

# BENGALI CUISINE

Bengal has long been cited as the land of plenty and more so when it comes to its cuisine. Bengali food is a revelation for the uninitiated. It is a fusion of textures - crisp bhajas, grainy mustard sauces, oily fish head biting into juicy prawns - and a tactile feat of picking one's way through fish bones to get at spicy, delicious bits of Ilish, and thin, light luchis that put puris to shame. And then there is Panchphoran! the five-spice mixture that is the mainstay of Bengali food.

The gastronomic side of the state really comes into its own during Durga Puja, one of the biggest and most celebrated festivals among the Bengali Hindu community. The Durga Puja festival that is prevalent today is a folk form of an ancient custom that is celebrated in the month of Ashwin or Kartik (i.e. months of September and October according to the English calendar year). Durga Puja has always been a massive affair in Kolkata, but with Bengalis having moved all over the world in search of their destiny it is now celebrated anywhere that has a large enough Bengali community. Spread out over a period of four hectic days, the 'aarti' performed every evening and Bhog or ritual offerings of the goddess's favourites made to the deity are the highlights.

The ritualistic approach to Bengali food is not limited to festivals however. The entire process of preparing, cooking, serving and even the order in which food is consumed is taken very seriously on a daily basis. Rice is the staple, and cold pressed golden mustard oil is the pungent Bengali-cooking medium. The "ranna-ghar" or cookhouse is the centre of the Bengali home. It is here that the magical meals are conjured out of mere ingredients! Preparation for each dish is elaborate, with emphasis being laid not only on freshness but also how certain fish and vegetables are cut. Spice combinations are precise and each dish is individually made. In more orthodox Bengali homes, fish and vegetables might still be cooked over separate fires and lamb, if cooked, is done on a makeshift fire outside the kitchen.

The Bengalis are passionate about their fish (fresh as well as salt water). Ilish or hilsa holds a very special place in the diet. The head is fried and cooked with rice, dal or vegetables, popular belief attributing consumption of fish head as good for the brain! Nothing goes waste in a Bengali kitchen, the tail and bones are stir fried into a fiery 'churchuri.' Although Bengali cuisine is predominantly fish-based, it has a treasure trove of varied vegetarian fare as well. The credit for the variety of vegetarian dishes in the Bengali repertoire can be laid at the feet of the Hindu widows. Strict religious codes of the past, prescribed only vegetarian food and proscribed even onion and garlic. Food was to be prepared in a separate kitchen and consumed within its confines, but this monastic existence led to great ingenuity. The search for variety in the face of such great limitations resulted in culinary gems!

Bengalis are perhaps first among food lovers in India. Leisurely meals comprising of many items and requiring hours of labor and ingenuity have long been a major part of Bengali culture. Food is traditionally consumed sitting on the floor on mats or asans. In front of each asan is placed a large platter fashioned out of bell metal/steel or a large section of banana leaf. Around this platter are positioned a number of small bowls in which portions of dal, vegetables, fish, meat, chutney and dessert will eventually be served. Rice enjoys the pride of place in the center of the platter flanked by vegetable fritters, wedges of lime, whole green chilies and perhaps a bit of pickle. The piece de resistance is the little hole in the middle of the mound of rice that is topped up with a spoonful of ghee!

Whatever the number of dishes the most important part of eating a Bengali meal is eating each dish separately with a little bit of rice in order to savour its individual flavours. The order of consumption goes from the more delicately flavoured dishes first and slowly graduating to stronger ones. Vegetables, especially bitter ones, come first, followed by dal, perhaps accompanied by fries or fritters of fish and vegetables. Then come complex vegetable dishes like Ghanto or Chachhari, the important fish Jhol as well as other fish preparations in that order. Meat will always follow fish and chutneys or ambals will provide the refreshing touch of tartness to make the tongue anticipate the sweet dishes.

