

Rice as soul food

For Bengalis, rice is not only food but also nourishment for the soul.

One favourite is jao bhaat, a congee-style dish with lemon leaves, ginger, salt, and sometimes charred chilli and nigella seeds. A lighter version uses seasonal vegetables like potatoes, greens, and gourds, lifted with a spritz of lemon, known as lebu bhaat. In villages, vegetables are steamed directly in rice, creating a starchy mash that blends beautifully with the grains.

Another classic is ghee bhaat, rice seasoned with salt and clarified butter. It can be enjoyed with sugar, molasses, or rich meat curries. A sweet version with coconut shavings and sugar was once a traditional treat, though now it is almost forgotten.

There is pish-pash, a congee cooked with chicken, moong dal, and vegetables, finished with butter and

ginger, perfect when unwell. Sticky rice, or binni chaal, makes khichuri: the brothly version pairs with beef curries and fried aubergines, while the drier version is cooked with lentils and winter vegetables.

Bosha bhat is another beloved preparation. It is rice cooked by absorbing its own starch water. And then there is panta bhat, fermented rice eaten with chillies, onions, and salt. Once the staple of the common people, it is now a delicacy in Dhaka during Pahela Baishakh, served with hilsa and vegetable mash.

Bengalis also cherish sweet rice dishes. Payesh is made with molasses for a deep, earthy flavour. Phirni is made with ground rice cooked in milk, flavoured with nuts and raisins, and decorated with silver foil. Jorda, bright orange rice with citrus pulp and zest, is another festive favourite.



#Recipe

Rustic khichuri from Kushtia

Some recipes are measured with cups and spoons. Others are measured with instinct. This rustic khichuri belongs to the latter.

I learned it from my mother-in-law in Kushtia, though I have never matched her touch. Perhaps it is because her cooking carries not only skill, but the rhythm of a lifetime spent with grains, vegetables, and the flavours of her land.

For 500 grams of rice, she loosely uses 250 grams of mashkalai daal, soaked until softened. The rice and daal are washed together, then mixed with mustard oil, onions, ginger, garlic, and simple spices like turmeric, red chilli, cumin, coriander, and salt. Whole garam masala adds warmth. Everything is combined by hand, water poured generously, and even the spice clinging to fingers is washed back into the pot.

The khichuri cooks slowly until tender, neither dry nor soupy, but soft and moist, with grains melting into one another. The aroma of mustard oil and garlic fills the room. It pairs



beautifully with beef curry, but is just as satisfying with begun bharta, seasonal vegetables, fritters, or a fried egg.

Each time I cook it, I am reminded that the finest food is often the simplest; recipes carried from one generation to the next, holding memory and belonging in every bite.

By Aziza Ahmed
Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel
Food & Décor: RBR

