

FOR THE LOVE OF FOOD
KANISKA CHAKRABORTY

A PUJO FEAST BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

Tradition meets innovation on the plate

Everyone talks about food during pujo. More often than not, khichuri, polao, ilish, chingri and mangsho tends to land leading roles in these discussions with luchi, and cholar dal playing solid supporting roles. And of course, beyond all this there are sweets. Artful, creative, delicate, yet honest to god mishti. Sandesh, kamolabhog, chandrapuli, narkel naru... the list can go on.

Every year we also look forward to Pujo feasts. Mostly at home, as eateries are really crowded, waiting time too long, and meals rushed. We stay in and enjoy home cooked food. But last year was an exception. We had an invitation to a place which is really close to our hearts.

For those who know my social media shenanigans would know I am often seen at a little piece of heaven called Sienna Café. The good folks who put an incredible spin on the known, making it extraordinary. Every time!

This was a full-scale meal covering the smorgasbord which is Kolkata food, but in forms which we are not familiar with!

Khichuri was possibly the most known and closest to recognition. Brilliant, flavoursome, short grain local rice embellished with nutty hyperlocal ghee came with an assortment of bhajas. For what is khichuri without bhajas?

There was a delectable Calcutta fish fry on a bed of mustard oil and green chilli mash! Turning the humble alu bhorta on its head and making it sing a different tune. Shredded chicken came in a fiery red gravy. A nod to two things. The ubiquitous chicken bharta of dhabas and the laal murgir jhol of Sunday! Spicy yet comforting.

What followed was scarcely believable. A bowl of congee style rice, small bowl of ilisher tel and a large steak of ilish bhaja. The brilliant thing was the ilish was painstakingly deboned. We ate it with a



spoon. Usually when ilish is deboned in a restaurant there is a lot of wastage. This was absolute perfection! Deep umami. Succulent surrender. Ethically eating boneless ilish is a joy. And the tel was redolent of lovely nigella and chillies.

As a salute to the bread omelette loving Kolkata, put came a take on ros omelette. A custard like square, delicate omelette in a red jus. A Goan staple adapted for Kolkata. Came with the unmistakable quarter pound pauruti, toasted. Took me back to the days of my beats around central business district and many lunches of bread omelette.

Chinese cuisine is big in Kolkata. This is Calcutta Chinese. May or may not be authentic but insanely tasty. And one such dish sold in old Chinese eateries is something called shingara chow. Shingara is not to be confused with the classic snack, but really is a meat filled dumpling along with egg noodles, with a deep broth poured over it. Pak choy kept company, added colour and textural contrast.

What is a Pujo feast without mishti? And Sienna's take was to create a crème brûlée of doodh cha. I stay away from all desserts but had a bite of this. Of course, this was intensely milky and sweet but the best part was the smokiness which mimicked the open coal fire on which the tea kettles are boiled street side in every tea stall ever.

As Pujo feasts go, this was truly a stellar one. Known yet unknown. Pushing the comfort envelope. Taking a tried and time-tested cuisine and applying ninja level technique to elevate the meal to an experience. I am told Sienna are doing something similar this year too. Can't wait to go there and be blown away. Happy Pujo folks! May the food gods keep smiling at you all.

By Kaniska Chakraborty
Photo: Courtesy team Sienna Café

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