

## Customs and Cuisine of Bangladesh

By Linda McElroy, curator

The land in Bangladesh is quite flat, unlike its mountainous neighbors, Nepal and Bhutan. The soil is fertile because it's often renewed by rivers in flood that deposit their silt as they retreat. One of the staple foods is rice and the other is fish. A common saying is, "Fish and rice make a Bengali". Fish from rivers are considered more flavorful than fish from the ocean. A wide assortment of greens, fruits, and vegetables flourish in every season. Because the majority population is Muslim, beef, chicken, and goat are eaten, but pork is not.

Bangladesh has a distinctive cuisine that resembles that of the Indian state of Bengal, with which it shares a culture and history. Mustard oil is a common cooking oil and flavoring, and the Bengali five-spice mixture known as *panch phoron* is often used to flavor cooking oil before other ingredients are added. This blend of fennel, fenugreek, cumin, nigella, and mustard seed makes much of Bengal's cuisine easily distinguishable from regions of India. Also in contrast to the Hindu cuisine of Bengal, meat is consumed, and onions are used in great quantity as both a flavoring and ingredient. Generally rice and dal (lentils) are served at most meals.

### Dining Etiquette:

If invited to a meal, it is considered rude to turn the invitation down. If you are unable to attend, express that indirectly to suggest it may be difficult – "I will try," or "I will have to see," are acceptable responses if you cannot accept immediately.

Guests are generally served first, then the oldest, continuing in order of seniority. Do not begin eating until the oldest person at the table starts. Ensure you wash your hands before eating. Even so, the left hand is considered unclean, so only eat, pass dishes, or drink with the right hand. Flatbreads such as *paratha* and *roti* are served to scoop up the food, although you will not be considered impolite if you ask for utensils. Dishes are eaten sequentially at a meal rather than served all at once. Each dish is eaten separately with a little rice or flatbread so that the individual flavors can be enjoyed.

You will be constantly urged to take more food, so pace yourself so you can consume more servings. "I'm full," is only considered a polite gesture and you will be expected to eat more.

Source: [Mangoes and Curry Leaves by Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid](#); and [www.uncorneredmarket.com](http://www.uncorneredmarket.com)

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## Recipes



- 1 cup diced potatoes
- 1 cup cubed Asian eggplant
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ to ½ teaspoon cayenne
- 3 cups water
- 4 or 5 green chiles, stemmed, seeded, and cut into large pieces
- ½ cup chopped coriander leaves

### Directions

Pat fish dry and cut into serving size pieces. Set on a large plate. Mix together 1 teaspoon each of the salt and turmeric, then sprinkle onto the fish and toss gently to coat. Heat 2 tablespoons of the mustard oil in a wok or large heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Add the fish and pan-fry until just touched with brown (you will probably have to cook in several batches, adding extra oil for each batch), then lift out and set aside on another plate.

Add the vegetable oil and place the pan back over medium-high heat. When the oil is hot, add the Bengali spice mixture and stir-fry briefly, then add the ginger and tomatoes and stir-fry about 1 minute, until the tomato starts to break down. Add the potato and eggplant and stir-fry for several minutes, until they begin to soften. Add the ground coriander, cumin, cayenne and the remaining ½ teaspoon turmeric, then add the water, cover and bring to a rapid simmer.

Slide in the fish and the chiles, lower the heat, and simmer until the chiles and vegetables are tender, another 5 minutes or so. Taste for seasoning and stir in the remaining ½ teaspoon salt if needed. Garnish with coriander leaves.

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## Fish and Vegetable Stew (Jhol)

Serves 4

### Ingredients

- 1 to 1½ pounds cod fillets or steaks, or fillets of another firm-fleshed fish
- 1½ to 2 teaspoons salt
- 1½ teaspoons turmeric
- 3 to 4 tablespoons mustard oil (can mix ¼ teaspoon dried mustard into ¼ cup vegetable oil)
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon Bengali Five-Spice Mixture (*panch phoron*, see separate recipe)
- 1 teaspoon minced ginger, or ginger mashed to a paste
- ½ cup diced tomato

This is a fish and vegetable stew (*jhol* means simmered or cooked in water), commonly served at the main noon meal in many households. Cod, halibut, tilapia or even salmon would all be good choices for this dish, any fish that will hold together when pan-fried.

Source: [Mangoes and Curry Leaves](#)



### Bengali Five-Spice Mixture (*Panch Phoron*)

Called *panch phoron* (*panch* means “five” and *phoron* is “flavor” or “spice”), this mixture of whole untoasted spices gets tossed into hot oil before other ingredients are added.

