

LIFE AS IT IS

WARA KARIM

Writer, painter, gardener, content creator
Website: <http://www.scratchingout.com>



Tong, America's first fuchka cart

In a tin foil container there were seven crispy semolina shells filled with seasoned potato, yellow peas, onion, green chilli, and cilantro; they were topped with grated hardboiled egg. The sauce cup at the centre was almost full to the brim with a lip-smacking tamarind water. I dunked a 'fuchka' in that water, popped it into my mouth, and closed my eyes to relish the burst of flavours, which is unique to Bangladesh's most beloved street food. My palate danced to the crunchiness and hot-sweet-tanginess of the deep-fried orb. I was instantly carried back to the life I left behind in Dhaka.

On that September afternoon, however, I was nowhere near Dhaka, I was standing in Jamaica, a neighbourhood of Queens, New York City. I had been waiting in front of Tong, America's first fuchka cart. NYC's borough of Queens is famous for Bangladeshi restaurants, but there was a niche market quietly waiting to be tapped; no one was selling authentic Bangladeshi street food until Tong came on the food scene.

"When I first came up with the idea of selling Bangladeshi street food, not a single person I know encouraged me to go for it," said Naeem Khandaker, 29, the brain behind Tong. "If it is not bhat-mach-biriyani, it is not going to sell, everyone said to me."

Khandaker proved every naysayer wrong. However, it took him countless hours of hard work, sleepless nights, and an ironclad determination to be successful in the business. The first Tong cart was established on 73rd Street in Jackson Heights. Today, in addition to its Jackson Heights location, Tong boasts fuchka carts in Jamaica and Ozone Park neighbourhoods of Queens. There are also two Tong franchises in Bronx and Brooklyn.

The beginning was not easy; it was a one-man show. "I cooked all night and in the afternoon, I sold my food. I did this every day, seven days a week," he said.



The first one month was slow, people were not ready to pay \$6 for a plate of fuchka or chotpoti. One can buy a plate of chicken biriyani for as low as \$7 at the Bangladeshi restaurants of Queens. However, the reluctance of customers soon changed into curiosity and anyone who tried Tong's fuchka, chotpoti or jhalmuri came again and again. It was what Tong was selling, the uniqueness of its menu and its quality that brought people back to Tong.

"Tong has very limited social media presence today, but in the beginning, it literally had zero presence on social media," Naeem said. "I believe that for a business to become successful, promotion by word of mouth is the most effective method."

"If you consistently sell quality products or services, you do not have to worry about promotion or advertising," he added. "It is your customers who will promote your business."

Today, many people drive to New York from neighbouring states like Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania only to enjoy

a plate of fuchka at one of Tong's five carts. Its customers are not just Bangladeshi Americans, Indian, Pakistani, European, Hispanic, and African Americans are also spotted in front of Tong, all waiting for a taste of authentic Bangladeshi made-from-scratch street food.

In addition to traditional fuchka, Tong is also popular for its doi fuchka, chotpoti, jhalmuri, and bharta prepared from green mango, guava, strawberry, and pear.

Asked what's now cooking in Tong, Naeem, who started his street food business in 2018 with just \$50,000, said that he was looking forward to opening his first brick-and-mortar Tong in Jamaica, Queens this October.

"In the restaurant version of Tong, our customers will enjoy a wider range of Bangladeshi street food," he said. "We will have an open kitchen, which will allow our patrons to directly see how our food is prepared."

Back in 2018, Naeem was a 26-year-old college student in New York City. The

more he explored the city, the more he realised that not one Bangladeshi culinary entrepreneur was selling authentic Bangladeshi street food. Not only that, a large number of restaurateurs of Bangladeshi descent were actually selling North Indian food under names like Taj Mahal, Gandhi, Kohinoor, Star of India, etc.

"I am proud of my Bangladeshi roots and I was willing to take the risk to do something that nobody dared to do before and that is, sell Bangladeshi street food to the New Yorkers," Naeem said.

His venture not only proved profitable, but also drew attention of the media — Tong was featured in The New York Times and NY Mag, and is soon expected to be featured in an HBO documentary on street food. Tong was also one of the six finalists in the Best Freshman category at the 2019 Vendy Awards, a prestigious street food contest that used to be hosted by a non-profit advocacy organisation called Street Vendor Project, to promote the vibrant street food scene of New York City. The annual festival successfully ran from 2005 to 2019.

Tong's success has inspired other entrepreneurs as well. A number of young Bangladeshi immigrants have followed in Naeem Khandaker's footsteps and opened their own successful fuchka stands in New York City.

If I have to mention one Bangladeshi food that I always missed here in the US, it was fuchka made in Bangladeshi style. Although I do not live in New York, I do not live too far from it either, so I rejoice in the fact that I have finally discovered a place whose crumbly-flavourful fuchka can satiate my craving for it 365 days a year, for Tong is open every day rain or shine.

By Wara Karim
Photo: Wara Karim