

THE IFTAR EXPERIENCE

PORT CITY STYLE

Iftar means a little more to us than just the ritual of breaking daylong fast during Ramadan. It means rekindling the bonds we have with our family, friends and community in general. It means being grateful for all that we have, and spreading the kindness and goodness of heart to those who need it the most. But that does not leave the delicacy out of it, which we have made our own over the decades of cultural practices. Every city has an essence of iftar to call its own. In today's issue, we bring everything that makes Chattogram's iftar scene -- the brotherhood, sense of equality and delicacy -- all wrapped in one.

Chattogram's go-to iftar destinations

Be it a roadside stall or upscale restaurant -- almost all the restaurants in the port city -- no matter how big or small -- have something tantalising to offer to customers, who are thronging the places to purchase iftar items.

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

Iftar has taken a different form altogether in the subcontinent. In Bangladesh, iftar accounts for not only the delicacy but also the bonds that get strengthened in the process -- be that within the close circle of family or friends or that of the community.

However, the country has its own favourites when it comes to choosing the delicacies. Though many prefer homemade iftar, locals continue to rush to different stalls for diverse delicacies such as jilapi, firni, halim, chicken tikka, kabab, pizza, roll, lassi and doi to make the ritual of breaking fast more pleasing.

Certain places or dishes have special appeals based on the city you're in. As Ramadan begins, the port city has also geared up for an iftar extravaganza.

Be it a roadside stall or upscale restaurant -- almost all the restaurants in the port city -- no matter how big or small -- have something tantalising to offer to customers, who are thronging the places to purchase iftar items.

Like the capital, Chattogram has its area-specific favourites for iftar as well, even though on a smaller scale. Starting from Enayet Bazar's Royal Sweets, Handi at Wasa intersection, GEC's Candi, Sadia's Kitchen, to Lalkhan Bazar's Highway Sweets, Halishahar's Gausia Sweets, Kazir Dewri's Royal Heart and Sakura Kebab, every corner has something to claim to be its own during the festivities of iftar.

Then again, there are some popular iftar places that have the city's heart. One such



outlet is that of Rodela Bikel, a restaurant located at MA Aziz Stadium Market, which emphasises nutrition and hygiene when preparing iftar items. A good number of customers throng the shop searching for delicacies.

Another interesting iftar destination for the port city dwellers is Barcode, which offers the "biggest iftar bazar in the city". "Barcode Food Junction" is a combination of four restaurants under a single roof in Shulokbahar at Muradpur in Chattogram city, namely -- "Mezban Khaile Aiyun", "Birchattala", "Teheriwala", "Burgwich Town" and "Ometra".

Their iftar menu features swarma, various items made with meat and countless kebabs. The restaurant offers more than 170 delicious iftar items ranging from different cuisines every day. The food hub has been hosting nearly 350 people, at a time under its roof now.

People from far and wide come here to enjoy a multi-cuisine and live kitchen experience.

All these places make Chattogram's iftar scene a bit more happening every day. What could be a greater joy after a daylong fast to enjoy beautifully curated delicacies with your loved ones?



'No one returns empty-handed from here'

MOHAMMAD SUMAN

Every day at the port city's CRB intersection, around 300 people gather to break their fast. Most of these people belong to the lower-income groups of the city, including some with very little means to go by.

The arrangements are done by Bidyanando Foundation, who also ferry iftar items for free across the city on a truck.

Mohammad Haniif, a Bidyanando volunteer, said they serve mutton biriyani along with regular iftar items twice a week. "We also serve some 2,000 packets of iftar items and biriyani every Friday with cooperation from Chattogram Metropolitan Police," he added.

Zulekha Begum, who earns a living by seeking alms, comes to CRB intersection along with her children every day for iftar. According to Zulekha, no one has ever gone empty-handed from this arrangement.

Apart from Bidyanando, Mohiuddin Chowdhury Foundation and other charity organisations distribute iftar to 2,000 people across the city.



Where differences bow to brotherhood

Behind Anderkillah Shahi Jame Mosque's unique iftar arrangements

ARUN BIKASH DEY

Hundreds of fasting Muslims, sitting on the floors, waiting to break their fast with the call for evening prayer -- such has been the everyday scene at the port city's Anderkillah Shahi Jame Mosque during the month of Ramadan for over a decade.

Fasting devotees from all across the city -- of all ages, social and economic classes -- assemble at the mosque premises after the Asr prayers every day to have iftar together.

In the afternoons, all differences and class barriers fail to the call of brotherhood.

Anderkillah Shahi Jame Mosque bears the testimony of the Mughal era in Chattogram and is of immense historic value. The mosque was built by Shayestah Khan in 1667AD on the order of Emperor Aurangzeb to commemorate the Mughal victory over the region.

