

THE FEARLESS OLIVE
BY REEMA ISLAM



Vegetarian restaurants: a HOLY GRAIL



Dhaka, and its love for food has been a long-standing relationship. An active heritage of food revolving around the Mughals in Puran Dhaka, and the diverse menu of a capital city, Dhaka offers cuisines from a large selection of countries

The Dhakaite's palate was further polished with the advent of the café culture and now, people either crave for a black, sugar-free coffee, or the multitude of flavoured ones, as opposed to the 3-in-one Nescafe affair from about a decade ago. Yet, as Dhaka catches up with the changing trends of food, it still sorely lacks a fully vegetarian restaurant.

A typical Bangladeshi dinner table is ideally loaded with a bit of meat, some pulses, vegetables, fish and of course, the staple; rice. Although this concept also extends to the restaurants in Dhaka, with menus that offer a large variety of vegetarian dishes, there is still the noticeable absence of an all vegetarian restaurant. Theoretically, this could be quite an easy job, given that our cuisine has far more vegetarian recipes than its meat or fish

sourced straight from the farm. They supply small amounts of fresh produce and keep adding new items to their list of options. While running my catering services about four years back, I had scant options of sourcing fresh herbs, but now, fresh rosemary and basil, among other herbs, are regularly available. Avocados and Greek yoghurt have made their way into our fridges and gluten free bread, which was possibly a term that only genuine sufferers of the celiac disease were aware of, is also in the markets. This new range of products appearing on a regular basis has provided people with more culinary options to explore. These small-scale businesses are set up by people who felt the absence of these products, and the alternate food choices in the general food scene of Dhaka. These businesses now



allow people to glaze over the fact that the food is boring a hole in their pockets, but this behaviour could be taken as an example of the way a typical consumer thinks. People often feel that vegetarian meals need to be less expensive than meat based ones, and this train of thought is perhaps one of the major deterrents for investments. An all vegetarian menu will not necessarily be cheaper, as sourcing good quality vegetables can be quite expensive. On top of this, an all vegetarian menu would attract a niche crowd, whereas the all-inclusive one brings in more money with the additional choices offered. So unless the food is embellished with add-ons like music or some other form of entertainment, investors feel the food alone might not draw in the crowds.

But Dhaka can adapt to this change in people's tastes as more people save up to travel and return with new found taste buds familiar with a range of food types they were apprehensive of trying out before. As we took on to mocha latte and matcha tea, an all vegetarian restaurant could have just had the edge over the others, drawing in a very unique set of people, who will appreciate the initiative.

Because, as a pescatarian friend of mine aptly puts it; an all meat menu is not for everyone, but vegetarian food is always for everyone!



counterparts. With an exceptionally large platter of bhortas and torkaris that we can conjure up, it comes as a huge surprise that this category of restaurant has not been invested in. This trend, however, does not reflect the rapidly changing lifestyle of the people, as more are turning towards healthy options, and now, one can actually count the number of vegan, vegetarian or pescatarian people in your friends list that require a certain diet. Dhaka now also has a fair number of private businesses offering "fresh" or "organic" vegetables which are

offer us high quality products, catering to a niche market, at an often above average price.

Yet, the vegetarian restaurant remains elusive. Jatra Biroti hosts infrequent events of strictly vegetarian affairs, which offers the handful of vegetarian/vegan Dhakaite the chance to indulge in a menu that suits their preferences. However, the options offered can also be very expensive. This however works for Jatra as the food is not the main focus, but is coupled with the music and socialising. This distraction does

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