

LIFE AS IT IS

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What is the ultimate cure for homesickness? Food, of course!

I tell my friends and family all the time that I may be physically present in the US, but in my heart and head, I live in Dhaka, most days and nights. Ask around, and you will see that I am not the only one who feels this way. It is quite a common emotion among us, non-resident Bangladeshis.

I get homesick in all seasons of the year. For instance, it is winter now, and friends and family who live in Bangladesh are posting photos of cold-season festivities from fairs to pitha utshobs.

The photos of winter foods and festivals on social media are pushing me deeper into nostalgia. No matter how much I wish, I cannot return home at this time to be part of all the merrymaking, so I find my own ways to comfort my homesick heart.

Two places in the US that feel closest to home are Jamaica and Jackson Heights in Queens, New York City (NYC). These are the two neighbourhoods where Bangladeshis from all over America come to experience the country they have left behind.

During the upcoming Christmas break, I am planning to visit Jamaica for the nth time. Why? Because I have been craving fuchka for the last three months. I will visit Tong, America's first fuchka cart, to relish one or maybe two plates of fuchka, and a bowl of green mango or guava bharta.

As I write this, I see seven crispy semolina shells filled with seasoned potato, yellow peas, onion, green chilli, and cilantro dancing before my eyes. The shells are topped with grated boiled egg, just like how they do it back home. The sauce cup in the centre is almost full to the brim with a lip-smacking tamarind water. I firmly believe that anyone who has not tasted

fuchka is missing out on one of the best foods in the world!

Queens is where I feel as if I am in Dhaka. When we become tired of hearing English all around us, my husband and I plan trips to NYC. We love Manhattan, but Manhattan does not comfort me. For this homesick heart to feel a bit less homesick, I need to spend several hours in places like Jamaica and Jackson Heights. There, I can see 'deshi'



men and women in panjabi, pyjama, and shalwar kameez, speaking Bangla in public places, streets lined with Bangladeshi-owned grocery stores and restaurants selling my favourite 'deshi' vegetables, halal meats, and foods ranging from shingara-samosa to kachchi biriyani.

Jamaica and Jackson Heights instantly remind me of Dhaka.

To us Bengalis, food is an integral part of our lives. We are foodies without any qualms. We miss the taste of "ma er haat er ranna" every day, and feel thankful when someone cooks us bhat-mach-mangsho-bharta in a foreign country.

I am a genuine fan of traditional Bengali cuisine, and I am always eager to try new



Bangladeshi restaurants. During a trip to London in 2019, I paid a visit to East London solely because I had always heard that Tower Hamlets, Brick Lane, White Chapel, and Green Street remind one of Bangladesh. At Kolapata Restaurant in White Chapel, I enjoyed a deshi dinner over khichuri, hilsa fry, daal, beef bhuna, and shutki bharta.

I have been to more than a dozen Bangladeshi restaurants here in New York City and one in London, and one common thing about these places that has always bothered me is their lack of hygiene. I would have visited these restaurants more often and even recommended them to my non-Bangladeshi friends, only if these restaurants practised proper hygiene. Our Bangladeshi restaurateurs must prioritise hygiene if they want to attract diners from diverse nationalities.

Jamaica or Jackson Heights is a 2.5-

hour ride from Delaware, and therefore, we cannot go there frequently to enjoy deshi food. However, there is a Bangladeshi grocery store here which sells frozen curries that come all the way from Bangladesh.

You will find everything from shutki, chingri, and taki mach bharta to ilish polao. Cumilla's famous roshmalai and Bogura's mishti doi are also exported to the US, keeping in mind forever-homesick Bangladeshis like me. In addition, one will find kotbel, boroi, chalta, and aamra bharta and different kinds of pitha that come all the way from Bangladesh.

On those occasions when we crave deshi food but cannot go to NYC, we go to our local Bangladeshi grocery store to get frozen ilish polao, chingri bharta, or kochu shaak. Frozen curries never taste as good, but there is a saying: half a loaf is better than no bread. While I enjoy cuisines from around the world, it is only Bengali cuisine that comforts my heart when I am particularly homesick.

We try to visit Jamaica or Jackson Heights a few times a year. Whether it is for breakfast at Sagar Restaurant, a plate of fuchka from Tong, a box of sandesh from Premium Sweets, or a frozen Bangladeshi hilsa from Mannan Supermarket, these places transport me back to my home country, its people, and its delightful cuisine.



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