



A vendor transports yoghurt to the restaurants on the empty streets of old Dhaka, happy to avoid weekday traffic on a Friday.

## THE RECIPE NEVER GETS OLD

DUCK EGG OMELETTE, BIRYANI, AND *BHORTA* IN DHAKA'S HISTORIC QUARTER **BY REEMA ISLAM**  
**PHOTOGRAPHS BY VINCE BOISGARD**

**M**y *dada bari*, or paternal grandfather's house, still stands on a corner of Taher Bagh Lane in Kaptan Bazaar in the old city of Puran Dhaka. My family was based in Libya when I was young, but we visited annually. I have a dominant memory from that time, which is waking up to the distinctly unfamiliar sounds of women shouting orders to servants, a cacophony of crows, and the ringing of rickshaw bells.

Mornings also meant decadent breakfasts of parathas and tiny omelettes made of duck eggs; *mishti doi* or sweet yoghurt with *bakarkhani*

bread, and *achars* that my elder sister would sneak out of our home and buy for me. There was however, no sneaking around for the resident monkeys, who would calmly walk into homes, grab the largest bunch of bananas, and walk out with equal composure.

Puran Dhaka was always redolent with the smells of decay and crumbling, with greying walls and red floors. Beneath the layers of grime and dirt, however, were tales of foreign invasions, revolution, famine, floods and earthquakes. Once brightened by *dhak*—the flame of the forest trees, which possibly gave it its name—the

city emerged during the rule of Sher Shah Suri in the 16th century and grew during the Mughal era.

With Buriganga River serving as its lifeline, Dhaka grew around factories or *kuthis*, churches and schools. Now over 400 years old, the old city is still the busiest part of this capital of 15 million people. Its chaotic streets are also the setting for an exciting culinary journey.

### BIRYANI FOR BREAKFAST

Behind the walls of the British Central Jail, which incorporated Sher Shah Suri's older fort, is where the Dhaka of the Mughals, the East India



Company, the Armenians, the Portuguese, French and Dutch came together. Friday is a good day to visit the area around the unfinished Lalbagh fort, behind the central jail area. A five-minute walk from this 17th century structure, commissioned by Aurangzeb's son, Prince Azam, is the Royal Hotel (44 Hornath Ghosh Road, Lalbagh; +880-1912831456; 6 a.m.-11 p.m.). Dhaka's quintessential *kacha* biryani, in which the meat, potatoes and rice are cooked in one dish, rather than layered together later (*pakka* style) is only available at weddings. But the hotel's mutton *khashi kachi* biryani (BDT120/₹95) is the closest casual alternative and my personal favourite. Royal's *doodher shorbot* (BDT250/₹198 per litre), which consists of almonds and pistachios in cold milk, is also a popular liquid dessert.

A 15-minute rickshaw ride away is the landmark Haji Biryani (70 Kazi Alauddin Road, Nazira Bazar; +880-

## My family doesn't live near Puran Dhaka

anymore but I love going on a Friday, when people are in weekend mode

1711523505; 11 a.m.-11 p.m.) operating since 1939, when its proprietor returned from the Haj. To date, it has only sold one item: beef biryani (BDT130/₹95), in bowls made of dried jackfruit leaves. Sharing tables is the norm at this 20-seater. Another wedding special on the menu is the yoghurt drink *borhani* (BDT80/₹63). Made with half-a-dozen spices, including pepper, salt, and mint leaves, Haji's version might be the best in town, and it is certainly the best way to wash down a bowl of spiced meat and rice.

Another popular haunt is Nanna Biryani House (42 Becharm Dewry, Sardar Bhaban; +880-1726671727), famous for its chicken pulao (BDT130/₹87). Here, huge leg and breast pieces, marinated in a juicy masala mix, with kewra and green chillies, lend their fragrance to the rice.



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1 Misthi doi, always a popular dessert. 2 Jorda with mishti, made of sweetened rice with gulab jamuns, is served at weddings. 3 Chicken kebabs doused in masala and barbequed on coals. 4 Crisp bakarkhanis, Dhaka's favourite morning snack.

## MASTER COOKS AND BAKERS

No Bangladeshi meal is complete without a *bhorta*, a mashed dish, typically served with plain rice and dal. Nirob Hotel (Nazimuddin Road; +880-27300265; 6-11 a.m.) excels at a range of traditional *bhortas*. The slightly fermented *chepashutki* (BDT40/₹31) consists of dried Puntius fish, which is rehydrated, stacked in an earthen pot with fish oil for a few months, then sautéed in mustard oil with onions, garlic and chillies before being roughly mashed.

