


Fresh fish or *shutki*?

Shutki is often on the list of favourite foods in a Bengali household. Those who love shutki love it for its intense aroma. Those who avoid it or don't like it, do so for the same reason as well. There is another group straddling the middle, who can't stand the smell shutki gives out during cooking, but love to eat it nonetheless. For them, shutki only becomes a delicacy once it's cooked and served.

It begs the question, however, that despite having so much fresh fish, why must Bengalis have shutki? It is true that many people who live along the riverside areas aren't particularly fond of shutki. For example, people in Patuakhali, Barisal, Bhola or Barguna prefer fresh fish. A lot of people in this region don't want to eat shutki, and they don't cook it either.

How did shutki come to be?

Shutki was the result of a necessity. This necessity was that of preservation. Fresh fish easily goes bad, so an old way of preserving fish was to dry it under the sun and turn it



t h i s
method.
This practice
of drying fish
under the sun in open air is
an ancient one.

In Bangladesh, shutki is produced between the months of October and April. The lion's

share of sea fish derived shutki is produced in Cox's Bazar. Various chemicals and pesticides may be used during production to preserve shutki for extended periods of time, causing grave harm to the human body.

The heartland of shutki

No one ever visits Dubla'r Char in the Sundarbans, Saint Martin's Island, Sonadia, Maheshkhali, Cox's Bazar, Nazirtek, Ibrahimpur in Sunamganj, Mymensingh, the Chalan Beel region, or Sirajganj without bringing some shutki back with them.

The regions mentioned above produce shutki from both freshwater and saltwater fishes. The fishermen in these regions produce shutki from a sizable chunk of their catch, because shutki can be preserved for many days and it has high market demand. In fact, in times of trouble, many families live on shutki and the income it brings in.

III. Shutki is valuable

No matter how much some people might be put off by shutki, it's actually quite expensive. The most expensive shutki are the ones made from lakkha and rupchanda fish. A kilogram of good quality rupchanda shutki can go for anywhere between Tk 3,000 to Tk 4,000, and lakkha shutki goes for between Tk 4,000 to Tk 5,000. Chhuri shutki is sold between Tk 800 to Tk 1,200. The prices in Dhaka are usually much higher than

those in Chattogram or Cox's Bazar. The cheaper shutki is the mixed variety of different kinds of fishes. But the most popular by far is laitta shutki. Sweetwater shutki is usually made from small fish.

Mind-blowing chepa

Chhepa is another shutki whose mere mention is a mouth-watering prospect. Even though it's mainly prevalent in the larger Mymensingh region, it's available in different regions of the country and known by different names, such as sidhol or sidol (regional name in Mymensingh and Cumilla), and byarma (in the hill tracts). Its English name, "semi-fermented fish" is used when exported abroad.

Chepa is produced using puti shutki with traditional fermentation methods. The smell of chepa is so intense that for those who don't like shutki, it causes

much discomfort. On the other hand, those who like chepa shutki like it for its characteristic taste and smell.

Although chepa shutki is popular in Mymensingh and the greater Jashore region, not many people in the North of the country eat it, or are even familiar with it. In Kishoreganj, Mymensingh, Narsingdi, Sylhet, Cumilla and Narayanganj, chepa is the most highly produced variety of shutki. There is a lot of variety in its preparation as well. Many people have chepa shutki with chipped rice and rice cakes as well.

For a long time, I was unfamiliar with this shutki as I hail from Northern Bengal. Then I noticed one day that my cooking assistant at home made spicy chepa shutki with vegetables for their own family. That is when I first tasted it. I didn't like the taste or smell of it then. So, the question persisted, why do people like chepa shutki so much?

Later on, a co-worker's mother prepared some chepa shutki for me. It tasted heavenly. She made it with lots of garlic.

onions,
and green
chillies. Then
I had a similar
chepa bharta with
a red chilli paste. The
eating process involved
a lot of tears and pain, but
it was so good that I couldn't
stop.

In Narsingdi, I had chepa shutki wrapped in pumpkin leaves. Chepa is prepared with aubergine, potatoes, taro, gourd greens, and loti. Others prepare it with taki or shol fish (varieties of snakeheads). I am now a fan of chepa shutki as well. A weekly dose of chepa has become the norm for me.

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