

Delectable Palates of Bengal

By

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Abstract

Bengali cuisine is a culinary style originating in the Bengal region in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, which is divided between Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. There is an emphasis on fish, vegetables and lentils served with the staple rice. Many Bengali food traditions draw from previously middle-class activities, such as adda (fun gossip) and other traditional and social functions like Marriage, Anna-prashan. Bengali cuisine is known for its varied use of flavors, confectionaries, and desserts.

Keywords

Bengal, cuisine, authentic taste, special ingredients.

Introduction

Bengal has been famous for its food and cuisine ever since the establishment of civilization in the landscape of gluttons, made up of the sovereign state of Bangladesh (earlier East Bengal) and the Indian state of West Bengal. Traditionally, Bengal has been renowned for its extraordinarily fertile agricultural land. Again the rivers of Bengal are an inexhaustible source of different varieties of fish. Thus from ancient times, rice and fish emerged as the staple food for the Bengalis. Apart from this Bengal has a rich tradition of many vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, and most of these such as Dal (lentil soup), posto (vegetables made with poppy seeds), fish curry, and mutton curry are consumed with rice. There are ample references scattered across Bengali texts describing rice as the primary food item in their diet. Payesh (a Bengali sweet dish) prepared with rice, milk, and date jaggery or sugar is prioritized on every auspicious occasion. Besides boiled rice, different kinds of puffed rice such as Muri, Khoi, and flattened rice also fulfill the daily needs of the common Bengalis.



After rice, dal (lentils) is popularized among Bengalis, Khichudi, a preparation of rice and dal and some spices, often offered to the deities as Bhog (Offering) is also a significant dish that determines the importance of rice and dal in Bengali's daily life.



Image 1: Rice Field

Characteristics

Bengali cuisine can be subdivided into four different types of dishes:

- Charbya, or food that is chewed such as rice or fish.
- Chosya, or food that is sucked, such as ambal and tak.
- Lejhha, or food that is meant to be licked like chutney
- Peya or which includes drinks mainly milk or mango drink (aampanna or aampora shorbet)

Bengali cuisine has the only traditionally developed multi-course custom in South Asia that is analogous in structure to the modern service a la russe style of French cuisine, which is served in courses rather than all at once. There is a strong emphasis on rice as a staple, served with fish, meat, vegetables and lentils. Many Bengali food traditions draw from social activities such as adda or Mezban. A traditional Bengali lunch consists of bhaat (rice), shukto (mixed vegetable), alu bhaja (fries), begun bhaja (fried eggplant), dal, chingri macher malaikari (a prawn curry), rui macher kalia (rohu fish curry), mutton, chatni, papad and doi (sweet curd), mishti (sweets).



Image 2: Traditional Bengali Thali

Some of the Highly Recommended Traditional Vegetarian Dishes of Bengal

For most Bengalis, the go-to comfort food is bhaat, aloo bhate, kacha lonka (rice, Bengali-style mashed potatoes, and green chili). Bengal has an elaborate and complex cuisine, but its vegetarian spread is happiness for the soul. The emphasis is on how you cut the vegetables (the chopping pattern has a special significance), the variety of masalas, and the use of ginger as a staple ingredient. All these add a special flavor to Bengali vegetarian meals.

Shukto: A typical Bengali meal begins with a bitter curry. This bittersweet broth of vegetables includes bitter melon, potato, drumsticks, brinjal, hyacinth beans (sheem in Bengali), green banana, and other vegetables. Adding some crunch to it is boris (fried lentil dumplings) making it a delicious gravy dish.

Dhokar Dalna: Dhoka is a diamond-shaped lentil cake made from a mix of chana dal and a little paste of dried white peas. Dhokar dalna makes for a great side dish with its simple gravy and rich lentil cake.

Basanti Polao: Aromatic rice laden in a serene yellow color, that is rich in ghee and sweetness and that is the main characteristic of this dish. Made with a special kind of

basmati rice, basanti polao is loaded with cashews and raisins to provide a crunch and some extra sweetness to the rice.

