



# A TASTE OF DHAKA

## Street snacks you shouldn't miss

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I decided to compile a random list of street snacks for the bohemian souls of Dhaka. The range of street food in Dhaka is so extensive that some of us have yet to taste new treats at any random street corner or alley in this maze of a city.

I strongly believe that the history, heritage, flavours, and variety of street food in Dhaka are nothing short of the African American soul-food culture, where the impoverished improvised their limited resources, which became a source of comfort and a cultural connection.

Similarly, the best from our meagre kitchen took to the street and earned our toiling people a plate of dinner. It could be a full fledged research topic, and one could document thousands of reasons to understand the "why" and "how" of our deshi snacks -- some popular, some not so much.

Let's put the big talks aside and start listing. With the slightest drop in temperature, you will notice a distinct shuffle in the menu and offers from these roadside pop-up food carts, thatched shops, and vendors walking around parks and residential areas.

Chittoi pitha wallis (walli is the feminine gender of wallah, meaning vendor) come out from every nook and cranny with their portable mud

stoves and terracotta woks that have multiple moulds made in them, so that you can make two or three at once and meet the rush hour demands.

Chittoi Pitha, or steamed pancakes, are a traditional food from Bangladesh, and they rule the street food scenario during the short winter. The thin but not runny rice flour batter is poured over the hot pan and covered with a lid to trap the steam inside. The pithas are white small discs with a slightly crisp base and a soft, bubbly, porous top. Bland and slightly salted, these steamed rice cakes must be savoured piping hot with mustard, mint, and dried fish paste or duck curry. Chilly evenings are meant for this delight. It can also be had with jaggery and coconut shavings or just soaked overnight in sweetened milk.

Dhakai jhuri chanachur makha, which is not the same as the all-famous jhalmuri, is the perfect sinus-clearing street delight. Casually served in a rolled paper cone, often made from the torn pages of an old book with a stiff paper slip tucked inside, doubling as a makeshift spoon, this fiery mix is mind-blowing. My favourite spot for this is DCC Gulshan 2 market, opposite the doughnut place. Tk 20 for a cone, it is basically crispy matchsticks made from chickpea and lentil flour,

called jhuri chanachur in Bangla. The accompanying condiments are onions, green chillies, coriander, lemon juice, and rock salt, all tossed together in a repurposed condensed milk can and given a rhythmic shake with the palm of the vendor's hand.

To spice it up further, people request slivers of the hottest chilli pepper or naga morich, while faint-hearted ones like me request no chilli. The savvy vendor half-listens to your order and generally sticks to his tried recipe and may add boiled chickpeas to tone down the heat a little. In winter, the vendor adds his own secret touch -- half-ripened tomatoes with garam masala and some kind of flavour enhancer.

The crammed footpath of Salimullah Road in Mohammadpur serves the best street food of all -- a bowl of steaming corn soup peppered with chunks of soft bone-in chicken pieces floating perfectly with vegetables like papaya, carrots, and beans. An unusual combination in corn soup, but one spoon and you are flying; add a dash of the served chilli-vinegar

condiment and you are in heaven.

Sweet corn roasted over open coals in Dhaka is a must-try; now is the perfect time to find the sweetest corn in town. The melt-in-the-mouth corn kernels get a smoky flavour from the hot coals, and the tangy mix of lemon juice, rock salt, and red chilli powder makes it a perfect evening snack.

Nowadays, an import from the streets of Nepal has become extremely popular with Dhaka's street food lovers: the refreshing taste of steamed chicken momos served with a spicy red chilli-garlic or a minty, runny chutney is a healthy choice for a light dinner on the go.

Meanwhile, the area surrounding Shilpakala Academy in Segun Bagicha, in my understanding, is the epitome of liveliness and raw energy. Besides all the cultural heavyweight programmes related to performing and fine arts, the place also adds pages to my street food documentation. Food carts, tea stalls, street traders, music, and the melodious chorus of the youth -- all these elements together bring out the vivacious atmosphere.

I gave my heart to a middle-aged woman who sells all kinds of sweet and savoury rice cakes with her children as her helpers.

the skillet makes this healthy street snack warm and nourishing, which keeps you all happy and snug inside. My hats off to this dexterous mother whose simple food items bring home the bread.

Eskaton Garden residential area is a story of a few quaint and posh streets and beautiful alleys. The greenery lends a suburban quietness to the character of the place, which houses the government officers' apartment complex and other administrative offices. And right after dusk, cute little food carts are parked by the pavement, dotted with plastic stools and tables. The carts, standing under the streetlamps, are lit by fairy light strings, giving the place a blue-tinted aura. The mouth-watering aroma of food, and smart kids behind the counter, put on a food show performance every day.

There are many appetising options, but I was impressed with a snack called Afghani momos. A ravioli-kind-of-dish, where the homemade soft dumplings are stuffed with chicken mince and served in white sauce, sprinkled with chilli flakes. Though Afghanistan and momos are like chalk and cheese, the gimmicky name for this light ravioli has done them right in attracting customers.

Street food can be this appetising and



healthy; it is an example to follow. An old man sitting a few carts away from this momo stall makes the best grilled sandwich in town. His tools are soft burger buns, sub-sandwich buns, freshly made chicken schnitzel, and a sandwich grill skillet. Crispy, hot, and smeared with a mayo dip, this sandwich gives the student's burger stand stiff competition.

Student's discount cart is run by a teenage boy who just finished his higher secondary and is awaiting university admission. Setting up a pop-up food cart and armed with his personal favourite burger recipe, he is earning himself good pocket money.

These are some of the not-so-popular but extremely satisfying street foods of Dhaka. And I leave out the established and time-honoured food streets for another day.

I write about these little-known carts that sell home-made food on the streets because, firstly, the foods are either steamed or grilled with little or no oil, which makes them a healthy snack. And most importantly, teenagers, young couples who are in between jobs, underserved women, and grand dames all sit with their secret recipe and feed the laid-back crowd of Dhaka, adding a thrill factor to Dhaka nights. I do want to encourage them.

**Footnote:** All these carts may face restrictions from the city corporation and might have changed location. Kindly spare me if you get a wobbly tummy.



From crunchy malpoas to bhapa pitha and dim chittoi, she makes them all. But her dim chapti is the best seller. I haven't come across this unique food item anywhere in Dhaka except for her cart. The thin rice flour roti is similar to the Sri Lankan hopper, and it is peppered with green chillies, onions, coriander, and an egg scrambled on top. Steaming the tortilla-like roti with a lid on

