

■ EDU GUIDE ■

What it takes to study THE CULINARY ARTS

ABIR HOSSAIN

To claim that food is merely sustenance undermines the impact it has on one's culture. A good dish can act as a landmark of a location, a reminder of fond memories, and a testament to the wonders that food is capable of weaving. Deeming it as the cornerstone of culture wouldn't be too far-fetched of a claim. In fact, our dining practices reflect how we perceive food. While a good meal is best enjoyed when it is shared with our loved ones, what we derive from it is personal. And some have sought to carve their own narrative of what food means to them.

Arpon Changma, chef and founder of BBQ Express and an alumnus from Subhas Bose Institute of Hotel Management, discusses his journey with the culinary arts. "Before delving deep into the culinary world, I didn't envision that I'd be doing the work that I do now. Like most kids from a middle-class family, I had to get a job and a degree," he said. "During my time at culinary school in India however, I noticed how serious the people are about food. This really instilled a drive within me to do something special for my own country."

Lazima Afroz, a student of Applied Food Studies and Baking and Pastry Art at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), talks about why she decided to pursue the field, "I can't really explain why I am drawn to food – it just comes to me naturally. The reason why I decided to attend culinary school is because I wanted to be unconventional. I grew up in an environment where everyone wanted me to do something more 'prestigious' like engineering or medicine. Honestly, there was spite involved in my decision but this is also something that I just love doing."

One can only imagine the energy rushing through the vicinity of each classroom. After all, it isn't only a

sense of obligation that has driven the decisions of each student – passion was undoubtedly a factor and possibly, the most important one. However exciting it may be, culinary schools demand excellence and consistency, and the challenges thrown one's way are just as thrilling.

Zohra Maliha, Executive Chef at MANZO and an alumnus of Le Cordon Bleu reflects on her experience at culinary school, "When I first entered culinary school, I encountered people from different countries and cultures. It was a little difficult getting used to at first but when I eventually did, I realised that everyone had so much to offer from their own cultures. There was a lot to learn."

"All that stuff you see on television about chefs yelling at you, and crying in the walk-in freezer are all true. Having come here with no prior professional experience was a big reality check for me, especially in the first two semesters. Adapting to an environment where you're constantly being watched and graded is a lot of pressure," said Lazima. "As a student of Applied Food Studies, not only am I training to be a chef but I also get to learn about the social, political, and cultural aspects of food. I have really expanded my horizons here"

The purpose of culinary education isn't to just teach students complex recipes. While culinary schools abroad are influenced by techniques and cultures foreign to ours, their primary goal is to help students expand boundaries by giving them tools to execute their own visions.

"Culinary schools teach you the skills. How you use it is completely up to you," says Arpon. "The work I do involves sourcing ingredients from all over the country, from the Chittagong Hill Tracts to the plain land. I want to present the stories these places have to tell through a plate of food."

As for educational institutions in Bangladesh, there are a few that students can apply to.

"My husband has opened up an institution himself called SHINNE (School of Hospitality Integrated Education Epicenter). There are also other schools available such as ICI (International Culinary Institute) as well as the one another operating under the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation that offer quality culinary education," asserted Zohra.

The question remains though, what opportunities are there for graduates with a degree in the culinary arts?

"One can open up their own restaurant and school. There also exists the opportunity to work professionally in hotels and restaurants. There is a lot you can do," said Zohra. Nonetheless, she advises against jumping straight into such a herculean task, and instead taking things one step at a time. Through a gradual process, it is easier to get a grasp of how every minute detail functions.

"Bangladesh, right now, has one of the best food scenes especially in Dhaka. It's full of opportunities and someday I would love to come back and have my own bakery and restaurant. For personal reasons though, I don't see myself moving back to Bangladesh" adds Lazima.

"The service industry requires that you have a lot of patience. You need to allow the experiences to mould you. Most importantly, make sure to keep all your senses active. This isn't an easy field but there are loads of opportunities," stated Arpon.

"Find people who are willing to support this dream of yours because you will need it. Stay strong and be courageous. Try to rack up experiences at local restaurants, consume lots of food media, and just make use of every resource at your disposal. It is so worth it and such a rewarding career," advised Lazima.

Abir Hossain is a sub-editor at Campus.



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