Aloo Posto: A simple Bengali vegetarian recipe, aloo posto is made with a handful of ingredients. The aloo and the posto (poppy seed) are the sublime combination of the dish. Its unbeatable taste captures all hearts.

Potoler Dorma: This dish is a complete makeover to potol or pointed gourd. A hollow cylindrical potol is stuffed with mashed potato or grated paneer and dry fruits and sealed on both the sides. These gourds are then cooked in a rich gravy and what you have on your plate is pure magic.

Mochar Ghonto: A lot of Bengali cuisine is about zero-waste cooking. This particular Bengali vegetarian recipe is made from mocha or the banana flowers. Peeling the banana flower is quite an arduous task, but the result is so worth it. The chopped banana flowers are steamed and then cooked with a variety of spices, along with nuts and coconut slices.

Labra: A mixed veg. Bengali style. Labra usually goes with the bhog or khichuri during pujas. A lot of unique vegetables go into this dish, like sweet potato, raw banana, taro corn, banana stem along with regular vegetables. Spices and optimum amount of oil is required to bring its authentic and unique taste.

Channar Dalna: The only time you will find Bengalis savour paneer (cottage cheese) is if it comes in the form of Channar Dalna. It is paneer in its truest form and that is what this dish celebrates. The paneer is mashed into a paste and made into ball shapes and fried. Then the paneer balls are cooked in simple onion and tomato based gravy along with slices of potato and selected spices.

Aam er chutney (Mango Chutney): A Bengali meal cannot be complete without anything sweet. Aam er chutney or Mango Chutney is a summer delight. It is a light chutney of un-ripened mangoes that brings together the sweetness of the chutney and the sourness of the mango.

Baigun Bhajja: Pan-fried eggplant, sizzling with aromatic spices. Served with freshly made tangy tomato chutney or served with dal and rice.

Cholar Dal (Chana Dal): Flavoured with coconut, ghee, and an assortment of whole spices. Bengali-style Chana dal tastes mildly spicy and packed with nutrition and low-fat content. It can be served with steamed rice or just chapatis.

Khichuri (Khichdi): Comforting, quick, easy, and irresistibly delicious. A perfect consistency of Gobindo Bhog rice with its exotic smell and flavor and Sona Moong Dal. One can add vegetables like aloo or cauliflower and some desi ghee to taste heavenly.



Image 3: Vegetarian Dishes of Bengal

Some of the Exquisite Non-vegetarian Dishes of West Bengal

West Bengal is famously known as the land of maach (fish) and bhaat (rice). Bengalis share an irrevocable relationship with these two foods that are a staple in almost every household. Since countless rivers surround the state, freshwater fishes are a major attraction with rohu, pabda, koi, ilish and many more varieties.

Bengali cuisine is a blend of sweet and spicy flavors. The delicate balance between the main ingredients and the seasoning plays a starring role. The simplest of meals gain an exquisite identity on adding “phoron” or a traditional mix of pungent spices. The ‘panch phoron’ is used generously and it includes a combination of five spices – cumin, nigella, fenugreek, aniseed, and mustard seed. What sets Bengali non-vegetarian curries apart are distinctive flavors of mustard oil as cooking medium, the paste of mustard seeds and poppy seeds, turmeric powder, and spices like cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, cloves, and mace, crushed into a fine powder called garam masala Bengali style.



Image 4: Vegetarian Dishes of Bengal

Non-vegetarian Bengali Recipes That One Can Try

Doi Maach: One of the most popular Bengali curries, doi maach is a yogurt-based slightly sour fish curry with tender fish chunks marinated in a pool of spices. A perfect lunch/dinner dish, it goes well with steamed rice.

Kosha Mangsho: It literally translates to mutton curry, is one of the classics of Bengali cuisine. Packed with bold spices, this thick curry comes with the right flavors of clove, cardamom, and mustard oil. Along with mutton, big chunks of potatoes are added to enhance the taste and completeness.