- 1 tablespoon nigella seeds
- 1 tablespoon cumin seeds
- 1 tablespoon black mustard seeds
- 1 tablespoon fenugreek seeds
- 1 tablespoon fennel seeds

Combine the spices in a jar with a tight fitting lid, store away from heat and light.



#### Notes and Instructions

Nigella (also called black cumin) is a small black teardrop-shaped spice with an oniony flavor. It is used sparingly on naan (flatbread) and to flavor hot oil at the start of cooking. If you can't find nigella (or any of the other seeds called for) in your area at an Indian or South Asian grocery they can be ordered online through Amazon.

You can either order the [panch phoron blend](#), or the [nigella seed](#) alone.

Source: “[Mangoes and Curry Leaves](#),” by Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid



## Beef and Onion Stew (*Beef Bhoona*)

Serves 4

### Ingredients

1 pound stewing beef  
4 tablespoons butter, or  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup ghee (clarified butter), or 2 tablespoons each mustard oil and vegetable oil  
1 teaspoon Bengali Five-Spice Mixture (*panch phoron*, see separate recipe)  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon turmeric  
2 teaspoons ground coriander  
2 bay leaves  
1 2" piece cinnamon  
1 tablespoon minced garlic or garlic mashed to

a paste

1 tablespoon minced ginger or ginger mashed to a paste  
 $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 cups thinly sliced onion  
4 green chiles, sliced into  $\frac{1}{4}$ " thick rings  
1 cup water  
2 tablespoons fresh lime juice  
1 teaspoon salt  
1 teaspoon sugar  
1 cup loosely packed coriander leaves  
2 limes cut into wedges

*Bhoona* is a method of slow cooking spices and meat until tender. It is very well suited to beef. Use stewing beef and look for meat with some marbling, for that will give the best flavor and the most tender texture. Accompany with *Khichri*, a kind of easy pilaf of rice and dal. In a traditional Bangla-style meal, if you served plain rice with the beef bhoona, you would also serve a simple dal, as well as a green vegetable.  
Source: [Mangoes and Curry Leaves](#)

### Directions

Cut the meat into  $\frac{1}{2}$ " cubes. In a wide, heavy pot heat the butter, ghee or oils over medium-high heat and add the meat cubes, browning on all sides and removing from pan when done. Add the Bengali Five-Spice mixture, there should be enough oil left in the pan, and cook for about 30 seconds, or until the mustard seeds have popped. Add the turmeric, coriander, bay leaves, cinnamon, garlic, and ginger and stir-fry for 30 seconds. Add the sliced onions, reduce the heat to medium, and cook, stirring frequently to prevent sticking, until well softened, about 10 minutes.

Next, add the meat back into the pan, add the water, lime juice, salt and sugar. Raise the heat and bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium/low, cover and simmer until a fork pierces the meat easily,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 hours. Add water as needed to prevent sticking to the pot. (Can be made one day ahead).

Stir in half the coriander leaves and transfer to a serving bowl. Top with the remaining coriander leaves. Serve with lime wedges, a squeeze of lime juice brings forward the flavor of the beef.

## Fried Zucchini, Bangla-Style

Serves 4

### Ingredients

4 or 5 small zucchini  
2 tablespoons mustard oil  
2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
(OR 4 tablespoons vegetable oil with  $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon dry mustard added)  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon turmeric  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon black mustard seeds  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon cayenne  
1 teaspoon sugar  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt  
coriander leaves or mint leaves, for garnish



### Directions

Slice the zucchini cross-wise into  $\frac{1}{2}$ " thick slices. Heat the oils in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the turmeric, mustard seed, cayenne and sugar and fry for about 10 seconds. Add the zucchini and cook, turning and moving them, for about 3 minutes, until browned on both sides. You may have to do this in batches, depending on the size of your pan. Don't crowd the zucchini or they will steam instead of fry.

Remove the slices as they are done and place on a platter, sprinkle with salt and fresh herbs and serve.

Let the flavored oil left behind cool, and refrigerate for future use in cooking or stir-frying.

### Notes and Instructions

In Bangladesh they would use *potal* (pointed gourd) for this dish. Our zucchini are the closest available substitute for the *potal*.

The cooking technique here is shallow frying, which gives the slices of zucchini a wonderful crisped outer surface, leaving the center creamy and tender-textured. It's delicious served hot or at room temperature.

Source: "[Mangoes and Curry Leaves](#)," by Jeffrey Alford and Naomi Duguid

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