints a good picture of how much the Bangladeshis miss their cuisine. And it is not just expatriates who miss the deshi food; even people living in Dhaka tend to miss their regional cuisine.

#### MY DESHI MENU

I think of myself as a die-hard fan of our local cooking. It does not matter which country I go to or what delicacies I eat there; within a few short days, my heart will ache for Bengali food. This makes me wonder at times as to why we are so drawn to our food. Is it because we are habitual to our palate, or is there truly an underlying magic to our light fish gravies and thick meat sauces?

While it is fact that since we grew up eating Bangladeshi food, our fondness for it is natural, but is that really all there is to it? I think, the magic lies in the sheer variety of specials that we have. The Bangladeshi menu has the potential to be made limitless, and each item distinctively delicious. You can choose from the many varieties of freshwater fish, sea fish, all the many kinds of bharta, fried curries, various kinds of vegetable curry, fried potato, fried brinjal, bori, shukto, plantain flower, the numerous types of shutki, pulses, pickles, beef, mutton, and chicken with our staple of rice. The use of oil and spices differs greatly between dishes; heavy in some and light on others and this lends to the

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sheer variety in taste. However, every individual can easily add a unique personal touch to the same preparation.

Do not think that the dessert section in our country has any less to offer either, as there are many varieties of rice cakes or pitha – a wintry day speciality, along with other crowd favourite desserts such as payesh, jarda, halua, and of course, mishti doi, and a host of sweets.

Our cuisine also has a healthy dose of mouth-watering Mughal influenced

rich food like biriyani, polao-korma, roast, rezala, fish or meat kalia, kofta-kabab, shrimp malaikari, egg korma, morog-polao, kacchi-biryani, tehari, borhani etc. I also have doubts as to whether any other cuisine offers anything like the vast variety of achar, or pickles, as much as Bangladeshi cuisine does. Besides, we have roti, paratha, naan, bakarkhani, haluas, sweets, and sherbet to offer as well. Common street food like singara, samosa, dal and alu puri, jhalmuri, mughlai-paratha, alur chop, beguni, chola, halim, jilapi are all supremely delicious as well. In short, the list of our rich cuisine can be quite extensive.

#### THE OTHER INFLUENCES

The integration of this large variety of dishes into the fabric of our cuisine has its

roots in our history; the strong presence of Hinduism and Buddhism in medieval Bengal, the very basic food culture of rice, fish, vegetables, milk, and sweets have originated from there. After the 1550s, Bangladeshi food began absorbing elements of Mughal cuisine as well. This union of the two cuisines was so long lasting that even today, if we crave for food that is 'royal' or 'aristocratic', we end up in Old Dhaka where all the famed chefs of Mughal cuisine have set up shops there.

Right after the Mughals, the British regime began; and once again, the local cuisine started to take influence from the colonisers' preferences, and items like tea, cake, biscuit, meat, various kinds of dishes cooked with potato and the varieties of bread entered the local food culture. When you think about it, even our famous smoked hilsa is a testament to their contribution. The Portuguese introduced us to cheese. Influence of Persian, Arabian and Turkish cuisines are also quite apparent in Bangladeshi food. All this variety from historical influences has only helped to enrich the cuisine, bringing in a distinct and classic element.

Moreover, while still part of the Indian Subcontinent, Bengal had direct contact with Myanmar. This connection has highly influenced Chittagonian cuisine with elements of the Arakann style, characterised by heavy spices and the penchant for shutki.

The cooking procedures of Bengalis and Indians may look similar to the naked eye, but in fact, they are not. Despite the geographic proximity, the style of cooking varies distinctly both in taste and texture. Indian cuisine involves the usage of many kinds of spices, particularly when dealing with fish, while we prefer our fish dishes to be light and simple.

#### VARIATION WITHIN OUR OWN BORDERS

The cooking procedures also vary quite greatly within our own borders, making the cuisine even more diverse. Although it is a small country with very little geographical variations, and a large and mostly homogeneous population, there are still distinctive differences in their food preparation techniques.

In the northern regions, fish and meat are cooked in light preparations, with fewer and lighter spices and oil. However, they also prepare heavy items like polao, roast,

alu bhaji (potato stir fry), fried brinjal etc. on special occasions. Potato is one of the most important ingredients for the area, especially when it comes to cooking. The use of Panch Phoron to temper pulses and vegetables is common, as well as the use of poppy seed and fenugreek. Along with the other dishes, kauner khichuri, alur dal, lafa, spinach, shidal and palka are their very own unique dishes.

In the southern region however, mainly in Chittagong, the use of spices is very high, and a distinct preference for meat over fish preparations can be noted, often at the cost of even vegetables and lentils. In case of fish, the region leans towards marine fish and its dried version, the 'shutki'. Chittagong's special beef preparations, called mejbani and kalabhuna, have been lovingly adopted by people all over the country and it is understandable because the taste is quite unforgettable.

Coconut and coconut milk are used in most dishes by people in the Khulna-Jessore region, and shrimp is among their favourites. But choi jhal is the most famous spice used in this region, and is also the most important ingredient for meat preparations, which are delectable.

In Sylhet, the use of spice is also very high. They use this wild orange called Shatkora in most of their dishes, and tastes tangy but with a starchy vegetable-like texture. This adds a unique touch to the cuisine in this area. Chittagong's mejbani, Sylhet's shatkora gosht, and Khulna's choi

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jhal – are all well-known delicacies and completely distinctive.

Another element of our cuisine is the enrichment brought into it by the food culture of the indigenous people. Various tribes have numerous ways and styles of cooking. All these elements combined create the peerless cuisine that is Bangladeshi.

The use of ingredients varies with each cook, and you can freely change the compositions of the curries. The cuisine carries all sorts of tantalising tastes—sweet, sour, hot and light. Where else will you find such variety? Is there any other cuisine that is this tasty? Perhaps, I cannot say, but this I know; we Bangladeshis crave our own food despite having access to many other kinds. Let me say this once and for all, "Tora Je Ja Bolish Bhai, Amar Bangladesh er Khabar Chai."

Translated by Sadit Ahsraf

Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed and Shahrear Kabir Heemel

