

From Bangladesh, with love

A British-Bangladeshi writer's new cookbook steeped in nostalgia showcases seasonal and regional recipes to highlight the uniqueness of Bangladeshi cuisine, often lost under the umbrella of 'Indian food' in the West

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

THE most important part for me was to preserve these dishes," British-Bangladeshi food writer Dina Begum tells us from her home in London. Begum's new book, *Made in Bangladesh: Recipes and Stories from a Home Kitchen* (Hardie Grant) which released this month, introduces readers to recipes from each of the country's eight divisions. It's her second after the *Brick Lane Cookbook* that celebrated the diverse flavours of that iconic part of London. "[There is often this assumption] that Dhaka is where all the food is, but it's not. It's one of many," says the author, who was born in Sylhet in the north-east of the country. "I wanted to give people a good overview of Bangladeshi cuisine and represent the country's culture internationally to not just the diaspora but also the audience that doesn't know much about it." There was also a need to present a sense of the country's vibrancy through the recounting of stories, memories and anecdotes about Bangladeshi customs and culture through recipes marking festivals and celebrations. "Often with many countries in the east, especially in South Asia, you don't

see all the positive things that are going on. What you see in the news is the negativity, the natural disasters and volatile events. I wanted to shine a spotlight on the joyousness."

For Begum, who moved to England when she was four years old, the book became a way of documenting dishes she learnt from her mother and grandmother, and grew up eating, very few of which have been recorded outside of Bangladesh and are in danger of being forgotten. "In many countries in South Asia, recipes are passed down orally so you just go through estimations, and don't write them down," she observes, a fact that presented a challenge during the writing of the book. "The way I learnt to cook was through *andaaz* and feeling. So when you're actually writing the recipe, timing, weighing and measuring everything rather than just doing it instinctively, it can become more of a technical thing. That was a bit of a challenge at first because it was not the way I was used to cooking Bangladeshi food. It was almost like approaching the dishes in a new way just so people understand how they are meant to be cooked."



DINA BEGUM

PIC COURTESY/HABIBUL HAQUE, DRIK PICTURE LIBRARY

I wanted to give people a good overview of Bangladeshi cuisine and represent the country's food and culture internationally to not just the diaspora but also the audience that doesn't know much about it

Dina Begum

Paying homage to the six seasons in the Bangladeshi calendar, Begum's book divides its recipes into six chapters, showcasing dishes from different regions with introductory lists of pantry staples, whole and ground spices that form the backbone of Bangladeshi home cooking, aromatics, traditional kitchen equipment and sample menus for everyday and celebratory dining. For this writer, whose family traces its roots back to East Bengal, the similarities with the Bengali cuisine—the predominance of fish and sweets, plentiful use of date molasses, flattened rice, mustard oil and the *gondhoraj* lime, and the popularity of *puchka* and other similar types of street food—were many.

"There are very many similarities in terms of ingredients and recipes," admits Begum. "If you go to Dhaka from West Bengal, for instance, you'd probably be familiar with the cuisine there. But the further down the border you go, the more differences you'll find. If you go to other parts such as Sylhet, Khulna or Chittagong, you'll see that they are cuisines in themselves. Each region is very distinct."

Shutki shira, a pungent and aromatic fermented fish stew made with the extremely hot naga chilli, for instance, is unique to Sylhet. *Shatkora*, a bitter and highly aromatic cooking citrus used in meat and fish dishes, also originates from the



BHA JA MACHER BHARTA

Bha ja macher bharta

INGREDIENTS

- ▶ 180 gms fresh skin-on mackerel fillets
- ▶ 1/4 tsp salt
- ▶ 1/4 tsp ground turmeric
- ▶ 2 tbsp mustard oil
- ▶ 1 large dried red chilli
- ▶ 2 medium onions, finely sliced
- ▶ 2 bird's eye chillies, chopped
- ▶ A few fresh coriander (cilantro) sprigs, chopped
- ▶ 1 lime, quartered, to serve (optional)