Bhapa Chingri: Bhapa means steamed in Bengali, and chingri is shrimp or prawns. This recipe has marinated prawns combined with a spicy mix of coconut, mustard, and chili paste – an absolute crowd pleaser!

Macher Jhol: A staple across Bengali homes, macher jhol is a fish curry made in mustard oil. The dish has fried fish chunks tossed in a curry made by sautéing onion seeds, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, and bay leaf. For seasoning, cumin seeds are also added to it.

Posto chicken: It boasts of a mouth-watering melange of spices and chicken with a nutty paste made with posto. It goes best with rice for a soul-satiating meal.

Bhetki Parcel or Bhetki Paturi: It is a delicious and popular Bengali cuisine. Bhetki is a local silverfish found in Bengal. The dish has marinated fish fillets, wrapped in banana leaf or aluminum foil and baked to perfection.

Fish Kabiraji: These fried fish fillets make for a popular tea-time snack in Bengal. Fish pieces are marinated in spices and then wrapped in gram flour and bread crumbs before being deep-fried.

Sorsebata Ilish Mach: This is one of Bengal's favorite fish recipes. Delicate Hilsa fish is curried in pungent flavors of mustard and poppy seed paste. Hilsa is known as the queen of fish in Bengal and has the most superlative taste.

Fish Kalia: You will find this royal fish curry at most Bengali weddings and other auspicious occasions. It is made with a special kind of fish variety called Rui or Rohu fish, a fragrant and rich fish curry.

Daab Changri: An exquisite Bengali curry, Daab chingri has shrimps mixed with heart-warming masalas and cooked, served in a tender coconut shell.

Chingri Maacher Malai Curry: It is prepared with king prawns and coconut milk, this dish is popular throughout Bengal.

Dimer Dalna: Egg curry with potato, is a very tasty dish cooked with tomato paste and regular spices and can be served with roti and rice.

Tel Koi: A spicy Koi fish curry accompanied by a generous amount of mustard oil is a seasonal delicacy.

Tangra Jhal: A spicy and tangy tangra fish curry that is enjoyable and delicious. Besides, the fish is very helpful in keeping your eyesight strong.

Topshe Fry: This is a traditional Bengali fish delicacy. The topshe fish is marinated in besan and fried in mustard oil. It is mainly served with tea or coffee as snacks.



Image 5: Non-vegetarian Bengali Dishes

Foods That Accompany Best in Bengali Addas

Bengali addas are intense gossip sessions where storms are being raised by the debaters for and against the motion. To fuel these intense sessions there has to be tea, coffee and some lip-smacking snacks.

Ghugni: This is a delicious snack made from boiling chickpeas shimmering in a pool of traditional spices and topped with chopped onion, green chilies, tomato, coconut, mutton chunks (optional).

Nimki: This is made of flour dough, flattened and cut into small diamond pieces and deep fried.

Singhara: This triangular-shaped Bengali samosa is stuffed with a spicy potato mix or keema and deep fried in oil. Traditional chutney is served alongside as a dip.

Chop: These are deep-fried spicy cutlets coated with bread crumbs. Chops can be both veg or non-veg. Veg chops are stuffed with a variety of cooked vegetables and coated with bread crumbs and fried. For non-veg stuffing chicken or mutton mince can be used.

Urad Dal Vada: It is also called Biuli Dal Bora and is cooked with a thick mixture of ground urad dal, sooji, chilies, onion, and other delectable spices. The ideal accompaniment to this vada is pudina chutney.

Jhalmuri: This delicacy is made with puffed rice, a mix of chilies, mustard oil, freshly chopped onions, coriander leaves, and various spices. It is an irresistible snack to munch on by adding chaat masala and lemon.

