

Gold on a platter!

Irrespective of how some might feel about it, shutkis can be quite expensive. The costly varieties include those made from lakkha and rupchanda fish. High-quality rupchanda shutki can range from Tk 3,000 to Tk 4,000 per kilogram, while lakkha shutki is priced between Tk 4,000 and Tk 5,000. Chhuri shutki sells for Tk 800 to Tk 1,200.

Prices in Dhaka are generally much steeper compared to those in Chattogram or Cox's Bazar. More affordable options include mixed varieties made from different types of fish.

The smelly delight of Mymensingh

Chepa is one variant whose mere mention is mouth-watering. Even though it's mainly prevalent in the greater Mymensingh region, it is available in different parts of the country and is known by different names such as sidhol or sidoil, hidol (regional name in Mymensingh and Cumilla), and byarma (in the hill tracts). Its English name, "semi-fermented fish" is used when exported abroad.

Despite the fact that chepa shutki is popular in Mymensingh and the greater Jashore region, not many people in the North of the country eat it. In Kishoreganj, Mymensingh, Narsingdi, Sylhet, Cumilla



Some people like having shutki of freshwater fishes such as rui, katla, puti, taki, shol, mola, dhela, tengra, bain, gochi, chingri, etc. Among shutkis made from saltwater fish, only laitta is affordable to the general public. Rupchanda, folichanda, lalpowa, chhuri, lakkha, jatka, choukka, and guijja can all be turned into shutkis. In winter, when the lakes and canals dry up, people catch fish in bulk and prepare shutki from them.

A salty treasure for generations

The shutki that is made from ilish has a special name – nona ilish. It is used in all sorts of delicious dishes, which is why it's a favourite for Bengalis at home and abroad. To make nona ilish, the gills, the intestine, and any remaining eggs are first removed before coating the fish with a mixture of salt and turmeric. Then its mouth is tightly bound with a bit of rope to make it airtight

and it is kept like this for 20-25 days to produce nona ilish.

Nona ilish bhorta with steaming hot rice; nona ilish with aubergine; nona ilish wrapped in leaves; nona ilish with pumpkin and gourd greens; and even nona ilish curry with vegetables — they all make delightful dishes.

The aromatic staple of the Hill Tracts

Nappi, another form of chepa shutki, is a favourite among the communities of the hill tracts. People make use of nappi to elevate the taste of their dishes. Members of the Rakhine community in Cox's Bazar, Kutubdia, and Maheshkhali usually produce nappi, which has the intense aromas of saltwater shrimp and other small fish. Even though it too has an intense smell, those in the hill tracts believe it is second to none when it comes to elevating the flavours in a dish.

Nappi is wrapped in leaves from a

banana tree and burned until it's hard before being applied to dishes. It can also be mixed with water and directly used in cooking. Other than the three districts in the hill tracts, nappi is highly valued in Chattogram, Barishal, Barguna, and Patuakhali.

Every month, nappi is being exported across the border through Teknaf and the Chittagong Hill Tracts to India and Myanmar. In various restaurants in Thailand and even Indonesia and Sri Lanka, shutki items like nappi are served.

A spicy affair

All these flavours of shutki rely on the different regional cooking methods to be able to express themselves fully. In some regions, they like having a broth made from larger dried fish. Some people like a drier curry made with tomatoes.

Aubergines, taro, and potatoes are common in preparations of shutki but the dishes must be spicy. People in the northern regions have less of it than people in the south, hence there are smaller variations in the preparation as well.

In winter, shutki bhuna is sold with bhapa pitha and chitoi pitha on the streets of Dhaka. Those who do not want the sweet and nutty taste, love eating pitha with shutki, coriander, or mustard paste.

The journey of shutki, from its origins in necessity to its role as a culinary icon, is a testament to its enduring cultural and gastronomic significance. It has united generations of Bengalis, weaving itself into the fabric of regional cuisines, seasonal celebrations, and family traditions. As shutki continues to gain appreciation in kitchens, it remains a flavourful reminder of our rich heritage.

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and Narayanganj, chepa is the most highly produced variety. There is a lot of variation in its preparation as well.

As I hail from Northern Bengal, for a long time I was unfamiliar with this form of shutki. One day, I noticed that my cooking assistant at home made spicy chepa shutki with vegetables for her own family. That is when I first tasted it and I did not like the taste or smell of it.

Later on, a co-worker's mother prepared some chepa shutki for me. She made it with lots of garlic, onions, and green chillies. I had a similar chepa bhorta with red chilli paste. The eating process involved a lot of tears but it was so good that I could not stop!

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