

INTERVIEW

Kishwar Chowdhury on Bangali culture and culinary storytelling

Food holds such an emotional place in our hearts. Even when people are gone, we still chase those flavours because they connect us to memory and belonging. That's really what I wanted this book to become—a way of carrying those stories and tastes forward for the next generation.

SAMAI HAIDER

When the *MasterChef* favourite Kishwar Chowdhury and writer Samai Haider caught up to talk about Chowdhury's debut cookbook *Smoke, Rice, Water* (Hardie Grant Books, 2026), the conversation quickly morphed into something much larger than publishing deadlines and recipe testing.

What unfolded instead was an intimate discussion about memory, migration, and the emotional weight of preserving culture through food. As the two authors compared notes on the writing process, the stories behind the book slowly unravelled in the interview—one memory leading to another, one dish opening the door to an entire history.

Writing a cookbook often sits somewhere between memoir and instruction. How did you find your voice on the page, and did it differ from how audiences saw you on *MasterChef*?

The storytelling aspect really began on *MasterChef*. I realised very quickly that people didn't have a reference point for what I was cooking or even where Bangladesh was. Sometimes people would ask me, "Is Bangladesh in India?" and I'd have to explain, no, it's an entirely separate country.

So, storytelling became necessary. To understand the food, people first needed an introduction into my world. I had to explain why this wasn't North Indian food, where Bengali food sits culturally, and why we eat the way we do.

There are almost 300 million Bengalis in the world and yet we're still largely unseen in global consciousness. Once I understood that gap existed, I felt a responsibility to tell those stories properly—not just for myself, but for future generations too.

When you first sat down to write the book, what kind of story did you want to tell beyond the recipes?

I knew very early on that I didn't want this to simply be a collection of recipes. I wanted to show the breadth and diversity of Bengali food because people often reduce everything from our part of the world to just "curry".

I really dislike that word because it flattens everything into one singular idea. We learn French food terminology so easily, but Bengali dishes all become "curries". A rezala, the rich, fragrant

Mughlai style meat dish, becomes a "curry." Haleem, the slow-cooked stew of meat, lentils, barley and wheat, also becomes curry. Even a stir-fried pumpkin bhaji, somehow becomes curry.

I wanted the book to show how layered Bengali food culture really is—the Mughlai influences, the importance of freshwater fish in this riverine delta, street food, home cooking—all these different threads that make up Bengal.

There's so much history tied into the food: Persian influence, Chinese migration, British colonialism, the rivers, the sea. I could honestly write three volumes and still only be scratching the surface.

Many of your dishes are rooted in memory and oral tradition. What was the process of translating those intuitive, inherited recipes into precise measurements and methods?

That was probably one of the hardest parts because Bengali cooking is so instinctive. We learn through phrases like "a little bit of this" or "cook until the smell changes". My mum would say things like, "turmeric should be seen and not tasted"; that's how our mothers and grandmothers taught us. That tells you much more than simply writing "half a teaspoon turmeric". So, while the recipes needed measurements for a global audience, I also wanted to guide readers through the why behind the cooking: why we're using certain spices; what flavour balance we're aiming for; how something should smell or feel when it's ready. I wanted readers to feel as if someone were standing besides them in the kitchen, guiding them.

Food writing relies heavily on sensory detail. How did you work to capture the smells, textures and the atmosphere of your cooking in words?

For me, it was about setting the scene. Take Dhaka's kacchi biryani. Of course, the recipe is there, but I also wanted readers to feel the experience around it—flying to Dhaka in winter, wrapping yourself in a shawl, going to weddings where famous baburchis are cooking giant vats of biryani. Or something like fuchka (crispy, hollow dough balls stuffed with spiced mixture or potatoes and chickpeas). Yes, I can teach you how to make it at home, but honestly, part of the experience is standing beside the fuchka cart while the vendor adjusts the spice and tamarind



PHOTO: YAAMEEN AL-MUTTAQI

water exactly to your taste.

The recipes matter, but so do the memories attached to them. Food is transportive. Smell especially carries memory in such a powerful way.

As writers, we sometimes grow attached to what we create. Were there recipes or stories you simply couldn't bear to leave out?

Absolutely. Leaving out the recipe for peyaju nearly broke my heart. I had begun and pumpkin flower fritters in the book already, but peyaju didn't make the final cut. It's such an important comfort food for us, not just during Ramadan, but all throughout. I still

think about it. But maybe that just means there needs to be a second book!

As writers, we often focus on the words, but this feels like a deeply visual, collaborative work too. Could you talk about the illustrators, photographers and other creatives you worked with, and how their contributions shaped the book?

I really wanted the book to be created through a Bengali lens; I didn't want it interpreted entirely through a western publishing framework. The photographers, illustrators and designers understood the emotional core of the project immediately. We

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Kebabs, christmas cake, and the making of a storyteller

Review of 'Calcutta Kebabs and Christmas Cake' (The University Press Limited, 2026) by Zeena Choudhury

RAANA HAIDER

7 Park Lane is the domestic domain described as "etched in memory like a beloved sepia photograph [...]" It was a world apart from the disciplined confines of Loreto Convent, Darjeeling. Zeenie spent the years 1946 to 1951 at the hill-station, returning for her winter break.

