

# From CHT and beyond: Arpon Changma and his fusion cuisine

He is a 35-year-old dashing chef who specialises in fusion cuisine, a concept of food that is steadily gaining momentum among upscale Dhakaites. Arpon Changma's creations in his restaurant, BBQ Express, combine elements of diverse culinary traditions that originated from different regions and cultures of Bangladesh. With utmost finesse, they craft and promote a "Texas-inspired, Chittagong Hill Tracts influenced" barbecue joint.



Recently, they have opened a second outlet in Banani, where they are dishing up a menu that's got it all — from the grill to the smoker. "I want to highlight our food stories from the sea, the hills, and the plain land. I completed my formal education in 2015 and then went on a year-long food research trip, studying the food culture of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Every item has a story to tell. All the energy from kitchens of Chakma, Marma, Morong, Tripura, Santal, Manipuri, and Bengali are inspiring as they influence my fusion cuisine," says Changma.

Changma's most recent chef-to-chef collaboration was with MANZO Restaurant serving the Dégustation Menu; the dinner event was sold out on both days. That says something about how posh Dhaka is agreeing with experimental fusion cuisine. Arpon Changma has lived his childhood in a quaint village in Rangamati. His interest in cooking began very early on when he ran small errands for his mother in her kitchen. "Pass the salt pot, bring the turmeric!" — my mum was always in the kitchen or in the fields. I learnt to appreciate and understand spice measurements; how to take a whiff of the earthy, roasted food she cooked. For me, my favourite food memory is how my mother cooked a simple meal with sabarang (lemon basil). This strong, sour, flavourful herb was mixed with shrimp paste and chilli and wrapped in banana leaf and smoked over a terracotta stove. The flavour and smell that wafted around our hut is what made a chef out of me," recalls Arpon Changma. He adds, "I am nostalgic about my mum's cooking and always look to recreate it with my techniques." Arpon Changma's well-known salmon-bakarkhani is a tested example of his imaginative mind. Shrimp paste spread on the flat-bread is topped off with smoked salmon and microgreens and added to it,

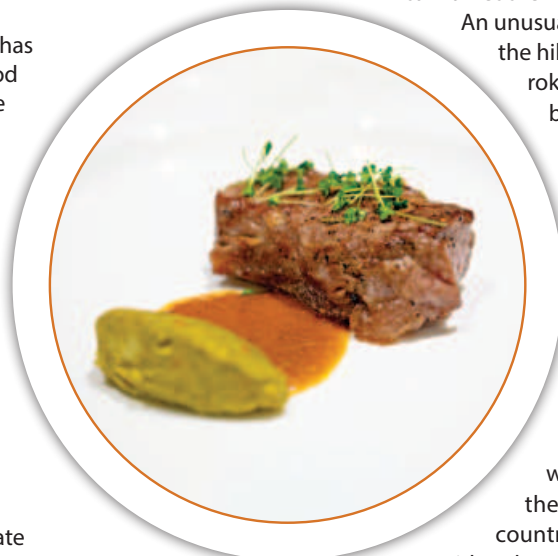
to cut the salmon fat, is a spoonful of sour puree of whatever fruit is in season like amra (hog apple), boroi (jujube), or even kotbel (wood apple).

The spirited chef always prefers local fruits to market the in-season delights.

An unusual fruit found in the hills of Chittagong, rokto gota (wild blood fruit), which is a natural palate cleanser, was once used to make a sorbet in one of his fine dining menus. So, when Arpon works on his fine dining menu he wants to plate all these stories of his country. He narrates his ideas by representing the

local seasons, bringing to the fore the culture, and trying to preserve lost recipes through his food and creativity. The main concept behind his restaurant menu is to elevate all locally sourced produce and then incorporate his fusion techniques into it.

Fusion food is not about mixing different ingredients in a pot. This type of cooking comprises pairing of ingredients, traditions, and techniques of various countries and in Arpon's case, from various cultures of Bangladesh. Presenting our diverse culture through gastronomical delights is such a brilliant idea and Dhaka foodies are loving it!



**By RBR**  
**Photo: Orchid Changma**