The textures of the food are appreciated first by the fingers and then enter the mouth. The other notable factor about Bengali eating habits is the amassing of miscellaneous debris by the plate. Vegetable stalks, fish heads, meat, fish and chicken bones, are all meticulously chewed to extract the very last drop of flavour prior to being added to the heap with accompanying sounds of chomps and slurps (a measure of the quality of the meal) and a great burp as the crescendo!

Bengali cuisine has many dishes in its repertoire, some of the more popular ones include: Bhapeys, in which fish are usually steamed with freshly ground mustard; Paturis, in which fish is wrapped in banana leaves; Malaikari is a dish in which crustaceans are cooked with coconut; Kosha Mangsho, which could either be lamb or goat meat cooked with onions and served with a rich, thick gravy; Ambole, is sour vegetables or fruit stewed with spices and vegetables fish or sugar; Bora or vadas usually made of a dal and chachhari (a stir fry of vegetables, which may or may not include small fried fish); Dalna (quartered vegetables cooked in sweetish gravy), and Ghonto (a mish mash of a vegetable with spices garnished with crushed fried Boris). Dalna and Ghonto are served before the non-vegetarian fare.

No Bengali meal is complete without catering to the sweet tooth and Bengali sweets are well known and popular all over the country. Misti doi, the sweet curd flavored with caramelized sugar; Rossogolla, the all time favourite; Sandesh, the delicate offerings of curdled milk solids and Chhana - curdled milk with the water removed, sugar and flavoring are some of the major sweet specialties of this region.

## **Bengali Cuisine Historical Influence**

Bengali food has inherited a large number of influences, both foreign and Indian, from both a turbulent history and strong trade links with many parts of the world. Bengal is fairly ancient; it was originally a Dravidian and tribal society that was extensively settled upon by the Aryans during the Gupta era, it fell under the sway of various Muslim rulers from the early thirteenth century onwards, and was then ruled by the British for two centuries (1757-1947).

Every layer of historical influence endures to the present day; the tribals have traditionally abided as hunter-gatherers in the dense forests of the Sunderbans while the rest of Bengal turned heavily agrarian, farming the extremely fertile Ganges delta for rice, vegetables and cash crops such as jute. There was also significant pisciculture in ponds and lakes, along with fishing in the many rivers.

## **Bengali Cuisine The Spread of Islam**

The Islamic influence came to Bengal a few hundred years after its arrival on the western borders of India. Its predominant influence was through administrative governors appointed by the Islamic rulers of Delhi and Agra. Bengal was under continuous Muslim rule soon after the late thirteenth century, first under the Turks and Afghans of and then continuously under the Mughals after the death of Sher Shah. Soon a large percentage of the population had converted to Islam. However, while the religion propagated in the populace, the region remained isolated from the political and religious centres of Muslim India. This meant that people retained many of their local customs and specially food habits.

## **Bengali Cuisine The Influence of the Widows**

In medieval Bengal the treatment of Hindu widows was much more proscribed than was common elsewhere. They led very monastic lives within the household and lived under strict dietary restrictions. Traditional cuisine was deeply influenced by them; they were usually the important contributors to the kitchen since they were not allowed any interests but religion and housework. Their ingenuity and skill led to many culinary practices; simple spice combinations, the ability to prepare small quantities (since widows often ate alone) and creative use of the simplest of cooking techniques. Since widows were banned 'impassioning' or 'aphrodisiac' condiments such as onion or garlic, most traditional Bengali vegetarian recipes don't use them which is in stark contrast to the rest of the Indian subcontinent where almost every dish calls for onions and garlic. This has led to a definite slant towards ginger in Bengali vegetarian food. This treatment of widows in Bengal continued until fairly recently; the effect on the cuisine was to preserve many of the dishes and techniques of the old in purest form well removed from the influence of Mughal or Western methods.