The list of *bhortas* on the menu is huge: unripe banana with coriander and chillies; tomato with mustard oil; cabbage with a heavy dose of garlic; simple potato with dried red chillies; beans with chillies; and more dried fish *bhortas* (average cost BDT30/₹23 per plate).

In Puran Dhaka, mornings still mean waking up to fresh *bakarkhani* (BDT3/₹2 per piece) and milky chai. It is popularly eaten with another speciality of Bangladesh, cheese or Dhaka *poneer* (BDT950/₹197 for 250 gm), a rennet product that is high on calcium and low in fat content. Though the *bakarkhani* is a common Kashmiri delicacy, the credit for its name, at least in Dhaka, goes to Aga Bakar, a general in the early 19th-century army of Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah.

In the same area, on Abul Hasnat Road, there are several hole-in-the-wall shops selling scrumptious *puris*, with potato or dal mixed in the dough (BDT5/₹3 & BDT3/₹2 respectively). On the opposite end of the taste spectrum are spicy *jali* kebabs (BDT12/₹9 per piece). The egg drizzled over these beef kebabs gives them their distinct layer of webbing.

## BANGSHAL BEAUTIES

About five minutes away by car from the Central Jail area is Bahadur Shah Park, once the venue for the public hanging of mutineering soldiers from the 1857 Uprising. Next to it is the neighbourhood of Bangshal, with lanes like the 300-year-old Shankhari Bazaar, home to Hindu craftsmen who make conch shell bangles.

Walk 10 minutes to Beauty Boarding (1, Shrishodas Lane, Bangla Bazar; +880-1711439566), the iconic *adda ghor* or hangout of Bangladesh's pre-

Partition era. This was the setting for many a revolutionary, who lived in its spare rooms, and ate food made by a Sylheti cook at its 20-seater restaurant. Formerly a printing press, the building was turned into a hotel by Tarak Shaha and his family. Though the hotel has recently been the site of intellectual chat and cultural exchange—it hosted the international photography festival *Chobi Mela*—people mostly come here for the food.

Popular favourites at Beauty Boarding include bhortas of *pabda* or catfish (BDT75/₹59), *ruj* egg bhorta (BDT10/₹7), eggs (BDT10/₹7), and *nola* (BDT110/₹87). The masalas are freshly ground, and except for a few fish items, the menu changes daily. The best dish, however, is the chicken curry, served with a large piece of potato.

Outside, in the narrow alleys, street vendors sell *murali* or fried dough, twisted and sprinkled with sugar and food colour. My father used to gorge on this as a child, and I love it as well. Back through the court area near Pogose School, which was built by an Armenian in 1848, and along Johnson Road, there's another gem of a shop: Beauty Lassi (30/A Johnson

Road, *Rayershaheb Bazar*; +880-1714295621, 8 a.m.-10.30 p.m.). Stop here for a refreshing lemonade with huge chunks of citrus (BDT15/₹11). This drink has been a favourite with lawyers for 90 years now; the shop started as a mere stall, but now has seating for about 30 people.

#### MUTTON UP

Beauty Lassi's lemonade helps endure a further five-minute drive through weekend traffic, down Johnson and Nawabpur Roads, towards Hotel Al-Razzak (29/1 North South Road, *Bangshal*; +88029566412; 6 a.m.-12 a.m.). Famed for its mutton leg roasts (BDT170/₹134), and *bhuna rupchanda* or pomfret (BDT350/₹276, depending on the fishing season), Al-Razzak has also, in recent times, become popular as a favorite haunt during Ramadan, for the early morning meal, or *sehri*. The restaurant has cabin seating for families.

The highlight, for me, of my feast through Puran Dhaka is closer to home, past the small iron monument at Gulistan, marking the centre of Bangladesh, in Kaptan Bazaar. The wholesale market, which is also known

as Thatari Bazaar, does brisk business in meat, spices and dry food items. It also houses Star Hotel & Kebab, a large, basic place with an array of local specialities. I visit it for the mutton *gilassy*, a dish that has its origins in the days of the East India Company. The story goes that the British told local cooks to use as little masala as possible in the mutton, resulting in a white dish with a film of oil, like a looking glass, on top of it.

My family doesn't live near Puran Dhaka anymore but I love going on a Friday, when the streets are emptier and people walk about in a relaxed, weekend mode. Sometimes, a bend in the narrow alley brings back memories of my father shielding me from a swerving rickshaw. The smell of freshly fried dal puri or the tamarind chutneys piled up into tiny mounds on an aluminum tray take me back to the days when we would hide behind the pillars and gasp at the spiciness of these forbidden snacks. Old Dhaka has now been infused with new flavours. Some of the people from my childhood are no longer there too. But just as soon as I am back in its narrow alleyways, I feel right at home again. ❄



Weekends also mark a busy time outside the butcher shops in Thatari Bazaar.