

IN PURSUIT OF THE CULINARY ARTS

AAQIB HASIB & FAISAL BIN IQBAL

"Growing up in a household of amazing cooks, it was difficult to not fall in love with cooking. I had always wanted to enrol in a culinary school right after finishing A Levels. By the age of 22, I started an online food business and ended up receiving unimaginable feedback and support from the community. But I always felt the need for professional training on culinary arts. That is when I finally decided to chase my dream of attending culinary school."

And with that, Anika Farha, a Computer Science graduate from BRAC University, was off to Le Cordon Bleu—one of the leading culinary arts schools—in London, United Kingdom. Anika will be getting her Diploma in Gastronomy, Nutrition and Food Trends, and hopes this will elevate her cooking skills to another level.

Just like Anika, there are many others out there whose interests are piqued by their love of food. Most of them enjoy cooking as a hobby, while a select few partake in it on a semi-professional or professional level.

Even a decade ago, cooking as a profession was something many people only dreamt of but lack of opportunities held them back from achieving this dream. In contrast, the food industry in Bangladesh now is progressing at an astounding rate.

An increase in the number of local cafes, restaurants and fast food joints, coupled with the entry of foreign food chains into the market is an indicator of how far the industry has come. To add to this scene, there is the growing popularity of home-catering and food delivery services as well as online food pages on Facebook and Instagram. All of these aspects of the industry have immensely contributed to its growth and advancement.

The result has been an increasing amount of opportunities for food enthusiasts, who prefer cooking over just eating it.

THROUGH THE EYES OF A PROFESSIONAL

"I don't think a professional degree is an absolute necessity to work in the field of culinary arts. That said, I do believe it helps if you can afford the time for it," says Sameera Hussain Wadood, an independent culinary consultant.

"The best option, when you don't have access to a good institution, is to work your way up at a restaurant and learn the trade, especially in Bangladesh. An international degree does not count for much if you can't work with local ingredients and people."

As a culinary consultant, Sameera's job involves training chefs, developing unique menus, recipe research and development, food presentation, waste management, feasibility analysis and a lot more.

Having cooked since the early age of six, Sameera



bring their unique sets of skills."

TAKING A MORE TRADITIONAL ROUTE

Sadly, not everyone can participate in the food industry on the scale that Sameera has. The opportunities to attain culinary education were not as common as it perhaps is today.

Shahila Kabir has also been cooking since she was a little girl. Beginning her journey by learning at the hands of her mother, she inherited *shahi* recipes. After marriage, she was further able to add her mother-in-law's recipes to her arsenal.

However, it was only after her husband had passed away that Shahila began venturing into the food industry. She initially started by catering on a few online platforms, before finally forming her own catering business, *Ruhi's Rasoi*.

Having grown up with no formal cooking education, Shahila mulls over the idea of culinary degrees now, "Of course, gaining technical knowledge always helps. If you can get a culinary degree, it will definitely make you a better cook. It'll give you the opportunity to not only learn lots of difficult techniques, but it also gives you a better idea of the ingredients you are working with and how to best use them."

Discussing the opportunities available for aspiring cooks in Bangladesh, Shahila says, "Bangladesh is a country that loves food. So, cooking as a profession should hold a bright future. However, I feel that at a consumer level we need to know and understand more



into a professional career, she knew that gaining the proper experience and training would help her go a long way, over the alternative of being self-taught.

Elma pursued a year-long diploma in patisserie at the Gastronomic culinary school in France. After her return in 2017, she formed *Pastryarchy* with a partner. Their combined decision was to establish their own brand, instead of working at another restaurant.

Over the course of a year, Pastryarchy now has its own professional kitchen. They primarily operate through an Instagram account. More than anything they've garnered a loyal following and returning customers continue to drive Pastryarchy forward in their goal for a world "ruled by pastry".

Discussing why more people aren't pursuing a career in the culinary arts in Bangladesh, Elma says, "In the Bangladeshi food industry, academic degrees and skill sets are under-acknowledged and underestimated, as people's potentials are subdued by the pressures of making fast money for the respective business. Value isn't given to those who want to push boundaries, instead, there's a market for the normative, for the things that are already being done over and over because it makes easy money. I see a possibility of pushing for a change through online platforms—by changing and improving people's demands and tastes. If we don't start offering, then they wouldn't know that it can be something they want."



Ramsay deriding the life out of someone who failed to impress him, thinking "If that were me, Gordon would have licked the plate clean."

Unlike the "idiot sandwich", who actually dared to take on the challenge of professional cooking, most of us are afraid to come to terms with taking on a profession in the culinary arts. But as times changed and more opportunities began to present themselves, professional cooking is moving in a more positive direction in Bangladesh.

In a country where career options used to be somewhat limited to only medical sciences, engineering or corporate jobs in multinational companies, we have indeed come a long way. People like Elma and Anika have shown us that borders mean nothing when you are passionate about your dreams. Individuals like Sameera have shown us how habits can turn into virtues and then into a profession. Stories of entrepreneurs like Shahila tell us how success can come knocking at your door if you



taught herself to cook on a tight budget when she moved to Dhaka from Chattogram. For her, online recipes never seemed to work as foreign ingredients were either unavailable or too expensive. She then began incorporating her own knowledge and creativity using local, fresh ingredients as substitutes.

"I don't just love food, I have a burning need to create with food. So, I picked up my knives (and ideas) and went looking for problems to solve in the food industry," Sameera shares. "We've just scratched the surface. My personal goal is to curate and redefine Bangladeshi cuisine and put it at the forefront of the international food industry. I want people to know that we too can have fine dining experiences if we choose to. However, to achieve that goal, we need more people to

about the food we're buying. More often than not, consumers will compromise on the quality of food for lower prices. As a result, producers compromise on the quality of the food they sell to keep their prices competitive, resulting in a vicious cycle. Until we, as buyers, are aware and conscious about the fact that the food ultimately affects our health, it will be a difficult uphill battle for those unwilling to take shortcuts."

THE DIGITAL COOKING EXPERIENCE

Elma Arifeen graduated from BRAC University with a degree in economics. However, what she always desired to pursue was her passion for baking.

The moment she realised that her love for baking could be turned

When further asked about the best place to start learning to become a chef, Elma responds, "Right now, the best way is through social media. Join a platform that helps market your items or create your own brand, utilising social media platforms for marketing. If done right, it goes a long way. Maintaining quality and proper presentation are other factors in capturing people's interests. You also need to be aware of what is already being done and what you need to do to stand out. Once you've created that image, then it's easier to get catering opportunities for different places. The key to sustaining a flow of customers is, I believe, to ensure that you're always doing something better."

At some point in our lives, we have probably looked at Gordon

only try.

For every aspiring chef out there, when you find yourself in a situation where you have to write an essay about what you want to be in the future, go ahead and scribble down the words "a professional in the culinary arts."

Faisal wants to be the very best, like no one ever was. To survive university is his real test, to graduate is his cause. Send him memes and motivation at abir.afc@gmail.com

Aaqib is stuck in an existential crisis loop. Send help at aaqibhasib94@gmail.com