

The versatile paneer



What is the first thing to strike your mind when you read the words soft, spongy, crumbly, and delicious? For most of us, if not all, it's cheese!

Cheese is a highly resourceful ingredient and has numerous variants around the world. While Italians love to top their pizza with grated parmesan and the Greeks enjoy a good helping of feta cubes over their salad, we have our very own "deshi paneer."

Humble in its origins and versatile in nature, paneer has deemed itself to be an indispensable part of the Bengali taste palate. Even within the bounds of our country, paneer is enjoyed in myriad forms. While some people like to munch on thin slices just as they are, the Dhakaiyas came up with their very own invention with the paneer bakarkhani, which is made with generous portions of this cheese.

Paneer can take on the avatar of several delicious delicacies, but it has grabbed an irreplaceable spot in our afternoon tea accompaniments. Many people like to dunk thick slices of paneer inside a warm cup of tea, whereas others prefer various snacks where paneer is the prominent ingredient.

Albeit paneer is essentially a cheese with local origins, it can be used to concoct a plethora of fusion delicacies. Thus, here are five different ways to cook with our very own Bengali paneer with a slight twist on global cuisines. Whether you serve them up as a snack or starter, these are sure to satiate your cheesy cravings.

SPINACH AND PANEER BOEREGS

Boereg (or borek) is the international counterpart of our local samosas. It consists of a moist and cheesy filling that is parcelled inside layers of filo pastry smothered in butter, which gives it a crispy and flaky exterior. The soft and crunchy elements truly make this a perfect cheesy affair.

Ingredients

1 tbsp olive oil
1 white onion

2 cloves garlic
¼ tsp nutmeg powder
¼ tsp cumin powder
¼ tsp paprika powder
½ tsp ginger powder
½ tsp black pepper powder
Pinch of salt
1½ cup fresh spinach
¾ cup cubed paneer
½ cup chopped mushrooms
1 egg
½ cup melted butter
1 tbsp sesame seeds
6-8 filo pastry sheets

Method

Dice the onion and garlic cloves into small cubes and also chop up the mushrooms very finely. Clean and wash the spinach leaves properly and roughly chop them as well. Then, heat oil in a pan and add in the chopped onions and garlic; sauté them until translucent. After this, add the chopped mushrooms and cook them until tender, followed by adding the spinach.

As soon as the spinach hits the pan, add in all the spices one by one including nutmeg, cumin, paprika, ginger, black pepper powder, and a pinch of salt. Stir these in while the spinach wilts and remove from heat. You should extract as much moisture as you can from the spinach.

In a food processor, add in this mixture along with cubes of paneer. Beat one egg and reserve about a tablespoon before adding the rest to the mixer and blitz this into a coarse mixture just until combined. The mixture shouldn't be very soggy but should be wet enough to be rolled into balls with ease.

Take one sheet of filo pastry at a time to work with and cover the rest of the sheets with a damp cloth to prevent them from drying out. Halve each sheet lengthwise, smother entirely with butter, and place a small ball of the mixture at one corner. Brush the sides with melted butter and fold the top

in a diagonal. Continue this process until you reach the end of the pastry sheet and trim off the excess.

The end product should be triangular

in shape; brush the tops with the reserved beaten egg and sprinkle sesame seeds atop. Bake these for about 10-12 minutes at 160° C in a preheated oven.

PILLOWY PANEER PIEROGI

Pierogi, dumpling, momo, or pot stickers — call them whatever your heart desires but all of these are variations of the same snack. Pierogi is essentially a Polish version of the more commonly known dumpling, which is filled with a soft, fluffy, savoury filling, where every bite will give you a mouthful of cheesy sensation.

Ingredients

For the dough —

1 cup flour
¼ cup warm water
1 tbsp olive oil
Pinch of salt

For the filling —

4-5 large potatoes
1 onion
2 cloves garlic
1 tbsp clarified butter
2 strips beef bacon
¾ cup diced paneer
2 tbsp cream
½ tsp salt
½ tsp black pepper powder
½ tsp cumin powder
½ tsp smoked paprika

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G-8, K.D.A. Avenue, Khulna-9100, Bangladesh. Phone: 88-041-730725, 730792, 732790, 732792. Fax: 88-041-730341
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