#FOOD & RECIPES

Rediscovering the quiet comfort of traditional Bengali daal dishes



Nobody has ever queued up for lentils. Nobody takes a photo of the steel bowl sitting at the corner of the table. And yet, take it away and see how lunch goes. The rice looks lost, and the bhorta feels lonely. And someone always asks, "Daal nei?"

You can tell daal is coming before you see it. Around one in the afternoon, there is a hiss from the kitchen, garlic and dried chillies hitting hot oil, and the whole flat knows lunch is minutes away. That sound is the chonk. It lasts ten seconds, and no one has ever been annoyed by it.

A plain plate of daal-bhaat is a small miracle. Rice by itself is just rice. Pour a little over it, and it becomes a meal you want to keep eating. Add alu bhorta with a lot of mustard oil, a begun bhaja, and maybe a fried egg with lacy edges, and you have the kind of lunch nobody describes as special, but everybody remembers.

A cooked cup of lentils has about 18 grams of protein, plus fibre, iron and folate. Eaten with rice, the two cover each other's gaps in amino acids, so the plate ends up healthier than it looks. Our grandmothers figured this out long before anyone printed it on a packet.

It is also affordable and very forgiving. Too thin, let it simmer. Too thick, add water. Forgot the salt; add it at the table. Daal never complains!

Ask people about daal, and they rarely talk about protein. They tell you about one particular bowl. A grandmother's, a hostel mess's, the one that appeared during exams and fevers and the weeks when nothing was going right. Most of us didn't have a favourite dish on those days. We just wanted the thing that was already in the kitchen.

Then there is the eating itself. Mashing rice and daal together with your fingers, warm enough to loosen the grains, is something no spoon has ever managed. The smell of turmeric, garlic and toasted spice hanging around the kitchen afterwards is the closest thing we have to a family perfume.

We talk a lot about the dishes that show off, the biryani, the kachchi, the naans and kebabs that need a nap afterwards. Daal does not need any of that. It sits on the table, gets scraped clean, and somebody always asks for a second helping!

DAAL-BHORA POTOL (LENTIL STUFFED POINTED GOURD)

Ingredients

For the stuffed pointed gourd —

10–12 medium-sized potol (pointed gourds); ½ cup chana daal (Bengal gram), soaked for 1 hour; 1 tsp ginger paste; ½ tsp cumin powder; ½ tsp coriander powder; ½ tsp turmeric powder; 1 green chilli, finely chopped; salt to taste; 3–4 tbsp mustard oil

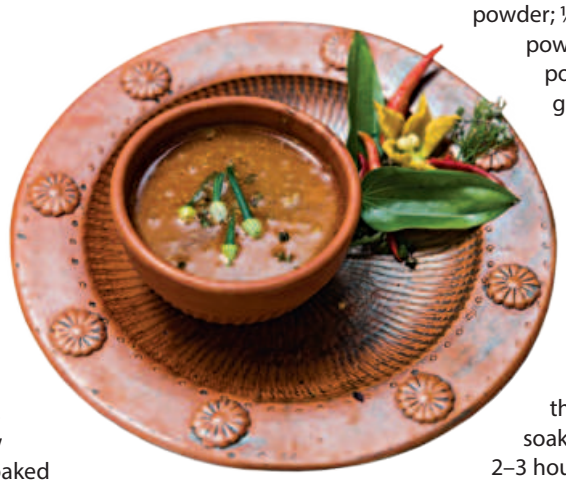
For the gravy —

1 medium tomato, finely chopped; 1 tsp ginger paste; ½ tsp cumin seeds; 1 bay leaf; ½ tsp cumin powder; ½ tsp coriander powder; ½ tsp red chilli powder; ½ tsp garam masala powder; 1 tsp sugar (optional); salt to taste; 1½ cups warm water

Method

Peel the pointed gourds lightly, leaving a little green skin for texture, and trim both ends.

Carefully make a lengthwise slit in each pointed gourd and remove the seeds to create a hollow centre. Boil the soaked chana daal until tender but not mushy, then drain thoroughly and coarsely mash it. Heat a little mustard oil in a pan and add ginger paste, chopped green chilli, cumin powder, coriander powder, turmeric and salt. Add the mashed daal and cook for 4–5 minutes until the mixture becomes fairly dry and aromatic.



Allow the filling to cool slightly, then stuff each pointed gourd with the prepared daal mixture. Heat the remaining mustard oil in a pan and lightly fry the stuffed pointed gourds until golden on all sides. Remove and set aside.

In the same pan, add the bay leaf and cumin seeds. Once fragrant, add ginger paste and chopped tomato, followed by cumin powder, coriander powder, turmeric, red chilli powder, salt and sugar. Cook until the tomatoes soften and the masala releases oil. Add warm water and bring the gravy to a gentle boil. Carefully arrange the fried stuffed pointed gourd in the gravy, cover and simmer for 10–15 minutes until tender and well coated with the spices. Finish with garam masala and a drizzle of mustard oil. Serve hot with steamed rice, pulao or luchi.

BEGUN WITH MOONG DAAL CRUST

Ingredients

2 large eggplants (begun), cut into thick round slices; ¾ cup yellow moong daal; 2 tbsp rice flour; ½ tsp turmeric powder; ½ tsp red chilli powder; ½ tsp cumin powder; ½ tsp ginger paste; salt to taste; 1 tsp poppy seeds (optional); mustard oil, for shallow-frying

Method

Wash the moong daal thoroughly and soak it in water for 2–3 hours. Drain and grind the daal into a thick, coarse paste, adding very little water. Transfer the paste to a bowl and mix in the rice flour, turmeric powder, red chilli powder, cumin powder, ginger paste, salt and poppy seeds. Add a little water if necessary to make a thick coating batter. Wash the eggplant slices, pat them dry and sprinkle lightly with salt and turmeric.

Heat mustard oil in a frying pan over medium heat. Dip each eggplant slice into the moong daal batter, ensuring it is evenly coated on both sides. Carefully place the coated slices in the hot oil and shallow-fry over medium-low heat until the lentil crust becomes golden and crisp and the eggplant is tender inside. Turn gently and cook the other side. Remove and drain on kitchen paper. Serve hot as a delicious Bengali-style starter or side dish with steamed rice and daal.

DAAL WITH TARO STEMS (KOCHUR DATA DIYE DAAL)

Ingredients

1 cup masoor daal (red lentils); 2 cups tender taro stems (kochu data), peeled and cut into 2-inch pieces; 1 medium tomato, chopped; 1 tsp ginger paste; 2 green chillies; ½ tsp turmeric powder; ½ tsp cumin seeds; 1 dried red chilli; 2 tbsp mustard oil; salt to taste; 4 cups water; ½ tsp cumin powder (optional)

Method

Wash the daal thoroughly and soak for 20 minutes. Wash the taro stems, remove their tough outer fibres, and cut them into pieces. Boil the stems separately until completely tender, then drain.

Cook the daal with turmeric and water until soft. Heat mustard oil in a pan and add cumin seeds and dried red chilli. Add the ginger paste and chopped tomato, and sauté until the tomato softens. Stir in the boiled taro stems, cumin powder and salt, and cook for a few minutes to allow the flavours to develop.

Add the cooked daal and green chillies, mix well, and simmer for 10–15 minutes until the daal reaches the desired consistency. Adjust the seasoning and add hot water if needed. Serve warm with steamed rice.

Important tip: Taro stems must be cooked thoroughly, as insufficiently cooked taro can cause itching or irritation in the mouth and throat. Choose tender stems and cook them until completely soft.

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