METHOD

Rub the mackerel with the salt and turmeric and set aside. Heat the oil in a frying pan over a medium-high heat for about a minute until hot, then add the mackerel fillets, skin-side down. Fry for 2–3 minutes until golden, then turn over and fry for another 2–3 minutes on the other side. Remove from the pan and set aside on a plate to rest for 10 minutes. Keep the pan on the heat but reduce the heat to medium. Add the dried chilli and fry, stirring, for about 2 minutes until the chilli turns dark brown and smoky. Remove from the pan and transfer to the plate with the fish. Next, add the onions and bird's eye chillies to the pan, and sauté for about 4 minutes until soft and translucent. Turn off the heat and tip the onion mixture into a mixing bowl. Coarsely crush the red chilli using a pestle and mortar, then add to the bowl with the onions. Use your hands or two forks to finely flake the fried mackerel and add this to the bowl too, along with the fresh coriander. Mix well, pressing down on the onion and fish so that everything is well combined and comes together. Check the seasoning and serve with lime wedges.



TENGA SHIRA

If you go to Dhaka from West Bengal, for instance, you'd probably be familiar with the cuisine there. But the further down the border you go, the more differences you'll find.



SHATKORA DHAL



Shutki shira, a pungent and aromatic fermented fish stew made with the extremely hot naga chilli is unique to Sylhet. There is also *shatkora*, a bitter and highly aromatic cooking citrus used in meat and fish dishes, that originates from the same region. PICS COURTESY/MADE IN BANGLADESH BY DINA BEGUM, PHOTOGRAPHY © HAARALA HAMILTON

Continued on page 31

Continued from page 30

same region, while in Chittagong, a spice called chui is commonly used in meat dishes. "As you go further south, you have more southeast Asian flavours and flavours from Myanmar, Indonesia and Malaysia coming through," says Begum. "So, there are dishes with coconut, tamarind and other ingredients that you wouldn't normally associate with Bengali food. There are Thai and Burmese influences that have come through both because of trade and proximity."

Then there also are flavour differences that arise due to religious reasons with Hindu Bengali food comprising more vegetarian dishes which exclude garlic, ginger and onions. "Also, there's more of a sweetness I would say in West Bengali cuisine from what I have experienced. Sugar isn't used in savoury dishes in most regions in Bangladesh," Begum points out.

Bhorta, a mash made with vegetables, fish and even meat, blended with core ingredients such as mustard oil, chillies and onions, "is the quintessential soul food of Bangladeshi cuisine," Begum writes in her book, which features a few variations from the classic aloo bhorta made with baked or boiled potatoes to a spicy gorur mangshor bhorta with shredded fried beef and a bhaja macher bhorta made with seared mackerel, "a staple in diaspora Bangladeshi homes, especially in the UK." "While it's quite common in West Bengal, in Bangladesh bhorta is on another level with hundreds of varieties. You can make it with practically anything," Begum tells us.

"Growing up, I didn't see the flavours of my home represented anywhere..." Begum writes in her introduction, highlighting how the cuisine of Bangladesh in the West, often gets lost "under the umbrella of 'Indian food'". While tourism and social media have contributed to the growth of some awareness around Bangladeshi food and culture in the UK and US, "it's still the case that I don't see very much represented," the author shares. "Even though a majority of Bangladeshi and Indian restaurants in the west are owned by Bangladeshis, roughly 80 per cent I'd say, they're not serving authentic dishes; they feel made up and flavours are not familiar at all. I'd love to see more Bangladeshi restaurants in the UK presenting traditional food."

smdmail@mid-day.com

CHITOI
PITHA

Meetha with a dash of kokum

A 19-year-old's bean-to-bar chocolate brand is bringing the focus back to native Indian fruits

JANE BORGES

WHEN boys his age were busy shortlisting colleges to apply to, all that 15-year-old Digvijaya Singh wanted to do was become a chocolatier. This wasn't the original plan, he confesses. "This is the time I had completed my Class X, and the pandemic had just hit us out of nowhere [in March 2020]," Singh, now 19, tells us over a call from Udaipur, where he lives. "I wasn't academically inclined and wanted to try out something different. But I was also cognisant of the fact that the economy wasn't going to look up for another two years at least." Keen on taking up a part-time gig, he remembers checking for recession-proof industries on Google.

