

# A taste of Indonesia at Pan Pacific Sonargaon



There is perhaps no better way to represent a country and its culture than its food—a cuisine created by the amalgamation of centuries of civilisation and the influences that shaped the nation.

What better way to celebrate all of that than a weeklong food festival? That is exactly what Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka did, kicking off 7 days of arrangements to celebrate all that is Indonesian cuisine, on Thursday, 30 August.

We sat with Chef Krisnamurti Damarjati, Executive Chef of Sonargaon, to understand the basics of the cuisine of his homeland Indonesia, consisting of the majority, over 17,500 islands of the world's largest archipelago by size. The sheer dimension, in terms of distance between islands on two sides of the country, and its vast maritime history, and hundreds of indigenous groups, mean that there is literally plenty of space and scope for varying influences on the food culture, creating distinct styles of cuisines in different parts of the country like Java, Bali, Sumatra, Banten etc.

"The basic staple element all over the islands is rice, used for all kinds of preparations, including dessert. The sambal, a ubiquitous condiment of the cuisine, comes in three distinct variants,

viz white, red and green," Chef Damarjati explained. It typically contains shallots, garlic, tomatoes, chilli, palm sugar, lime juice and even dried shrimp, all ground to a paste.

In Sumatra, the cuisine shows distinct influence of Middle Eastern and South Asian spices, whereas Javanese food bears similarity to Chinese, with strong hints of sweet elements within otherwise spicy dishes, and Indonesia's eastern region exhibits distinct connection to Melanesian style.

"Nasi Tumpeng, or Yellow Rice, typically served as a large conical mound with an assortment of sides on the platter, is one of the traditional ceremonial specialties of Indonesia, which featured as the primary dish to kick off all special occasions," Damarjati elaborated.

Grilling, braising, soups, satays and stir-fries are often used cooking techniques. "A professional chef using a wok to make a stir-fry could appear to be dancing—so swift and skilful are the movements," the chef described.

Of the plethora of savoury dishes at the food fest, the whole roasted lamb was cooked to perfection, each bite tender and flavourful. Squid was presented in an interesting curry-based spicy concoction,

with plain or fried rice (nasi goreng), and of course, the mandatory mi goreng, or fried noodles made their appearance.

One of the dessert items, Dadar Gulung, bore a distinct similarity to Bangladesh's Patishapta pitha, but with an interesting twist. A flat pandan pancake, made into a finger-length roll filled with coconut molasses, made for a perfectly balanced dessert with the leafy texture around a gooey sweet filling. The diamond cake, a hard sweet made from glutinous rice, molasses, rice flour, and coconut milk, was also delicious. The agar agar based cupcake sized cakes were deliciously light.

"Being an island nation, fish features quite prominently in the Indonesian cuisine. One such dish features marinated fish steamed inside banana wraps," Chef Damarjati said.

"To make the grilled chicken flavourful and juicy, it is marinated for two days," he said.

"A Balinese specialty is the Ayam Batutu, or a whole grilled chicken, stuffed with spices and spinach. The spinach interestingly, is often not eaten, its purpose being solely to flavour the chicken," he added.

Crackers are very popular with the Indonesian people, and are made in various flavours, to be dipped in sambal as a handy snack. An indigenous variety, the candlenut, is often crushed to release its oil, and added to cracker batter for flavour.

Ketupat are small rice dumplings steamed inside woven leaf pouches, to be had with light curry based meat dishes like Opor Ayam, or chicken cooked in coconut milk. Fermented soy and dried fish also feature prominently in the national dishes of Indonesia.

"Banana fritters are also common, and interestingly, a layered sponge cake, flavoured with cinnamon and nutmeg, a clear indication of Dutch influence, is considered a favourite," said Chef Damarjati.

With such varieties of food in his homeland, and rich experience of cuisines from all over the world, we asked the chef what food he likes from Bangladesh. Shorshe Ilish and Ilish-egg fried, and of course, the kacchi Biriyanis seemed to be his easy choices.

The purpose of the festival, which was wholeheartedly supported by the Indonesian embassy, was to promote better bilateral relations between Bangladesh and Indonesia, and encourage more tourism. As the festival ended last on Thursday, 6 September, Dhaka foodies should keep their ears open for its next leg, whenever that happens, to immerse in the rich and complex cultural heritage that is Indonesian cuisine. It is an experience not to be missed.

**By Sania Aiman**  
Photo courtesy: Pan Pacific Sonargaon

## Friendship Colours of the Chars

Bringing unsung heroes of Bengal the limelight they often don't enjoy, "Friendship Colours of the Chars" launched its very first retail outlet in Banani on September 5, 2019 (Thursday). The store serves rural women from the remotest parts of Bangladesh to display a range of handmade items.

Friendship Colours of the Chars is a concern of the non-governmental organisation, Friendship. It works in the most inaccessible islands and the coastal belt of Bangladesh to empower people through sustainable approaches. One such initiative was giving women in chars, or remote riverine islands, access to free training programmes to learn skills like weaving and crafts. The retail outlet is thus a celebration of what marginalised women in chars can do when simply given the opportunity. But what stirred such an initiative in the first place?

"I don't believe in development which does not bring identity and dignity. And that is why Friendship is ingrained with these two core values. The women I see in remote areas are subdued just because of a lack of education. That is why we began with adult education. Next, they needed income generation. That led to a decade in training and development," shares Runa Khan, founder and executive director of Friendship.

"Bangladesh is equipped with such strong women who can bring forth good work and aid in development," she added.

What culminated as a result of Runa Khan's relentless efforts is the fashion outlet of Friendship Colours of the Chars. Here, you will find every rack speaking of the artisanal skill of the marginalised women. Handloom fabric, jamdani saris, and indo-western outfits will stir our emotional pull for Bengal's timeless culture. The range of scarves is sure to demand a closer inspection. Hung pieces include interesting sets of ethnic jewellery, whether they are earrings, bracelets or beaded ornaments. The books and showpieces of boats, horses etc. will then steal your attention. And, if you still manage to not give in, the story each product has to tell will surely have you captivated.

"What makes the truest difference is how our products are made. Only traditional techniques of weaving (handlooms), dyeing, printing and embroidery are used. Materials used are pure cotton and silk. Even the colours are 100% natural," ensures Nazra Mahjabeen Sabet, Assistant Director, Nodi Ltd, an enterprise of Friendship.

The clothing store was inaugurated by BGMEA President, Dr. Rubana Huq who ensured the trade organisation's utmost support for Friendship Colours of the Chars. Moreover, chief guest, Mia Seppo, Resident Coordinator, United Nations, also stood in solidarity with the initiative, saying, "The poor cannot afford poor solutions."

"With the brand, come the people. And, so, it's these marginalised communities that I want to be recognised worldwide. I want people to see that just because they are poor and uneducated, it doesn't mean that they cannot produce something coveted by international markets," shares Runa Khan.

**By Ramisa Haque**  
Website: <https://friendship.ngo/>