## **Bengali Cuisine European & Other Outside Influences**

The Europeans came to modern Bengal soon after the Mughals, but in small numbers. The Portuguese visited the ports of Bengal as traders and missionaries, along with the French, the Dutch and the British. The French were the first to establish a colony at Chandannagar, but by the late eighteenth century the British were dominant. They made it the eastern capital of the Empire while Dutch and Portuguese missionaries launched their missions and schools from Bengal. Marwari and Gujarati traders made it their home, Afghans visited frequently with their spices and money lending, the Chinese came to escape the mainland. The prosperity of Bengal made it attractive to Syrians, Jews and Armenians too. The Europeans brought cooking techniques, but also new ingredients and food items. In addition, cities developed population centres of Europeans; this in turn encouraged foreign purveyors to set up locally, such as Jewish bakeries and English sausage vendors.

# Bengali Cuisine The Partition of Bengal

The partition of India from the British in 1947 separated West Bengal from the present-day Bangladesh, causing a significant change in demographics. Though the population was already somewhat concentrated along religious lines before the partition, the resultant migrations afterwards dramatically increased the religious divide. Food and cultures followed the people who, at least in the initial years, were often transplanted from one side to the other lock, stock and barrel. Some ten million people are thought to have crossed the border in either direction, a migration that had a significant influence on local culture. Further, the new international border was far more difficult to cross, and this continued the divergence of cultures and cuisines.

The newly formed West Bengal was a small state in India dominated by the mega city of Kolkata, which was already one of the largest cities in the world and about a quarter of the population of the state. Kolkata naturally came to dominate the food habits of the state. The city was India's richest city till the late seventies, attracting people from all over India and building a cosmopolitan culture that both incorporated influences from the rest of India and propagated many trends outwards. On the other side of the border, Bangladesh was isolated by the international boundary and continued to develop a distinct cuisine of its own. Today, three generations later, Bangladeshi and Kolkata cuisines are quite distinct.

## Bengali Cuisine Culinary Influences

Bengali food today has some broad (though not so distinct) variations - Traditional, Mughal, Anglo-Indian and Chinese.

## Bengali Cuisine Traditional Bengali Cuisine

The traditional society of Bengal has always been heavily agrarian; hunting, except by some local tribals, was uncommon. The rearing of animals was also not popular. This is reflected in the cuisine, which relies on staples like rice and dal, with little place for game or meat.

Fish is the dominant kind of meat, cultivated in ponds and fished with nets in the fresh-water rivers of the Ganges delta. More than forty types of mostly freshwater fish are common, including *rui* (rohu), catla, *magur* (catfish), *chingri* (prawn, shrimp or scampi), as well as *shutki* (dried sea fish). Almost every part of the fish (except fins and innards) is eaten; the head and other spare parts are usually used to flavor curries. Mutton, from baby goat, is the most popular red meat.

Other characteristic ingredients of traditional Bengali food include rice, *masur dal* (dal of red lentils), *moong dal* (dal of mung beans), mustard oil, mustard paste, posto (poppyseed) and coconut. Bengal is also the land of mangoes, which are used extensively ripe, unripe or in pickles. Hilsa, which migrates upstream to breed similar to salmon, is a delicacy; the varied salt content at different stages of the journey is of particular interest to the connoisseur, as is which river (the fish from the river Padma in Bangladesh is traditionally considered the best). The panch phoron spice mixture is very commonly used for vegetables. A touch of *gorom moshla* or hot spices (cardamom, cinnamon, clove, bay leaves, and peppercorn) is often used to enliven food.

Another characteristic of Bengali food is the use of a unique cutting instrument, the *bothi*. It is a long curving blade on a platform that's held down by foot; both hands are used to hold whatever is being cut and move it against the blade. The method gives excellent control, and can be used to cut anything from tiny shrimp to large pumpkins. Traditional cuisine is very demanding in the kind of cuts of vegetable used in each dish, and using the wrong one is frowned upon. Further, different vegetables are usually cooked together; the wrong cuts can lead to some vegetables remaining raw or becoming overcooked.