That's how he accidentally landed on chocolates. With knowledge being in plenty on the web, Singh found himself sinking his teeth into this discovery, binging mostly on online chocolate tutorials. "I was fascinated with the idea of bean-to-bar chocolates [making them directly from cacao beans]," he shares. The process of sourcing and selecting the beans, roasting, winnowing, conching and tempering—as elaborate as it seemed—made him want to give it a shot.

His handcrafted chocolate company, Saraam, is a result of that brainwave. "It started with me experimenting with some samples in the kitchen," says the self-taught chocolatier. His cousin, Mahaveer Singh, and later his aunt, Sunita Singh, who were taken in by his idea, decided to join him. "It took a lot of trial and error," he shares. The brand, initially called Sarang, became a reality only a year later in July 2021. "And our first bean-to-bar batch launched in December 2021."

The beans, he says, were initially sourced from a farm in Puttur, Karnataka. "It is owned by Keshavamurthy, who also co-runs a tree-to-bar artisanal chocolate brand Koko Pods with his wife," says Singh. "He was quite helpful in my journey, and also very encouraging. If I had queries, he was always happy to help. I was glad to be part of such a healthy ecosystem."

Initially, selling out of a store in Udaipur, the real breakthrough for this three-member team came when Singh attended a farmer's market at Jaajam restaurant last year, where he was introduced to Kottarapurath



Mohanchandran—the then Area Director of Udaipur and Jodhpur and General Manager of Taj Lake Palace, Udaipur, and his wife Seema. "They were very keen on promoting local bean-to-bar brands. That's how

Taj onboarded us and stocked our chocolates. Had this not happened, I would have abandoned my project completely, and gone on to pursue higher studies," he says.

Since Singh had just completed his Class XII, he decided to take a gap year and invest all his energy into building his new brand, which he re-launched as Saraam in July 2022. But in a market already inundated with small batch, single origin chocolates, Singh was conscious about not creating a brand that was run off the mill.

Dilip Nair, General Manager of Taj Fateh Prakash Palace suggested he pair the chocolates with ber (baer) fruit, the tiny round somewhat sweet and sour plum, also known as Indian jujube. "I had never heard of this pairing before, but we decided to try it out." The chocolate became an instant hit. For the G20 meeting in Udaipur at the Taj in December last year,



Digvijaya and Mahaveer Singh, co-founders of Saraam



At Saraam, single-origin chocolates are paired with baer, sitaphal, kokum, sea buckthorn, and karonda among other fruit



The cacao beans are currently procured from a farm in Idukki, Kerala

Singh went on to create another untested combination—sitaphal (sugar apple) and chocolate.

Even as he was amid these experiments, he came across an article in an online environmental publication that highlighted how climate change and poor demand were leading to a drop in the cultivation of indigenous fruits in the country.

Singh decided to infuse new life into his brand—bringing indigenous fruits into the mix. Saraam's chocolates are unusually paired with several native fruits. There are chocolates with kokum from the Konkan belt; sea buckthorn and karonda from Himachal; red chillies from Mathania, a village in Rajasthan; phalsa, a summer berry from the Ganga plains in Varanasi, and jamun and coconut. "We are working with various dehydration companies who buy these fruits from villagers who collect these fruits from the wild vegetation," says Singh, "Since these fruits are not cultivated in abundance or at least are not easily sourceable, they sometimes end up costing thousands for a kilo in dried form." His cacao beans now come from a farm based in the

Traditionalists probably can't wrap their heads around our chocolates... find them blasphemous. But if they are making people curious about our native and diverse fruits, we are more than happy

Idukki district of Kerala.

While they sold about 18,000 chocolate bars last year, Singh hopes that in the coming years not just the sales, but also the conversation around indigenous fruits pick up. The teenager, who is currently studying philosophy at Delhi University, says, "There are the traditionalists who can't wrap their heads around our chocolates. They probably find it blasphemous," he thinks. "But a large group of people seem to be loving it, and if our chocolates are making people curious about our native and diverse fruits, we are more than happy."

smdmail@mid-day.com

TO BUY: saraam.co