

MACHHER JHOL

Story of the Bengali FISH CURRY



Some like it watery, cooked with large tomatoes and spiced with fiery red chillies; others prefer a thick, mellowed version with vegetables tossed in it. There are cooks who will vouch for the tradition of frying fish before adding on the gravy, others stir fry the spices in water before adding the freshly cut fish pieces in it. Which is a better method to prepare fish curries? Who is to say?



Long before the Jamuna bridge came to use, the only way to reach the northern districts of Bangladesh, like Nilphamari, was by bus through Aricha and across the river Jamuna on ferries. It was a long wait often taking two hours to eight hours just waiting for the ferry!

What made those long waits worthwhile was the food served at the shanty restaurants dotted on the sides of the road leading to the *ghat*. The eateries would have large woks at the entrance, each filled to the brim with mouth-watering curries — fish, egg, and chicken.

At the *ferryghat*, rice and watery curries were staples. My father was especially fond of the food served there, and everytime we were travelling to Nilphamari, he made it a point to feast at the restaurants along with us children. No matter how much mother wanted to discourage him, it was all in vain!

Enthused by the flavour of the curries, father inquisitively asked about the preparation of the food, especially the secret behind the bright red colour of the curries. The answer he got was that the gravy is prepared from a simple paste of turmeric, red chilli, and onions! Mother tried and tried again to replicate that red fish curry at home, but never quite succeeded. That distinctive whiff of the fish, and that bright red colour were always missing.

Amma was certain the secret ingredient in making that watery, red curry has remained a secret with the restaurateurs!

Having the curry at the *ferryghat* was nothing short of a family ritual, but if we ever missed it, there was always the food on the steamer or on the ferry itself. No matter which dish one opted for, the chicken or the fish, the gravy and the rice and daal were free! One could eat to heart's content.

People who still travel long distances to the southern regions of the country can get the taste of that heavenly food. Some teased that the recipe to the delicious taste was the riverwater itself!

Although it has been proven impossible to replicate that distinctive flavor of the curry at the *ferryghat* that is not to say that the technique in making delicious *macher jhol* has not been mastered.

Fish curries remain one of the most favoured dish for Bengalis. A word of caution though, making the gravy light does not mean one can add endless pints of water. Creating the right balance is an art in itself, and takes a while to master.



Who can forget the taste of hilsa cooked in a light broth using just turmeric, red chillies, salt and some onions? The *ilish* curry itself has many variations, which cooks across Bengal have seasoned over centuries. The gravy is often thickened to one's

liking by simply adding potatoes, pointed gourd, green bananas, or large cucumbers. There are many who use mustard oil, green chillies and poppy seed paste to reduce the gravy. No matter what ingredients are used, one of the basic requirement for the dish is the fresh fish from the river.

One does not require a hilsa to make the dish tasty. Koi, magur, shing, or shol— cooked with potatoes, eggplants, cauliflower and tomatoes, and steaming white rice can also do the trick.

The technique of cooking fish varies from one region to another and depends on using the spices in the correct proportions. In our neighbouring districts of northern Bengal, cooks sprinkle jeera powder and that simple hack completely changes the taste of food. And, of course, some

use lentil fritters to thicken the dish.

The mystery in cooking the perfect fish curry not only lies in the amount of water used, or the fish itself. A lot also depends on the vegetables. Although tomatoes and potatoes are commonly used, how many of you have relished on the traditional food of bitter gourd cooked with small fish in a light gravy? One needs to taste the divine dish to appreciate the subtle use of the vegetable to change the taste of the food. The trick is simple, the bitter gourd in cut and salt rubbed on its surfaces to drain the bitter juice out. Although this does not take away the signature taste of the bitter gourd completely, adding all the ingredients takes the dish to new heights.

Before I end, I would like to pose one question to the readers. Is there an ideal way to cook fish? If you are a Bengali, the answer to the question is a simple no. Rivirine Bangladesh is a source of abundant variations of fish, and each region has developed their own unique way of cooking them. There was a time when resources were geography bound, but as more and ingredients are found equally across the country, regional variations are being tried out across the country. This has added variations in the way we cook fish, especially the *majher jhol*, the curry.

Based on the article, "Ghater jhol theke ghoror jhol; radhte parle shobie mojar" by Shahana Huda Ranjana.

**Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed
Styling and Food: RBR**