In East Bengal, now Bangladesh, the cuisine developed relatively isolated from influences of the rest of India and South East Asia by the difficult geography of the Ganges delta. Four characteristics stand out - fresh-water fish, beef, the extensive use of parboiled rice and mustard oil. Dal is also a staple. Spices are used sparingly, and the methods of preparation are relatively simple - steaming, frying or stewing. Floods are common in the region, so there's extensive use of root vegetables and dried fish (*shutki*). Milk and dairy products, so widely used in the neighboring India, are not as common here; the geography prevents large scale breeding of cows, thus making dairy an expensive indulgence. Notably, hardly any food calls for curd or ghee. However, sweets do contain milk and dairy products as well as jaggery and rice paste.

In western parts of Bengal, more connected with the rest of India and dominated by the mega city of Kolkata since the late eighteenth century, a separate cuisine emerged. The delta is thinner there, with fewer rivers and more open plains. There is significant commerce with the rest of India, leading to a flow of spices, ingredients and techniques. The food is much richer with various spices, the presentations are more elaborate and a significant feature of the cuisine is a vast array of sweets based on milk and sugar - the result of both better supply and the influence of traders from the milk belts of Gujarat and Benares. While fresh-water fish is still common, mutton is more common among the Muslim population than beef and dried fish is nearly unknown. Wheat makes its appearance alongside rice, in different types of breads such as *loochis*, *kochuris* and *porotas*. Though mustard paste is extensively used, mustard oil is abandoned in favor of groundnut oil or refined vegetable oil. There's a greater use of coconut, both in cooking and in desserts.

Prosperity and urbanization also led to the widespread use of professional cooks who introduced complex spice mixtures and more elaborate sauces, along with techniques such as roasting or braising. Also introduced around this time, probably as a consequence of increased urbanization, was a whole new class of snack foods. These snack foods are most often consumed with evening tea. The tea-time ritual was probably inspired by the British, but the snacks bear the stamp of the substantial Marwari population in Kolkata - *chaats*, *kachoris*, *samosas*, *phuluri* and the ever-popular *jhal-moori*.

## **Bengali Cuisine Mughal Influence**

Islam arrived in Bengal probably around the mid-thirteenth century, coming into force with the penetration of the Muslim rulers from the northwest. Dhaka (Bangladesh), in particular, expanded greatly under Mughal rule. The partition of India in 1947 resulted in a large migration of people to and from present-day Bangladesh, resulting in a much stronger divide along religious lines. Bangladesh today shows a much greater Muslim influence than West Bengal.

The influence on the food was top-down, and more gradual than in many other parts of India. This led to a unique cuisine where even the common man ate the dishes of the royal court, such as *biryani*, *korma* and *bhunas*. The influence was reinforced in the Raj era, when Kolkata became the place of refuge for many prominent exiled Nawabs, specially the family of Tipu Sultan from Mysore and Wajid Ali Shah, the ousted Nawab of Awadh. The exiles brought with them hundreds of cooks and *masalchis* (spice mixers), and as their royal patronage and wealth diminished, they interspersed into the local population. These highly accomplished cooks came with the knowledge of a very wide range of spices (most notably saffron and mace), the extensive use of ghee as a method of cooking, and special ways of marinating meats.

This has remained, more than the other categories, the food of professional chefs; the best examples are still available at restaurants. Specialities include *chaap* (ribs slow cooked on a tawa), *rezala* (meat in a thin yogurt and cardamom gravy) and the famous *kathi* roll (kebabs in a wrap). The local population absorbed some of the ingredients and techniques into their daily food, resulting in beef or meat-based varieties of many traditional vegetarian dishes, but by and large the foods remained distinct.

