

How Ismail Hossain Brought Bangladeshi Flavours to MasterChef UK



Seeing Ismail Hossain reach the semi-finals of MasterChef UK is a moment of pride. He carried the soul of Bangladeshi cuisine to one of the world's most prestigious culinary competitions, and in this exclusive interview with The Daily Star, Ismail Hossain shares his unexpected journey and the deep-rooted stories behind his success.

When Ismail Hossain walked into the MasterChef: The Professionals kitchen this year, he did not arrive with a lifelong dream of becoming a chef but with something far more meaningful — memories!

"Back in Bangladesh, I never dreamt of becoming a chef," he shares. "I just simply loved food; I used to help my mother in the kitchen, especially during Ramadan, but that had nothing to do with wanting to become a chef."

Family gatherings, outings with friends, roaming around for street food — these early memories quietly shaped his understanding of flavours, even if he did not realise it back then.

Hossain's journey into cooking began when he moved to London. Like many young Bangladeshis abroad, he started from scratch. He learned from his flatmates by observing and helping them with tasks such as chopping and cleaning.

After a few months, he was slowly picking up the basics. The turning point came when a friend invited him to work at a restaurant. And that's where he met the first head chef, James Knight.

He was amazed by how Knight made a dish with twenty different components and transformed simple dishes into something extraordinary.

From that point onwards, his love for cooking gradually started to grow, and it became something he wanted to master.

Ever since, Ismail has worked in British, Mexican, Mediterranean, and Spanish kitchens and developed a diverse culinary foundation, eventually rising to head chef. Notably, he has never worked in any Bangladeshi or Indian restaurant, which makes his understanding of the flavours more remarkable.

"I learned about all the spices from my mother and books," he says.

His family's reaction to his career choice changed over time. While his brother was supportive from day one and encouraged him to pursue whatever he wanted, others were more sceptical.

"No one said it on my face, but I felt the word 'baburchi' cross their minds at least once," he admits smilingly.

That perception began to evolve when one of his cousins witnessed his professional environment and shared positivity with the family.

Now, Ismail approaches cooking as something of continuous learning. "Being a chef is like being a lawyer; you have to keep studying," he stated. "Trends change, flavours evolve, and with that you must grow."

He believed it, and he also taught all the newcomers about this rule. His dedication to improving a dish involves thorough analysis, trying to break down the spices, and continuously refining his techniques.

Despite his experience, it is his Bangladeshi roots that define his culinary identity. On MasterChef, he presented beef rib bhuna and haleem, two deeply personal dishes that have the core memories and essence of his roots.

His beef rib bhuna is inspired by his childhood memories. Growing up in a middle-class family, Friday was always special to him. After the Jumma prayer, he loved entering the house filled with an irresistible aroma.

The same goes for his haleem dish. It was very personal and holds a core memory, recalling the nights when he and his

brother spent waiting eagerly for his father to bring home haleem from Dhaka.

"My journey is fully rooted in Bangladesh," he says. "If I didn't grow up in that food-centred culture, I wouldn't be here today."

Representing local cuisine on a prestigious platform holds deep meaning for him. Many of the judges were unfamiliar with authentic Bangladeshi cuisine, but through his cooking, Ismail introduced them to the flavours of the land and became a cultural ambassador.

"They did not know what Bangladeshi food truly was, but now they do, because of me," he says with a sense of pride.

He also hopes to change the societal norms of Bangladesh through his platform.

"Cooking is a basic skill and for everyone," he says firmly.

It is a powerful message that reflects his wish to reshape perceptions within Bangladeshi households.

From a young boy who simply loved food to a chef who is representing his country and culture on an international stage, his journey is nothing short of extraordinary.

By Faria Nowshin Tazin
Photo: Courtesy

