

Of meals that ended up as the pièce de résistance of journeys

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Bourdain, the genius both in and out of the kitchen, once famously said, "Travel changes you. As you move through this life and this world you change things slightly, you leave marks behind, however small. And in return, life—and travel—leaves marks on you." There is another piece of advice by the sixty-one-year-old chef and author that has become a veritable blueprint for my travels; it goes something along the lines of: "You learn a lot about someone when you share a meal together."

This story is part my appreciation for Bourdain, something that took me a year and a few months following his death to eventually pen down and come to terms with, and part my jog down memory lane remembering fantastic meals. Sometimes, at someone's home, sometimes in a small *tong* perched atop the banks of Brahmaputra river, sometimes in a Garo village in Haluaghat of Mymensingh, sometime on a launch coursing through the vast Jamuna River and sometimes inside a *bhaat er hotel* in strange cities from

the north to the south.

Thanks to my favourite TV show host, chef and author, Anthony Bourdain, I have often made it a point to plan my travels centering around food. In fact, I have come to believe that other than the very air we breathe, there's hardly anything more integral to our existence than food.

How can I forget being completely beat after looking for one particular bird through the *chars* of Brahmaputra all morning and finally chancing upon it just near a *tong* (makeshift store) sitting

on the banks of the river? Tired in the dipping winter temperatures of Kurigram, we quickly ordered plates of rice—fat and white—and asked the owner to bring us all her specialties. The day's menu was fresh fish from the river cooked in turmeric and red chilli broth, then goat meat in a gravy of thick potatoes and split chickpeas and a slightly soupy spinach with the tiniest shrimps. We were quick to gulp down the meal and over the moderately dismantled table discussed how to find the bird we had set

out to seek, how it used to be abundant by the chars just a few years back.

I also carry fond memories of one particular breakfast at a village in Askipara in Haluaghat. Together with the Garo family who was hosting us, we ate gooey jackfruit, sticky rice, Khari chicken (cooked with crushed green chilies and baking soda), fresh mangoes and lukewarm milk. Mashima, the matriarch of the household, sat down with us and talked about her family, the village, how they settled here and gave us a verbal tour of their cuisine. I knew she had so many more stories and it made me deeply regret that Bourdain, the only white man I would be comfortable with showcasing stories from this country, had failed to do so.

Bourdain even got the seal of approval from a journalist. Lebanese journalist Kim Ghattas said, "Bourdain developed a new approach that used conversations about food to tell the story and politics of the countries he visited in ways that hard

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