

## Pampering the Feudal Lord's Palate

The wealthy landed aristocracy of West Bengal were party-hearty gourmands whose rich family recipes evoke a bygone era

Gustasp and Jeroo Irani



A zamindari meal

**W**hen food, fantasy and an awesome setting come together, time travel

happens. We savored a regal repast at a 250-year-old palace, now a boutique luxury hotel, near Kolkata, in the state of West Bengal in eastern India. No, we did not burp at the end of the meal to signal supreme satisfaction as a true aristocrat would have done, but the mouthful of flavors teleported us to an era when the landed aristocracy ate gargantuan gourmet meals off goldware, silverware, or even the best china.

This delectable panoply of dishes of the former Bengali "nobility" can now be savored in the nostalgia-wreathed home of a former zamindar or aristocrat and in a handful of hotel-restaurants in and around Kolkata. A few heritage palaces and homestays, too, showcase these dishes, which the party-hearty landed zamindars of Bengal used to satiate their appetite for rich food.

"Bengalis have always been hearty eaters and the richer you were, the more lavish meals you had," said Kolkata-based travel and food writer Uttara Gangopadhyay. "Apart from traditional dishes, the zamindars and other wealthy families experimented with cuisine, especially after the arrival of the British. Many family recipes exist even today.

"The family of poet and novelist Rabindranath Tagore was known for such experimentation," she added. "However, not many former upper crust families can afford such extravagant spreads now," she said, speaking of recipes handed down from mother to daughter that are rustled up only on festive occasions. Indeed, each family of the zamindars of Bengal had its own recipes which incorporated the use of hand-ground herbs, spices and roots to create dishes nuanced in flavor, color and presentation. Like nobility elsewhere in the world, the zamindars lived extravagant lives of privilege, with a deep-rooted sense of entitlement that a feudal society confers on those atop the pecking order.

"The splendid banquets were a way of showcasing their power and wealth," said Kolkata-born Kaushik Chatterjee, founder of Kolkata Story Tours, a company that offers immersive walking tours of the city of joy. "The fare in an aristocratic household would be cooked with the best and freshest ingredients that money could buy and by the finest chefs from not just Bengal but from India and even Europe," added Chatterjee. Post a meal, hands would be washed with gulab (rose) water, and followed by leisurely puffs on a gargara (tall, piped hookah) with scented tobacco.



Rajbari Bawali, a restored zamindari mansion

We spoke to Samarendra Nath Mondal, a descendant of the Mondal zamindars, the family that once owned the Rajbari Bawali, a restored zamindari palace, now a boutique luxury hotel, near Kolkata. He told us how the Mondal zamindars of Bengal were among the richest and most powerful landed aristocrats in the erstwhile province. The lineage of the Mondals goes back 400 years. In the Mughal and British Raj eras, zamindars wielded great clout. Soon, the Mondals transformed the region of Bawali into a sylvan hamlet of temples and palaces.

Over a century, prior to Indian Independence, Rajbari Bawali had become the epicenter of profligate living. Lavish parties were held where tables groaning with delectable food, based on timeless recipes, coaxed the taste buds of eminent guests into submission. Post-Independence, the Bengal nobility fell on bad times. Their lands were acquired by the Indian government and they could no longer maintain their palatial properties. The Mondal family, too, got fragmented, with many members foraying to distant lands to rebuild their broken lives.

Ajay Rawal, the current owner of Rajbari Bawali, stumbled on the dilapidated Rajbari palace in 2009 and fell in love with crumbling decadent opulence. He restored the palace with great sensitivity, keeping true to its spirit and the architectural style of that era.

such as mangoes, papaya, pineapple and tomatoes give these velvety concoctions a super kick.)



Sweets at Rajbari Bawali

The gourmands of yore relished their bold, high-protein non-vegetarian fare, too, and so we relished some more knock-out dishes: kosha mangsho, succulent mutton chunks pot-roasted in the Kolkata style, which is best had with luchi (a deep-fried puffy bread); bekti paturi, fish marinated with mustard, wrapped in banana leaf and steamed; and kochu pata chingri, shrimps cooked in mustard and coconut paste, with a melange of spinach and Colocasia leaves.

The sweet finale was luscious rosogolla, round dumplings simmered in a sugar syrup; and mishtidoi, chilled sweetened yogurt brushed with caramel and served in terracotta pots.

A Bengal zamindar's banquet balances flavors and textures and is calibrated to evoke nostalgia for an era long forgotten by most, but now you can taste it, even roll it on your palate.

Text and photographs by Gustasp and Jeroo Irani.



Preserves and papad at the Rajbari Bawali

But it was at the banquet, which happened in a private, high-ceilinged dining room at Rajbari Bawali, that we got a real taste of the past. The food was laid out on green banana leaves placed in red terracotta thalis with matching bowls that were slowly filled with a rich assortment of dishes.

Soon fugitive flavors were chasing each other across our palates, starting with the shukto – a colorful melange of vegetables and bitter gourd cooked in a poppy seed-based gravy and topped with fried lentil dumplings. The dizzying array of vegetarian delicacies which were served first included begun bhaja, shallow-fried eggplants; jhurjhure aloo bhaja; crisp potato juliennes; and the signature aam aada diye daal, a lentil stew cooked with raw mango-flavored ginger.

Other fragrant vegetables seemed to waltz on to our platters. Okra cooked with mustard, and channar kalia, soft balls of cottage cheese simmered in a spicy gravy. The banquet was beginning to resemble a well-laid, prolonged siege on our stomachs! Back in the day, platters would be changed for the parade of non-vegetarian courses that followed the subtle vegetarian options. To give our beleaguered stomachs a rest, we had a palate cleanser – a subtle tomato-based chutney with papads, crisp, round, flat, bread discs. (chutneys, or spicy condiments, are Bengal's best-kept secret, and fruits