Makar Sankranti or Poush Parbon of Bengal – The month of Pithe Puli

Poush or Makar Sankranti (Makar means Capricorn and Sankranti is transition) is the time of harvest festival and each house smells of Pithe-Pulli and Payesh. Come January and it's the customary pithe (a type of rice cake) time in the eastern part of the country. During this

time households are filled with the flavors of nolen gur (date palm jaggery) and coconut. The focus of the festival is sweet delicacies and brings culinary diversity across regions. The freshly harvested paddy along with nolen gur and jhola gur (date palm molasses) packed in earthen pots are brought to prepare payesh and variety of pithe along with rice flour, coconut, and milk. Some of the quintessential items are pathishapta, gokul pithe, chittoi pithe, kheer puli, chusi puli, ranga alu dudh puli, rosh bora, mugsamali pithe, rosho puli. This ritual is followed synonymously both in West Bengal and Bangladesh. The festival of Nobanno (Harvest of new rice) is a Bengali harvest celebration usually celebrated with food, dance, and music.



Image 6: Poush Parbon Dishes

Popular Sweets of Bengal

Bengal offers a rich variety of sweet delicacies, sweets, and desserts available in the region are astounding.

Mishti Doi: The creamy and delicious Mishti Doi (sweet curd), is made with a blend of thick milk and jaggery to give it a thick texture.

Rajbhog & Rassogolla: These are soft round sweets made of chenna and dipped into sugar syrup.

Sandesh and Kachagolla: These sweets are relatively dry items made with condensed milk converted into chenna, sugar or jaggery and it can be molded into different shapes.

Malpoa: It's a kind of a pancake, is a syrup-drenched concoction made from flour, sugar and coconut.

Rassomalai: These are small sugar balls of chenna, soaked in malai with a dash of cardamom.

Pantua, Langcha, Kalojam, and Chennar Jilipi: These sweets are made from yummy combinations of milk, flour, semolina, ghee, khoya, sugar, and cardamom. They are dipped into the sugar syrup.

Amrity: It is designed into spirals with decorative curlicues around the edges, made from ground dal, sugar and cardamom, and is fried in ghee.

Chomchom: A popular sweet in Bengal made of flour, coconut, cream, sugar, and saffron.

Joynoger-er Moya: It's a delicious dry concoction made out of puffed rice, jaggery and ghee and shaped into delicious round balls.

Mehidana: This dish is made of powdered rice, flour, and saffron.

Shor bhaja: This delicious dessert is made of deep-fried milk cream in layers and then soaked in sugar syrup.

Chandrapulli: This is shaped like a pale crescent moon, and is made from cottage cheese, mawa, coconut, and cardamom.

Narkel Naru: A dry sweet made into small balls, especially a combination of grated coconut, jaggery, or sugar.

Labongo Latika: This item is prepared by grandmothers on special occasions with a sweetened khowa and crusty pastry covering that is sealed with a piece of labongo (clove).

Ladikeni: A popular sweet since British times and named after Lady Canning, the wife of Charles Canning, who was the Governor General of India during the 19th century.

Sitabhog: It's a popular dish from Bardhaman in Bengal and looks like sweet pulao, made of white rice and small gulab jamuns.

When you enter a Bengali sweet shop, it is difficult to make choice from such a wide and diverse collection of sweets. Bangladesh also shares a similar taste for sweets as that of West Bengal, but some of the authentic sweet items of Bangladesh are Makha Sandesh, Doi Chitra, Bogura's Doi, Chennar Pular of Jamalpur, Porra Barri Chomchom of Tangail, Sandesh of Satkhhera, Channamukhi of Brahmanbaria, Balish mishit of Netrokona, Rashomonjari of Gaibandha, Rossomalai of Comilla, Kachagolla of Natore, Peda of Noagaon, Sabitri & Rashokodombo of Maherpur, Rashoballi and Tusha Shinni are some of the popular sweet items of Bangladesh.





Image 7: Popular Sweets of Bengal

Popular Cuisine to Try in Bangladesh

Alive with exotic spices and mesmerizing flavor, Bangladeshi food is one of Asia's most wondrous cuisines, defined by its tropical geography and diverse array of influences, from Persian to Indian.

This beautiful country's cuisine roars with the richness of spices and aromatic qualities.

Shorshe Illish: This fish is cooked in savory mustard paste and commonly served with white rice. Illish (Hilsa) is the national fish of Bangladesh.

