



ESSAY

# Dining at Oxbridge: “Formal”, please

ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

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MANZOORUL ABEDIN

I was a little anxious. It was only the second day of my life at the University of Cambridge, and I was already bombarded with instructions on how to dine. It was a cool October evening, yet I was sweating nervously and profusely in the black suit I brought from Dhaka, topped now with a dinner gown, a mandatory custom for dining at Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge together; often to refer to their academic credentials).

“Formal Hall” has a specific meaning for the Oxbridge student. Essentially it is a fancy, smartly attired meal that happens, at least once a week, in a college’s main dining hall. For Oxbridge, a college is where students live, eat, and socialise (while departments serve the bulk of the academic duties). A formal hall, however, is much more than just dining; it is somewhat a “ritual” with an overarching sense of a grandeur and extravaganza, as Sharpe (1974) described—“the waiters scurried to and fro, bowed down by the weight of the food and their sense of occasion ... the clatter of knives and forks, the clink of glasses, the rustle of napkins”, which to Durkheim were “sacred

objects” (1912/1995).

Awe and wonder were my initial reactions, too, when I arrived at the pre-dinner drinks, gazing at the mediaeval and magnificent wood-panelled hall, buzzing with hundreds of students and academics, and waistcoated servers waiting with trays of drinks of all kinds. I was seduced by the spectacle, forgot about being nervous and wanted to participate, and then to conform almost powerlessly and become a part of the eager ambiance. For the main dinner, I observed, students sat at long refectory tables and the Master (the chief of the college) and Fellows (senior academics) sat on a raised platform—known as the High Table. The main dinner began when the Butler (the dining hall manager) sounded a gong (a large metal disc) and we all stood in silence, and a dinner ‘mantra’ was read in Latin by the Master. I had no idea what it meant but once it was over, the meal began. The ‘normal’ formals comprise three courses and coffee, but special occasions, such as the *Harry Potter* themed formals or the ones to celebrate Burns Night (a celebration of the life and poetry of the poet Robert Burns) or even the nationally themed formals, invariably call for more opulence. Homerton

College’s *Harry Potter* Formals, known to students as “It’s a bit like Hogwarts”, is quite a show with their dining hall dressed up like Hogwarts’ Great Hall, and staff attending as Professors Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall, Umbridge, Voldemort, and Ginny Weasley while students cast as Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Draco.

What was the food like? Rich, copious, an epicurean heap, so to speak. A cursory glance at my formal hall invitation cards still reminds me of a host of pompous range of foods that I had consumed over the years. Churchill College (where I resided for my PhD) once served me buffalo mozzarella, watermelon, crouton and rocket salad Balsamic syrup followed by roulade of beef shin steak with stroganoff sauce, mustard crushed potatoes and seasonal greens, cauliflower risotto with chilli pangrattato, and raspberry crème brûlée and shortbread biscuits as dessert. At Homerton College (where I supervised undergraduates), I had classic prawn cocktail salad, gem lettuce, lemon and paprika, butternut squash and butter bean salad followed by roasted sea trout supreme with salsa verde, lentil, vegetable and herb filo pie, sautéed new potatoes, fine

beans, mangetout and peas, and finally, lemon tart, whipped cream and raspberries as dessert. Thankfully, a much less ‘bombastic’ menu came up when the university Bangladesh society organised an Independence Day formal hall. It included the ever-familiar vegetable samosas, onion bhajis, pakoras and poppadoms as starters; tandoori chicken, beef bhuna, red lentil with spinach and sweet potato, ponir skewers and gulab Jamun and motichur laddu as desserts. However, ‘deshi’ or not, after every formal hall, I have always felt over-indulged, sluggish, fat.

Formal Hall is not just an eatery though.

Pretty soon, after a few ‘formals’, it dawned on me how dining subtly cultivates a habitus (how someone thinks and reacts to the world) for the Oxbridge student. S/he, by participating in the college dining and by engaging in sophisticated intellectual exchanges, feels at ease with people close to the establishment, both within academia and beyond. The Formal Hall thus demystifies the ‘academic elite’ to the Oxbridge student, manifesting why and how these two universities dominate prestigious career opportunities in the world. The micro dynamics of

the dining rituals contribute to the “creation of a social drama” (Dacin et al., 2010) that makes participants feel “special”, which has a powerful bearing on the formation of an individual identity that is uniquely Oxbridge—synonymous with academic excellence, prestige, and power.

True, the Oxbridge formal hall is an opulent affair, involving elaborate costumes and lavish dinner menu staged in a mediaeval ambiance. Agreed, Oxbridge dining rituals still legitimise ‘elitism’—a hierarchy of roles and boundaries. At the same time, it is also true that Oxbridge dining is a coming together—a melting pot—of the old and the new, the seasoned and the promising, in an increasingly diverse global academia. Amidst the competitive climate of academic excellence at Oxbridge, students go through a transformative experience—both negative and positive; internally and externally. All via these festive feasts—also known as Formal Halls.

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MUSINGS

## Of lost recipes and forgotten flavours

AMREETA LETHE

I have always had a rather avoidant recoil to the aftermath of death. The recent but persistent presence of death and loss in my life has only made me want to skirt around and wash my hands of it more; the ordeal of having to return to someone still beloved but no longer here is not one I want to take on more than I have to. And so, I have not found it in me to visit my grandmother’s grave. This August, it has been a year since I’ve seen her.

