

THE FEARLESS OLIVE
REEMA ISLAM



Fusion Terminal – Bottling our local heritage



Bilimbi is a fruit unknown to many Bangladeshis; the same goes for jara lebu — a Sylheti citrus. Both these find a new avatar, along with local tomatoes, being transformed into sundried ones, coming together in a unique set of pickles from the house of Fusion Terminal.

Initiated by a food enthusiast and self-taught chef, Pavel Hoq, the line of pickles has been in production since 2017 and now sells nine flavours of pickles and two infused chilli oils created by Pavel, four premium spices and the sundried tomatoes in extra Virgin Olive Oil, depending on seasonality.

Keen on promoting indigenous fruits and vegetables, fusing local tastes and bottling them in an up-market fashion, Pavel landed upon the perfect blend for each product through a series of trials and errors. Sans chemicals, Pavel went for the most basic and traditional method of pickling to ensure a healthy product with about three years of shelf life and a taste very global, yet local.

A development practitioner by profession, Pavel was COO at Grameen Intel, (renamed as Technology for Social Impact — TSI) for over eight years before giving up his job to seriously pursue his ultimate passion — cooking and pickling. With a

side business of running Shanchayita, a vegan restaurant that is perhaps Dhaka's first vegan venture, Pavel also offers curated platters online.

"I have always loved trying out new tastes and got to travel abroad extensively, but at some point, realised that we knew very little about the hidden fruits and vegetables of our own country," shared Pavel.

A chance tasting in Sylhet introduced him to the jara lebu, which is a cousin of the quince, a waxy apple that is very sour, high in vitamin C and can weigh up to 3 Kg each! It is exported to Europe and Bangladeshis or homesick Sylhetis based abroad might be its main consumers, but locally in Sylhet, jara lebu is cooked with fish or made into a chutney or an accompanying dish, much like a salad to add sourness.

"The rind is not bitter but a certain bitterness surfaces once it is cooked, much like in the case of shatkora," explains Pavel.

Sylheti shatkora on the other hand, is a more familiar taste for us and is readily available as pickles, while beef *shatkora* is one of those traditional dishes most of us have tried in the comfort of our dining rooms.

Shatkora has a far more popular fan base as compared to Sylhet's other citruses (there are more than 70 types of citrus in

Sylhet as it comes under the citrus growing region of this part of Asia), but Pavel highlighted the jara lebu as a local fruit worthy of being showcased in all its lemony freshness.

"The idea was to discover some of our lost tastes and therefore, recipes. Many of the fruits and vegetables I use are not cash crops or necessarily in high demand. In fact, some of them are relatively unknown to many, like the bilimbi," explains Pavel.

With the expert advice of Dr M Nazim Uddin, (SSO, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute, Gazipur), Pavel has learned much about the health benefits of these relatively unexplored fruits. Bilimbi has the colouring of a star apple, of which it is a sourer, tangier cousin and grows in Chattogram. It is a native of our region and is found in Indonesia, Malaysia, and even

in Sri Lanka, as 'billing.' It grows naturally in people's gardens and on the roadsides, with little economic value. Bilimbi can easily be preserved and likewise, Pavel used his own concoction to pickle this exotic fruit. Known as Belumbu Blast, the product pays homage to a neglected fruit that has nevertheless spread up to South America, the Caribbean islands and even in Egypt as a sour condiment.

However, the secret to Pavel's *Lal Jhal xTreme* (infused chilli oil) leaving a buttery aftertaste is the roasted garlic he adds to enhance the flavours of the Naga chillies, sun dried whole, then infused in the oil.

Pavel also plans to make flour out of jackfruit seeds, but for now has introduced sun dried tomatoes which are definitely a first for any local company. As a personal cooking hack, boiling or cooking them whole in a pasta sauce brings out their flavours rather than adding them straight into a salad.

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed

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