## **Bengali Cuisine Anglo Indian or Raj Cuisine**

Anglo-Indian food isn't purely the influence of the British, though they are the dominant one. Bengal had a French colony, and also Portuguese, Dutch, Armenian and Syrian populations. These collective western influences are seen in the foods created to satisfy the tastes of the western rulers. The result is a unique cuisine, local ingredients adapted to French and Italian cooking techniques characterized by creamy sauces, the restrained use of spices and new techniques such as baking. English and Jewish bakers such as Flury's and Nahoum's dominated the confectionery industry which migrated from British tables to everyday Bengali ones, resulting in unique creations such as the *patties* (savory turnovers). Another enduring contribution to Bengali cuisine is *pau roti*, or bread. Raj-era cuisine lives on especially in the variety of finger foods popularized in the pucca clubs of Kolkata, such as *mutton chop*, *kabiraji cutlet* or *fish orly*.

## Bengali Cuisine Chinese Food

The Chinese originally settled into a village called Achipur south of Kolkata in the late eighteenth century, later moving into the city and finally into its present home in Tangra at the eastern edge of Kolkata, which still houses over 100,000 ethnic Chinese. No other part of the Indian subcontinent has any significant Chinese population. The Chinese of Kolkata form a substantial and successful community with a distinct identity. With this identity came Chinese food, available at almost every street corner in Kolkata. They were mostly Cantonese tradesmen and sailors, bringing with them aji-no-moto and sweet corn. The cuisine is characterized as much by what is missing - mushrooms, for instance, are not found in Bengal - as by what is there, such as a far greater use of pork than any of the other cuisines. As the Chinese opened restaurants for Bengalis, they spiced up the bland Cantonese sauces with sliced chillies and hot sauces, creating unique dishes such as *Chilly Chicken* and *Veg Manchurian*.

Chinese Indian food was given a second boost when a large number of Tibetans migrated into India when China annexed Tibet. Tibetans brought with them their own delicacies to add to this genre, such as the very popular *momo* (a kind of dumpling) or *thukpa* (a hearty noodle soup). Tibetans and Nepali immigrants also found ready employment in kitchens as 'Chinese' cooks because of their looks, and helped power the millions of eateries that serve this unique fusion on every street in India.

The influence of this unique cuisine cannot be overstated; it's available in every town in India as Chinese food. Bengali immigrants to other countries have started carrying this abroad as well; Indian Chinese restaurants have appeared in many places in the USA. Bangladesh is more isolated from this food, but far from immune to its charms.

## Bengali Cuisine Bengali Meals

The typical Bengali fare includes a certain sequence of food - somewhat like the courses of Western dining. Two sequences are commonly followed, one for ceremonial dinners such as a wedding and the day-to-day sequence. Both sequences have regional variations, and sometimes there are significant differences in a particular course between West Bengal and Bangladesh.

The elaborate dining habits of the Bengalis are a reflection of the attention the Bengali housewife paid to the kitchen. In modern times, this is rarely followed anymore. Courses are frequently skipped or combined with everyday meals. Meals were usually served course by course to the diners by the youngest housewives, but increasing influence of nuclear families and urbanization has replaced this. It is now common to place everything on platters in the centre of the table, and each diner serves him/herself. Ceremonial occasions such as weddings used to have elaborate serving rituals, but professional catering and buffet-style dining is now common. The traditions are far from dead, though; large family occasions and the more lavish ceremonial feasts still make sure that these rituals are observed.

## Bengali Cuisine Courses in a daily Meal

The foods of a daily meal are usually simpler, geared to balanced nutrition and makes extensive use of vegetables. The courses progress broadly from lighter to richer and heavier. Rice remains common through out the meal until the chutney course.

The starting course is a bitter. The bitter changes with the season but common ones are *karela* (bitter gourd) which is available nearly throughout the year, or tender neem leaves in spring. Bitters are mostly deep fried in oil, or steamed with cubed potatoes. Portions are usually very small - a spoonful or so to be had with rice - and this course is considered to be both a palate-cleanser and of great medicinal value.