In the year between, my grandmother—her own presence once as far-reaching as the shade of a banyan tree—and her legacy of delectable, mouth-watering meals cooked in large enough batches to feed the hordes that swarmed her house, managed to make themselves known in the nooks and crannies of the homes she left behind. She was here, too, in her absence, in the hollow kitchen and love-blackened utensils left behind, in all the recipes I had told her to teach me but never gotten around to learning (the thought of her death still only a creeping but distant thought then), and in the dishes everyone seemed to make—the shemai and payesh and dimer halua—which never tasted quite ‘right’ again.

I have since lamented never finding the time to shadow her enormous cooking endeavours come every Eid or Shab-e-Barat, to note and write down her recipes

because I could not afford to trust my already failing memory to remember them all—each perfected over decades of Sisyphean preparation. The few times I had mentioned it though, Dadi had been entirely dismissive of the concept, her own copy of Siddiqua Kabir’s *Ranna Khaddya Pushti* tucked in a bookshelf somewhere, scarcely consulted and gathering dust.

My mother, always more diligent than I, had managed to collect recipes from her mother in her own scrapbook, filled with scribbled ingredient lists, short form instructions, and photos cut out from magazine and newspaper pages to accompany each recipe. And so, carefully penned on a loose leaf by Nanu’s steady Bangla hand—its title distinct in residual red ink, a habit from her teaching days—the recipe for “ilish maacher polao” lies tucked between the pages of my mother’s recipe book. As a sentimentalist through and through and then some, I can’t help but envy my mother for what she has been able to preserve of my Nanu that I haven’t for Dadi. The last jars of sirkar achar threaten to deplete each day.

For all my lamentations, it is not merely grief that sustains cookbooks, but stories of resilience, joy, community, and shared history. Although it has now become somewhat of a joke that recipe blogs will have a novel’s worth of backstory preceding the recipe part of the, well, recipe, the food memoir has emerged as a popular means of truly putting oneself on the plate. The introduction of the personal in the form of such food memoirs begets the political dimension of food, memory, and history, although one might argue



COLLAGE: AMREETA LETHE

that recipe books without explicitly documented histories are still quite personal and therefore political by virtue of their existence and being handed down the family lineage.

In *Cookbook Politics* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), political theorist Kennan Ferguson examines such dimensions and political functions of the recipe book as they pertain to community-building and collectivity, culture and ethnicity, ideology, national and international boundaries, and more. In Tori Latham’s *Bon Appétit* article “Why Is Every Cookbook a Memoir Now?”, Ferguson is mentioned as saying that “the desire to connect has always been central to cookbooks...[having first become] necessary in cultures where family members moved away from one another and could no longer pass

down recipes or techniques as easily.”

Lately, as I contemplate whether it is truly in my best interest to leave home and settle abroad as everyone says, I think most about my people, and then about food. It takes a lot for me to not look at my well-wishers like a kicked puppy, indignant but still hoping they would say something, anything different—that it was alright for me to stay back, that I did not have to be condemned to such exile.

I have often been a staunch critic of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (Mariner, 2003)—a consequence, no doubt, of having to analyse it to death during my A Levels—and in particular Lahiri’s opening description of Ashima Ganguli tossing up jhalmuri for herself during her pregnancy but finding that there was always “something

missing”. It was such a tired take on the immigrant experience, so cliché and overdone and melodramatic and...and now, I find myself in her position, wondering how it would possibly feel to step out of the house and not find a jhalmuriwala a few feet away. Now, I feel as if I know what it is to have “something missing”, be it in all the food that my grandmother won’t cook anymore or in the thought of having to concoct my own jhalmuri overseas with an ingredient list that goes, “Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion,” and wishing “there were mustard oil to pour into the mix.”

There is always more to say about the politics of food and its sociocultural implications—the micro and macro-aggressions aimed at the fragrance of spice, the

joyous use of hands, the hegemonic overpowering of Bangladesh’s cuisine with Indian labels. There is more still to say about the joy and pleasure of food, as Isabel Allende investigates and delights in, for instance, in *Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses* (first published 1896)—the crossings of food and carnal pleasure, “the boundaries between love and appetite”, and the histories of aphrodisiacs and love-philtres.

But for the time being, we circle back to love, and grief. I find myself thinking of my friend who has just landed in Bangladesh from the UK, and how his first story on Instagram upon returning home has been that of a table spread of food. Food made at home, with love and a sense of responsibility, no matter how Sisyphean and mindless its preparation.

I think of the love sustained in the jars of sirkar achar.

When I mentioned to someone I loved about how they were her last jars of sirkar as I was serving it to them, they had told me to keep it for myself, to savour it, to make sure it lasted longer. If I were to hoard every little thing Dadi had left us, it would all begin to rot; how could I let any of it go? But it goes down easier as I watch people I love come to know Dadi, through what she left us because she can’t be here herself. Even if it means there is less and less of her for me to hold on to.

I know, because I knew my Dadi, that the achar is sweeter shared. I only wish I had found the time to write down how to prepare it.

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