

BENGALI BUFFET

*IncogRito**

It is said that the easiest way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Nowhere is this more true than in the state of Bengal, where the proverbial thirteen festivals in twelve months fall short of the excuses needed to eat, drink and be merry (for tomorrow we diet!).

Bengali hospitality centres around the culinary satisfaction of the guest, and no stone is left unturned (or dish left unstirred) towards this objective. Long hours of labour, patience and ingenuity are of the essence in the preparation of Bengali cuisine, and the slightest error is likely to tarnish the subtle interplay of nuanced flavours that characterise a delicacy. The final product can neither be stored for long periods nor be repeatedly heated without destroying the taste, and is not easy to reproduce on a large scale, which explained the dearth of authentic Bengali restaurants while growing up in Calcutta (a notable exception was *Suruchi* on Eliot Road, a small diner run by a women's group that rehabilitated destitute women).

Today the number of expensive restaurants in Calcutta purporting to serve Bengali food is proliferating, with film and sports celebrities venturing into the catering business, either as entrepreneurs or endorsers. While one cannot but feel proud that Bengali food is carving a niche for itself in the limited commercial space available for fine cuisine, the fact that these eateries are frequented by Bengalis or their guests indicates that the timeless art of cooking traditional food is dying out in Bengali households. Fast lives and nuclear families have long taken a toll on dinner rituals, simplifying the process and occasionally modernising social mores (such as allowing ladies to eat along with men, instead of having them sit and serve). However, the rigid rules associated with the sequence in which courses are laid out (typically in small silver or brass bowls surrounding the main plate) or the manner in which the food is partaken (one's social

background can be interpreted from the way the fingers are employed in eating) are so sophisticated that they would not seem out of place at a royal table, and that is why the very thought of a Bengali buffet in a crowded restaurant seems almost like an oxymoron.

My hunt for a Bengali restaurant in the United States came to a delightful halt last weekend when my sister took me to a humble hole-in-the-wall in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Catering mainly to the expatriate student population in and around Harvard and MIT, the little restaurant, run by a middle-aged couple hailing from Calcutta's suburbs, also draws Indian and foreign connoisseurs from different parts of the country. Small enough to provide an intimate setting without appearing claustrophobic, the restaurant embodies function over form (songs of Tagore in the background being the only indulgence), and we devoured the delectable taste of authentic Bengali dishes like the parched earth soaks up rain. While the restaurateur brought the choicest pieces of *ilish maachh* (hilsa fish) to our table and regaled us with stories of her immigrant experience, the mood created by the language, the music and the aroma transported us in time and place to a nostalgic past and left us begging for more.

AFTERTHOUGHT

The most sophisticated transmutation of milk in Bengal has been in the form of infinitely varied sweets, some made at home and some professionally. Certainly, no other region in India has shown such passionate absorption in sweets and appreciation of subtlety or variety in their preparation. The plump Bengali with his sweet tooth takes seriously the ancient Sanskrit recommendation, madhurena samapayet— a meal should be finished with something sweet— to the heights of finicky epicureanism.

Chitrita Banerji,
Bengali Cooking

* *IncogRito* prefers to remain incognito and we are committed to honouring the request. An engineer by profession *IncogRito's* writings have occasionally been published in various periodicals.