Another bittersweet preparation usually eaten in summer, especially in West Bengal, is a soupy mixture of vegetables in a ginger-mustard sauce, called *shukto*. This usually follows the dry bitters, but sometimes replaces it, and is eaten in much bigger portions. *Shukto* is a complex dish, a fine balance of many different kinds of tastes and textures and is often a critical measure of a Bengali housewife's abilities in the kitchen. However, *shukto* is not popular in Bangladesh.

This is followed by *shaak* (leafy vegetables) such as spinach, fenugreek, or amaranth. The *shaak* can be steamed or cooked in oil with other vegetables such as *begoon* (aubergine). Steamed *shaak* is sometimes accompanied by a sharp mustard paste called *Kasundi*.

The dal course is usually the most substantial course, especially in West Bengal. It is eaten with a generous portion of rice and a number of accompaniments. In Bangladesh, dal is usually eaten at the end of the meal, while in West Bengal it is eaten somewhat before the fish and meat courses.

A common accompaniment to dal is *bhaja* (fritters). *Bhaja* literally means deep-fried; most vegetables are good candidates but aubergine or pumpkin or plain potatoes are common. Fried fish (*mach bhaja*) is also common, specially *ruhi* (rohu) and *ilish* (hilsa) fishes. *Bhaja* is sometimes coated in a *besan* (chickpea flour) and *posto* (poppyseed) batter. A close cousin of *bhaja* is *bora* or deep-fried savoury balls usually made from *posto* (poppyseed) paste or coconut mince. Another variant is fried pointed gourd as *potoler dorma* with roe stuffing. Another accompaniment is a vegetable preparation usually made of multiple vegetables stewed slowly together without any added water. *Labra*, *Chorchori*, *Ghonto*, or *Chanchra* are all traditional cooking styles. There also are a host of other preparations that do not come under any of these categories and are simply called *Torkari* - the word merely means vegetable in Bengali. Sometimes these preparations may have spare pieces of fish such as bits of the head or gills, or spare portions of meat.

The next course is the fish course. Common fish delicacies include *maacher jhol*, *tel koi*, *Pabda maacher jhaal*, *Doi maachh*, *Chingri maachh* (shrimp) *malai curry*, and *bhaapa ilish* (steamed hilsa).

Then comes the meat course. The steep religious divide among the Bengalis of Bangladesh and West Bengal is most evident when it comes to the meat course. Meat is readily consumed in Bangladesh and some consider it the meal's "cream of the crop" course. To this day, the Hindu population in West Bengal do not typically consume beef. However, the Muslim population in West Bengal enjoy a variety of meat dishes. Mutton or goat meat is traditionally the meat of choice, especially West Bengal, but chicken and eggs are also commonly consumed. Beef is popular in Bangladesh, but not in most parts of West Bengal. Pork is very rare except among the Anglo-Indians and the Chinese in West Bengal.

Finally comes the chutney course, which is typically tangy and sweet; the chutney is usually made of mangoes, tomatoes, pineapple, tamarind, raw papaya, or just a combination of fruits and dry fruits. In Bangladesh, chutney is usually eaten during the dal course and no separate course is dedicated to chutney. *Papads*, a type of thin flaky flat bread, usually accompany the chutneys.

## **Bengali Cuisine Sweets**

Sweets occupy an important place in the diet of Bengalis and at their social ceremonies. It is an ancient custom among Hindus to distribute sweets during festivities. The confectionary industry has flourished because of its close association with social and religious ceremonies. Competition and changing tastes have helped to create many new sweets, and today this industry has grown within the country as well as all over the world.

The sweets of Bengal are generally made of sweetened cottage cheese (*chhenna*), *Khoa* (reduced solidified milk), or flours of different cereals and pulses. Some important sweets of Bengal are:

Made from sweetened, finely ground fresh paneer, sandesh in all its variants is among the most popular Bengali sweets. The basic sandesh has been considerably enhanced by the many famous confectioners of Bengal, and now a few hundred different varieties exist, from the simple *kachagolla* to the complicated *abar khabo*, *jolbhora* or *indrani*. Another variant is the *korapak* or hard mixture, which blends rice flour with the paneer to form a shell-like dough that lasts much longer.