Kacchi Biryani (mutton Biryani): Kacchi means 'raw', i.e. uncooked. This raw meat is marinated and kept at the bottom of the pot with rice on top and mixed with spices. So both rice and meat are cooked together.

Beef Kala Bhuna (Beef curry): It's a popular dish from Chattogram district of Bangladesh. It is named 'kala', which means black – cooked with a long list of traditional spices and yogurt for a longer period so that it takes a blackish hue.

Bhuna Khichuri with Dim Bhaji (Yellow rice with omelette): This dish is mostly prepared during the monsoon with rice, lentils, and a few spices, turmeric and ghee. A highly versatile dish and can be eaten with the omelette.

Sheek Kabab with Naan: This is a grounded beef or mutton, mixed with spices that is skewered and roasted over hot coals and pairs perfectly with soft warm naan. It's an important street food of Old Dhaka.

Bharta (mashed vegetables or meat with spices) : This is eaten as starter and prepared with mashed vegetables, mixed with a number of spices. Shutki bharta (dried fish) is popular in Chattogram, Sylhet, and Khulna. Egg and Ilish fish bhartas are also popular among Bangladeshis when paired with harmonious spices and herbs.

Kolijar Singara (Beef/Mutton Liver Singara): The gourmet version of Bangladeshi singara is made with spicy mutton or beef liver, with a richer, juicier flavor.

Haleem (mixed lentil soup and meat): This dish is generally prepared during Ramadan to break the fast. It is made with a mixture of wheat and lentils in addition to generous amount of shredded meat or inclusion of livers to enhance the taste. The finished dish is garnished with a slice of lemon, caramelized onion, and coriander.

Borhani: A traditional yogurt drink that is thick, frothy, herby, and spicy. It is a type of lassi but contains sour yogurt, coriander, cumin, mustard, green chili, and mint. In Bangladesh, it is served at special events such as weddings and family gatherings or to break fast during Ramadan.



Image 8: Popular Dishes of Bangladesh

Bangal (East Bengal) vs Ghoti (West Bengal)

There are actually two kinds of Bengalis – the Ghotis, original inhabitants of West Bengal and Bangals who have migrated from the East that is Bangladesh (erstwhile Purba Banga) after Partition. They love competing, each claiming superiority, especially when it comes to football, politics, and food. Through years of healthy debate, they have kept the bittersweet rivalry alive. The trump card of Bangal cooking is marich bata and phoron and a combination of whole spices to enhance the flavor.

While sweet is the main ingredient in a Ghoti's kitchen, traditionally they are known to add a bit of sugar or jaggery to most of their dishes along with other ingredients. Another ingredient used by Ghotis is posto (poppy seeds) and the eminent dishes prepared are – alu posto, dim posto, jhinge posto, posto bhapa etc.

Bangals are mostly rice oriented. A typical Bangal starts his day with rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Whereas Ghotis prefer luchies (puries) made of wheat flour. The stuffed luchies are called kachuries. Bangal and Ghotis maintain their loyalty in matters of fish as well. The Bangals staunchly support Ilish maach and believe that Hilsa fish of Padma river

is the best in the world, while Ghotis claim their love for lobsters and prawns. However, both Bangal and Ghotis will proudly avouch their cuisine better than their counterparts.

Conclusion

West Bengal celebrates many holidays and festivals. The Bengali proverb ‘Baro mashey Tero Parbon’ (thirteen festivals in twelve months) indicates the abundance of festivities in the state. So to match with the mood of the celebration, Bengalis are ever prepared with their elaborate array of delicacies. It’s a general assertion that Bengalis ‘eat to live’ and ‘live to eat’. Thus Bengalis and their relationship with food is an eternal love story.

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About the Author

Ms. Indrani Chatterjee is from Kolkata, West Bengal. She is a self-motivated writer and prefers to pen verses and has co-authored a number of anthologies of poetry. She is also a vocalist of classical music and Rabindra sangeet, currently pursuing a Graduation course. She has a profound inclination for art and is an emotive person.

