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### **Vegetarian Wonders of West Bengal**

The unique vegetarian varieties of  
this enticing cuisine



# VEGETARIAN WONDERS OF WEST BENGAL

The unique vegetarian varieties of this enticing cuisine

*By Bindu Gopal Rao*



West Bengal boasts an intricate and multifaceted culinary tradition, with a particular source of delight found in its vegetarian dishes that are often not in the limelight. However, if you scratch the surface, there are several intricacies that are yours to explore.

### **Quintessential Fare**

Bengali vegetarian food does not contain onion or garlic, and mustard paste, ginger and poppy seeds are usually used to add the spice element. The use of poppy seeds is not as prevalent as the opium poppies which were first grown in the erstwhile Bengal residency region and posto or poppy seed paste is an additive to potato and watery vegetables that are more insipid. As mustard was available easily, the oil was also used for cooking. For a while people switched to other oils but scientific research has proved that this is a very healthy cooking medium.

**Iti Misra**, food consultant and home-chef, explains, “one of the most famous vegetarian dishes in Bengal cuisine is Shukto, which many people think is like Avial, but it is not. It is eaten at the beginning of the meal and has drumsticks, raw banana, potatoes and karela or ucche (a smaller version of the karela) and is made with a light mustard and poppy seed gravy and is a distinctive dish. Medically it has been proven that if you eat something bitter first when you start a meal, it prevents any acid forming in the gut and it is customary to serve shukto first.”

### **Curry Fix**

Bengali dishes also include mustard paste that provides the sharpness required in certain vegetarian dishes, which may turn out rather bland otherwise. Poto (pointed gourd), Bhindi (okra) or Begun (Egg plant) can taste delicious when spiced up with mustard paste. When discussing the local Bengali cuisine, one cannot overlook the significance



**Iti Misra**





of these vegetarian offerings. **Sabyasachi Nag**, Executive Chef, **Holiday Inn Kolkata Airport** adds that there are several vegetarian recipes from both sides of the river. “Suktani, Chocchori, Vorta, Dhokar Dalna, Pur Vora, Poto Posto, Aloo Jhinge Posto, Labrar Tarkari, Karai Sutir Kachouri, Bhaja Masala Aloor Dum, Mochar Ghanto among others. Bengali vegetarian delicacies are underrated and undiscovered, from grandmother Rannaghor to modern Bong Kitchen, vegetarian options can never end,” he explains. Lentil cakes called ‘dhokas’ are a delicacy and replace meat in pure vegetarian Bengali meals. In Bengal, vegetables are difficult to come by in the monsoon and this is when lentil and lentil products are used to cook. The concept of boris (dry lentil dumplings) that are made in winter and stored are a part of many Bengali dishes especially in this season.

### **Spice Route**

One of the most distinct spice mixes that is an integral part of the food is the Panch Phoron - a mix of fenugreek seed, nigella seed, mustard seed, fennel seed and the local

tadka or tempering for the vegetables. “The powdered form of this mix is not the right way to use the mix, as these spices are not meant to be cooked. This blend flavours the oil, and this is integrated into the vegetables giving it a distinct Bengali flavour. Some people also use teen phoron - radhuni, nigella and fennel seeds to temper some vegetable preparations and this is more subtle,” says Misra. In a Bengali kitchen, a diverse selection of whole spices is essential for tempering (phoron) and crafting spice powders and blends. “To begin, we have ‘gota gorom moshla’, which includes cloves, cinnamon, and cardamom. Additionally, the Bengali cuisine relies on shada jeere (cumin seeds), kaalo jeere (nigella seeds), and panch phoron (a five-spice mixture). The use of both black and yellow mustard seeds is extensive in Bengali cuisine,” says **Soham Dhar**, Sous Chef, **The Westin Kolkata Rajarhat**.

### **Veggie Ways**

Interestingly, in Bengali culture, there are specific times of the year when vegetarian fare takes precedence. One notable period

festivals and rituals, such as Durga Puja, Saraswati Puja, and Lakshmi Puja, during which many Bengalis opt for vegetarian meals as a mark of respect and devotion. Furthermore, the Bengali calendar features several months, like Chaitra and Kartik, during which many people follow a vegetarian diet as part of their religious traditions. Additionally, some individuals may choose to go vegetarian during specific lunar phases, known as 'Ekadashi,' which occurs twice a month. These dietary preferences are deeply ingrained in Bengali culture and are often a reflection of both religious and seasonal considerations. Bengalis usually eat vegetarian food on Thursday as they do Lakshmi Puja and on Monday for Shiv Puja. Here is a recipe for you to try.

***Mocher Paturi*** courtesy ***Subrata Kundu, Chef, Kolkata Centre for Creativity (KCC) Café***

### ***Ingredients***

- 1 medium size banana flower
- ½ cup coconut
- 1 ½ tsp yellow mustard seeds
- 4 – 5 green chillies
- 3 tbsp mustard oil
- Salt as per taste
- ½ tsp turmeric powder
- 1 banana leaf
- 50gm basmati rice
- 1tsp olive oil
- ½ tsp black pepper
- 1 tbsp steamed rice

### ***Method***

· Firstly, clean the banana flowers so that you have an individual banana flower with their calyx and pistil removed. Now chop all the cleaned flowers. Transfer the cleaned flower to a saucepan with half teaspoon each of salt and turmeric and four cups of water. Cover and keep it for half an hour.



- Drain the water completely and wash once to remove the extra salt and turmeric before using.
- Grind black mustard seeds, white mustard seeds, and finely chopped coconut, until smooth by adding water as required.
- Drain the water from the banana flower as much as possible and mash it properly.
- In a bowl add mashed banana flower, mustard, and coconut paste, a teaspoon each of mustard oil and salt and combine.
- Now coat the banana leaf pieces with mustard oil and roast them over a pan for a few seconds on both sides. This will help them to become more pliable so that they can be easily folded without breaking.
- Place one banana leaf, add two tablespoons flower mixture and one green chilli in the centre. Carefully fold the two opposite sides of the leaf inward and then the next two sides inward to make a parcel. Tie the parcel with threads. Make all the parcels in the same way.
- Heat a non-stick pan, tawa, or combi oven with two tablespoons of mustard oil, place the parcels on the tawa and cover the lid. Steam the parcels on low flame for 8-10 minutes, or till you find the colour of the leaf has changed. Flip the parcels and steam the other side for another 8-10 minutes.
- Once done, take the parcels out from the pan. Cut the threads and serve.