Rasgulla is one of the most widely consumed sweets. The basic version has many regional variations.

*Pantua* is somewhat similar to the Rasgulla, except that the balls are fried in edible oil or *ghee* (clarified butter) until golden or deep brown before being put in syrup.

ChamCham (especially from Porabari, Tangail District in Bangladesh) goes back about 150 years. The modern version of this sweet was inspired by Raja Ramgore of Balia district in Uttar Pradesh in India. It was then further modernised by his grandson, Matilal Gore. This oval-shaped sweet is reddish brown in colour and it is of a denser texture than the rasagolla. It can also be preserved longer. Granules of *mawa* or dried milk can also be sprinkled over chamcham.

Several varieties of yoghurts such as *misti doi*, custards, and rice pudding (*kheer*) are also popular in both Bangladesh and West Bengal.

*Sandesh, chhanar jilepi, kalo jam, darbesh, raghobshai, payesh, nalengurer sandesh, shor bhaja* and an innumerable variety are just a few examples of sweets in Bengali cuisine.

In both Bangladesh and West Bengal, the tradition of making cakes, locally known as *Pithas* still flourishes. They are usually made from rice or wheat flour mixed with sugar, jaggery, grated coconut etc. Pithas are usually enjoyed with the sweet syrups of *Khejurer Gur* (date tree molasses). They're usually fried or steamed; the most common forms of these cakes include *Bhapa pitha* (steamed), *Pakan pitha* (fried), *Puli pitha* (dumplings), etc. Pithas are usually a celebration of the new crop, and often associated with harvest festivals.

## Bengali Cuisine Snacks

Moori (puffed rice) is made by heating sand in a pot, and then throwing in grains of rice. The rice can have been washed in brine to provide seasoning. The rice puffs up and is separated from the sand by a strainer. Moori is very popular in Bengal and used in a wide variety of secular and religious occasions, or even just munched plain. A variant of moori is khoi, which is flattened puffed rice. Both varieties are used to make many different snack foods.

One of the most popular and iconic snack foods of Bengal, *jhal* literally means hot and spicy. Jhal-moori is puffed rice with spices, vegetables and raw mustard oil. Depending on what is added, there are many kinds of Jhal-muri but the most common is a *Bhorta* made of chopped onion, roasted ground cumin, green or roasted chillies, mustard oil and fresh coriander.

A moa is made by taking Moori with gur as binder and forming it into a ball. Another popular kind of moa is *Joynagar moa*, which uses khoa and a sugar-milk-spices mixture as binder.

## Bengali Cuisine Glossary

**Ambal:** A sour dish made either with several vegetables or with fish, the sourness being produced by the addition of tamarind pulp.

**Biriyani:** Fragrant dish of long-grained aromatic rice combined with beef, mutton, or chicken and a mixture of characteristic spices. Sometimes cooked in sealed containers (*dum biriyani*).

**Bhaja or Bhaji:** Anything fried, either by itself or in batter.

**Bhapa:** Fish or vegetables steamed with oil and spices. A classic steaming technique is to wrap the fish in banana leaf to give it a faint musky, smoky scent.

**Bhate:** (meaning steamed with rice) Any vegetable, such as potatoes, beans, pumpkins or even dal, first boiled whole and then mashed and seasoned with mustard oil or ghee and spices. traditionally the vegetables were placed on top of the rice; they steamed as the rice was being boiled.

**Bhorta:** Any vegetable, fish or shrimps boiled and coarsely mashed, mixed with spices, mustard oil and onions.

**Bhuna:** A term of Urdu origin, and applies to meat cooked in spices for a long time without water. The spices are slow-cooked in oil (*bhunno*). The spices first absorb the oil, and when fully cooked release the oil again.