Zeenie's innate curiosity while coming of age, and her close involvement with her extended family, both young and old, form the framework and content of *Calcutta Kebabs and Christmas Cake*. The book's title reflects the city and the symbolic presence of Zeenie's two Queens—her Nanna is the landlady and her maternal grandmother who resides upstairs and Maggie is the other loving grandmother residing downstairs. Thus we have kebabs from upstairs and Christmas cakes from downstairs.

Her first visit downstairs results in the following welcome: "So you are the pretty princess who climbed the convent walls and escaped." Reading it, I giggled, quite pleased, then beamed. I loved her from that instant. "I am Zeena from upstairs. She introduced herself, curtsying. Nanna sent some food. She hopes you will like the kebabs", and thus we have our first introduction to Zeenie. She describes herself in the Dramatis Personae innumerable pages later, as "Narrator and Princess of Park Lane, observant, mischievous and tender-hearted."

The Princess of Park Lane (Berkely, 2003) is a cheeky charmer. "The most notable man at Lower 7 Park Lane was sunburnt. I soon discovered he was 7 Park Lane's very own



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

Rhett Butler, our Clark Gable [...] Every time we met, we would re-enact the final scene of *Gone with the Wind*. I was, of course, Scarlett O'Hara. He was my Rhett Butler—we would both giggle, and then I would say, "Rhett, Rhett. You're not leaving me?" He would reply, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," and then I would sigh and say, "After all, tomorrow is another day."

Zeenie further writes, "Master moshai, to put it simply, was my "bestest" friend. With him, a walk was history, poetry, theatre. We critiqued films and jstras, hummed ragas and popular choruses, studied Zainul Abedin's famine drawings and Jamini Roy's

folk saints, debated everything and dared to form opinions." His name was Dipankar Chakrabarty. Dipankar= deepa (lamp) + pankar (bearer)—fitted him to a T. One who carries light—symbolically, it represents wisdom, enlightenment, guidance and inner brightness. Slowly, as Zeenie grows up, the author Zeena emerges.

Zeenie relates frank details of family members and other painful adult encounters. There is an invitation to Memdidi, Master moshai's wife, and Master moshai's 30th anniversary of their very first meeting in Brighton on January 19, 1920. Amongst much merriment, "Memdidi wore a tight

smile" and "confided the sad truth about her three miscarriages, that, due to medical complications, she would never be able to bear a child."

Seated at the piano, Memdidi sang in plaintive tones: "Shokatore oi kandiche shokole, shono! shono! pita! Ja kichu paay, haraye jaay, na mane shantona"

Late at night, "Nanna spoke in tight whispers, clutching the phone. "Oh no! Master moshai...it just cannot be!...Mira has killed herself." A heart rending experience for a sensitive child to witness.

A contrasting exposure for Zeenie is the arrival of Nana Sahib, her maternal grandfather. "The whole house seemed shrouded in gloom, despite the bright winter sunshine outside. I felt so suffocated that I tiptoed down the stairs to Maggie...and cried for Nanna, who looked so sad. How dare he come back to 7 Park Lane—Nanna's house—after pushing her aside to make way for his third wife? Please, please—can't I stay with you until he leaves?" Maggie replied, "I think this is the time for you to be her special guardian angel, always by her side." At a tender age, Zeenie is exposed to harsh realities of life and the deep pain endured by a loved one.

Moving on to Calcutta's cityscapes steeped in history and rooted in heritage, Zeenat evolves into a compulsive researcher. All her childhood locations come alive with distant memories; as she provides the reader with adulthood research. We read of her favourite places, providing us with the rich background

of its founders in a historical and cultural context. One is transported to an era; a Calcutta in the 1940s with its cosmopolitan composition of inhabitants and their lifestyles.

Cultural and religious rituals of Eastern and Western origin: Muslims (Sunni and Shia), Buddhists, Jews, Hindus (of every caste), Christians (Anglicans, Catholics, and Protestants) appear. Zeenie's accounts of these exposures include descriptions of gastronomic spreads, all in good taste.

No book on Calcutta may omit Park Street, known in colonial times as Shaheb Para. Zeenie's haunts read like a map of the city's social life: Flury's Tea Room with Granny Maggie, Trincas, Mocambo, the Grand Hotel, and Nahoum's in New Market, founded by a Baghdadi Jew in 1902 and still beloved. College Street, Calcutta's famed Boi Para, rounds off the tour—a bibliophile's haunt then as now, best followed by a stop at The Coffee House and Presidency College.

Calcutta Kebabs and Christmas Cake comes to a close on page 568. An encyclopaedia of 25 pages of Dramatis Personae and glossaries follows. Family photographs spanning the 1930s to 2026 add faces to the narrative, ending with genealogies. Close to 600 pages, the book qualifies for the remark by British author C.S. Lewis (1898–1963): "You can never get a cup of tea large enough or a book long enough to suit me."

Raana Haider is the author of *India: Beyond the Taj and the Raj* (University Press Limited, 2013).