

A millennial's guide to buying fish in Dhaka



So, here's the tale: it all started with that classic accusation from the older generation, "millennials wouldn't know a fresh fish if it flopped into their shopping bag." We, the city-dwelling, screen-addicted generation, apparently stand accused of being hopeless at navigating a proper raw fish market.

Well, challenge accepted!

My plan was ambitious at first: wake up at an ungodly 4 AM and head to Karwan Bazar just as the fish trucks rolled in. But let's be honest, that didn't happen. I'm a millennial, not a miracle worker. Instead, I settled for

that's not my problem." Fair enough. You don't come to a bazar in Dhaka, expecting customer service with a smile.

But then came my saviour: Munir bhai, the owner of shop number 17, who decided that I was worth a bit of his time. Over a quick cup of tea from a nearby stall, he explained the art of fish buying. "The prime time," he said, "is around 9 AM, when the freshest fish hit the stalls. The longer you wait, the more you are left with what everyone else has passed over."

He also broke down the types: the priciest are pure river fish, then you have the mid-tier fish that are a cross between

reputation matters. Word of mouth is your best friend here; ask locals which stalls are trustworthy, and stick to sellers who don't mind you inspecting their stock closely.



Storage and handling at home

The battle does not end once you have bought your prize catch. Fish is delicate. Keep it cold on the way home, preferably on ice if you are making a long trip, and do not leave it sitting out in Dhaka's heat. Clean and gut it as soon as possible, even if you are not cooking right away. Your freezer is a safety net, but freshness fades the longer you wait.

Munir bhai also had a strong opinion on online fish shopping. "Yes, it's easy. Yes, they clean and deliver to your door," he said, with a shrug, "but you lose the instinct. You don't learn how to judge a fish. Here," he pointed to his stall, "you see, you smell, you touch. Online, you trust."

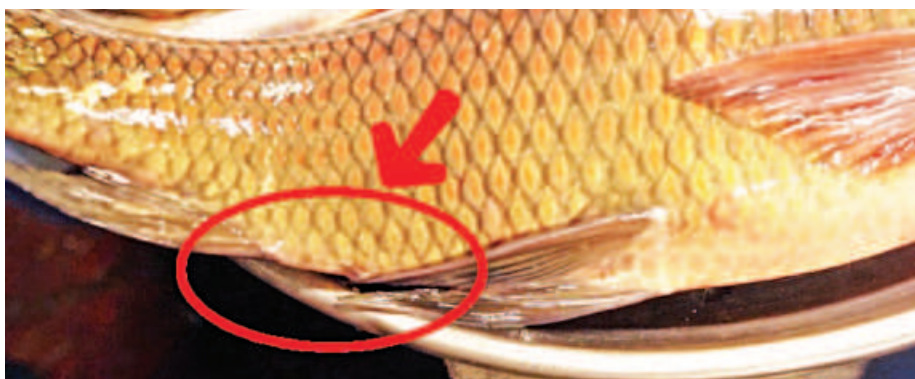
And he wasn't wrong. It would not be a lie if you call using an app for convenience from your couch tempting, but experiencing and doing what many people do daily, such as standing in a bazar, shoulder to shoulder with strangers, picking up on things and how they haggle and get the best fish are some things that an app can never teach.

I felt this eerie sense of success when I walked out of the Town Hall Bazar with the fish I just bought. I chose a fish, according to the checklist, haggled a little and felt like I was failing, learnt a lot, and didn't slip on the wet floor.

For a bystander, it could have seemed like a normal errand, but for me, it was a process that my father and forefathers went through. It reminded me that even some skills, however small, can tether you to the culture you grew up in.

By K Tanzeel Zaman

Photo: Md Ashiqul Alam (Shuvo)



a more human-friendly hour and trotted off to Town Hall Bazar in Mohammadpur around noon.

When I walked into the bazar, it was like stepping into a world of fishy chaos. It was a beautiful, slippery chaos where every seller was busy, every stall was full, and everyone seemed to have only two seconds for a clueless newcomer like me. The air smelt like salt, iron, sweat and fish. So. Many. Fish. The floor was so wet that you might have thought flip-flops were a death trap.

I tried asking a few sellers how to tell a good fish from a bad one, and the responses ranged from polite "I'm too busy" hand waves to the blunt "if you don't know,

farmed and river fish, and finally the fully farmed fish, which are the most affordable. And when it comes to our beloved hilsa, check the neck; wide and firm is the mark of a good one, and clear eyes are a must.

Now, Munir bhai's advice was golden, but here's what I picked up beyond his wisdom, lessons every first-time fish buyer in Dhaka should know:

Freshness matters

Fish doesn't lie if you know where to look. Smell is the first giveaway. A good fish should smell fresh and mild, not like a pungent, damp rag. Then there are the eyes, clear, not cloudy, with a brightness

that screams it was swimming just hours ago. The flesh should bounce back when you press it, never soft or mushy. And don't forget the gills: they should be a healthy red or pink, not a dull brown.

And then he added, "You also must look if the 'naabhi' of the fish is fresh and clean! Well, don't shoot the messenger. This is how the fish seller names the anus of the fish. If it's fresh and clean, it means the fish is still fresh. If it is dark, then the guts of your fish are most likely at the point of no return.

Seasonality and price

Fish in Dhaka, especially hilsa, play by their own rules. Off-season, you'll pay more for less, and what you get may not even be the real deal. Hilsa is notorious for being faked, with cheaper species passed off as the prized fish. There's even research dedicated to spotting counterfeit ilish. Moral of the story: be cautious and don't let excitement cloud your judgement. Sometimes it's better to wait for the season than overspend on a knock-off.

Authentication and trust

Dhaka's fish trade has its fair share of creativity, not always the good kind. With high-demand species, it's not uncommon for sellers to mix in cheaper fish or pass off low-quality stock as premium. That's why