**Bora:** See Kofta

**Chachhari:** Usually a vegetable dish with one or more varieties of vegetables cut into longish strips, sometimes with the stalks of leafy greens added, all lightly seasoned with spices like mustard or poppy seeds and flavoured with a phoron. The skin and bone of large fish like bhetki or chitol can be made into a chachhari called kanta-chachhari, kanta, meaning fish-bone.

**Chhanchra:** A combination dish made with different vegetables, portions of fish head and fish oil (entrails).

**Chechki:** Tiny pieces of one or more vegetable - or, sometimes even the peels (of potatoes, lau, pumpkin or patol for example) - usually flavored with panch-phoron or whole mustard seeds or kala jeera. Chopped onion and garlic can also be used, but hardly any ground spices.

**Dalna:** Mixed vegetables or eggs, cooked in a medium thick gravy seasoned with ground spices, especially garom mashla and a touch of ghee.

**Dam or Dum:** Vegetables (especially potatoes), meat or rice (biryani) cooked slowly in a sealed pot over a low heat.

**Ghonto:** Different complementary vegetables (e.g., cabbage, green peas, potatoes or banana blossom, coconut, chickpeas) are chopped or finely grated and cooked with both a phoron and ground spices. Dried pellets of dal (boris) are often added to the ghanto. Ghee is commonly added at the end. Non-vegetarian ghantos are also made, with fish or fish heads added to vegetables. The famous murighanto is made with fish heads cooked in a fine variety of rice. Some ghantos are very dry while others a thick and juicy.

**Jhaal:** Literally, hot. A great favorite in West Bengali households, this is made with fish or shrimp or crab, first lightly fried and then cooked in a light sauce of ground red chilli or ground mustard and a flavoring of panch-phoron or kala jeera. Being dryish it is often eaten with a little bit of dal pored over the rice.

**Jhol:** A light fish or vegetable stew seasoned with ground spices like ginger, cumin, coriander, chilli and turmeric

with pieces of fish and longitudinal slices of vegetables floating in it. The gravy is thin yet extremely flavorful. Whole green chillies are usually added at the end and green coriander leaves are used to season for extra taste. This term is also used to refer to any type of stew in meat, fish or vegetable dishes.

**Kalia:** A very rich preparation of fish, meat or vegetables using a lot of oil and ghee with a sauce usually based on ground ginger and onion paste and garam mashla.

**Khichuri:** Rice mixed with vegetables and in some cases, boiled eggs. Usually cooked with spices and turmeric powder.

**Kofta:** Ground meat or vegetable croquettes bound together by spices and/or eggs served alone or in savory gravy.

**Korma:** Another term of Urdu origin (literally '*braised with onions*'), meaning meat or chicken cooked in a mild onion and yoghurt sauce with ghee.

**Luchi:** Small round unleavened bread fried in oil. See *Parata*

**Parata:** Bread made from wheat flour and fried in the oven until golden-brown.

**Paturi:** Typically fish, seasoned with spices (usually shorshe) wrapped in banana leaves and steamed or roasted over a charcoal fire.

**Polau Pilaf or Pulau:** Fragrant dish of rice with ghee, spices and small pieces of vegetables. Long grained aromatic rice is usually used, but some aromatic short grained versions such as *Kalijira* or *Gobindobhog* may also be used.

**Pora:** The word literally means charred. Vegetables are wrapped in banana leaves and roasted over a wood, charcoal or coal fire. Some vegetables with skin such as brinjals, are put directly on the flame or coals. The roasted vegetable is then mixed with onions, oil and spices.

**Ruti or Roti:** Unleaved bread made in a tawa and puffed over an open flame.

**Tarkari:** A general term often used in Bengal the way 'curry' is used in English (it is speculated to be one of the origins of curry). Originally from Persian, the word first meant uncooked garden vegetables. From this it was a natural extension to mean cooked vegetables or even fish and vegetables cooked together.