Maulana Saeed Muhammad Anwar Hossain Taher Jaberi Al Madani -- who has been the mosque's Khatib since 1996 -- initiated the iftar arrangements in 2001, according to sources.

In the early years, the arrangement used to be of a small scale. However, it took its present form in 2008. The practice came

to a halt in 2020 due to the pandemic. But it's back with a new zeal this year, said organisers.

Around 400 people took part in iftar every day so far, said Mohammad Hassan Murad, the khatib's assistant.

"We will arrange iftar for 3,000 people after the 10th Ramadan and for 5,000 people from the 15th," he added.

Preparations for the iftar start in the morning, sponsored by well-off individuals who wish to remain anonymous, said Jainul Abedin, general secretary of the mosque committee.

Twelve cooks prepare the food, while 15 more "khadems" serve them during the iftar. Apart from regular traditional iftar items, seasonal fruits and biryani are also served occasionally.

Md Mamun, a rickshaw puller, said people from low-income backgrounds like himself, are greatly benefitted from this iftar at the mosque as the food is free of cost.

"Here, there is no discrimination between the rich and the poor. Everyone breaks their fast with the same food, sitting side by side on the floors," Mohammad Shahjahan, a student of Government City College, told this correspondent while joining the mosque's iftar yesterday.



Rice, milk, sugar and a touch of love

Cafe Arman serving their Ramadan special firni since 1987

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

There's something comforting about firni. This simple yet soothing combination of rice cooked in sweetened milk is one of the most popular desserts in the country.

And no wonder, it has made its way to the food lists of many in Ramadan as well.

In the port city, one name stands out when it comes to enjoying this scrumptious treat outside the home -- three-decade-old Cafe Arman, located on DT Road at Dewanhat.

This humble establishment began its journey in 1987. Ershad Hossain alias Arman is the man behind its success. It's a family endeavour, run by Arman and his three brothers. The place mostly sells snacks and tea. But come Ramadan, Arman rolls up his sleeves and churns up pots after pots of this special delicacy, which has taken the port city by a storm.

On average, they make eight huge pots of firni every day during Ramadan. Each pot contains around 150 kilogrammes of firni. Arman, the chef responsible for making the delicious dessert, supervises the cooking process himself.

Talking to this correspondent, Cafe Arman's manager Md Borhan said, "We also make other iftar items, but firni garners the most demand."

This correspondent saw a long queue of people awaiting their turn while visiting the place. The restaurant workers were seen pouring hot firni into small pots, and boxes for selling. Per kg of firni is being sold at Tk 320, while a small cup is sold at Tk 32. To handle the pressure of Ramadan, around 30 to 40 staff members were seen working.

Ariful Haque (60) of Patharghata area, came to the cafe to get some firni for his family. "I come here almost every week during Ramadan," he said.

Not just Ariful, people from Halishahar, Kotwali, Bakalia, Muradpur, Patenga and other distant places also throng here to purchase firni. Apart from that, seasonal retailers and iftar vendors buy it for selling it at their stalls.

So, what's the secret behind their success? What makes Arman's firni so special? Arman smiled and said, "Rice, milk, sugar and a touch of love."

HOME AWAY from home

CU campus abuzz with iftar arrangements after two years



NAIMUR RAHMAN

With the number of Covid cases on the wane and subsequently, restrictions eased, the campuses across the country are coming back to its old self. Students are continuing classes, exams and other academic activities to compensate for the loss in academic time due to the pandemic.

For many residential university students, Ramadan this year entails staying away from home. Shared and joint iftar sessions at campuses are the only means for them to keep the warmth and love alive, now that they are missing away on the opportunity to spend the month at home with their families.

Students of Chittagong University (CU) are no different.

"Being away from family is hard, particularly during this time. But we are getting to stay with our friends this year, and it's a pleasure nonetheless," said Arman Khan, a management major at CU, during an iftar party arranged by his department.

Several different associations and clubs like CUSS, CUAC, CUDS, CUAA, including the district associations, are organising iftar parties every day. In addition to that, students of residential halls also have their sehri together in their dining space at dawn.

"At first when we heard the classes would continue in Ramadan, we were disappointed. But after spending a few days on campus with friends, it is getting better," said Adnan Hossain, a chemistry major.

"There are iftar parties at different places every other day and we always have our sehri together. This feels like a reunion of sorts, to say the least as if we have been spending the time at home with our families all along," he added.

The iftar market near the campus area has also seen a boom this year. Rofiq Miah, a seasonal iftar vendor in gate-2 area of the campus, said, "During Ramadan, we don't sell our regular items. The entire profit that we make comes from iftar items only."

