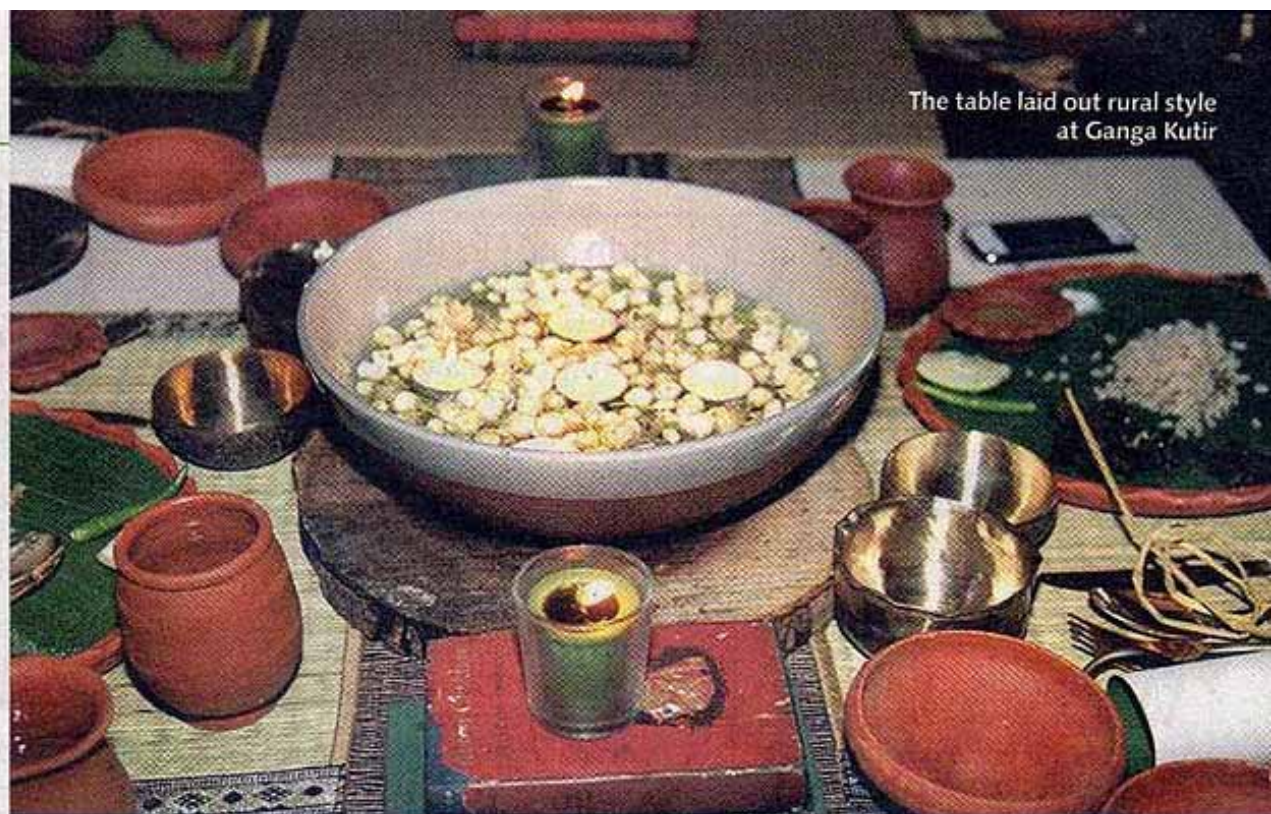




Rahul Verma discovers rural Bengali cuisine in an upmarket setting at Ganga Kutir



The table laid out rural style at Ganga Kutir

Rustic flavours

I woke up in the morning, looked at the flowing Ganga from my window and felt at peace. At a distance I could see fishermen in their boats. Everybody around me was fast asleep — after a night of unabashed revelry — and there was silence all around. I felt I had walked into another world.

I was at Ganga Kutir, a beautiful property just by the Ganges at Raichak, about 60km from Calcutta, on a festival dubbed as a 'Gourmet Getaway.' A group of 16 foodies had gathered there from different parts of India for the festival. I was among them — and a bit iffy to begin with, I must admit, for I am not much into elaborate, Bengali-styled gatherings. A day and a half later, I was a convert.

The festival, hosted by Calcutta industrialist Harsh Neotia and wife Madhu, who own the property, showcased the food of Bengal in different ways. There was the *burra sahib's*

breakfast, spilling over with sausages, bacon and cheeses, and the usual Bengali morning fare, with soft *luchi* and lightly-flavoured potatoes. The Zamindari dinner was an elaborate upper class meal of prawns and *hilsa*, amongst a great many other delicacies, served with aromatic rice. The traditional food of the Bengali Muslim figured on another day, with mutton *rezala*, chicken *chaaps* and what have you.

And then there was the meal that I enjoyed the most — the Grameen Aahar, or the food of rural Bengal. I sat down at this elaborate table — beautifully done up with traditional *thaalis* and flower arrangements — and looked at the wedge of lime and green chilli on my platter. So what did the simple folk of Bengal eat?

The food, it turned out, was simple — and delicious. The *kucho chingri* — small shrimps — had been cooked lightly with turmeric, onions and chillies, leaving the taste of the fresh



KHOSHAAR CHORCHORI

shrimps in the mouth. The *aloo o kancha kumrar chechki* was an uncomplicated dish of pumpkin and potatoes, cooked with light masalas. And the *masur dal*, cooked simply with onions and green chillies, reminded me of the *dal* that had been perfected by Angoori, our old cook, who used to top the light lentil preparation with a few drops of mustard oil.

The ambience added to the taste. Men in *dhoti kurtas* and women in saris with red borders moved around deftly, serving us food that smelt better than the fragrance of incense in the air. I chatted a bit with the surprisingly unassuming fashion designer, Sabyasachi, after I heard he had designed the festival — from the décor to the food. Indeed, the décor was superb — the warm colours matching the mood and the food.

If the other meals were a celebration of good living, the Grameen Aahar was a chapter on the food that figures on most

tables in Bengal, even today. Ingredients that go straight into the bin in other parts of the country are turned into mouth-watering dishes in this region. The nutritious skin of the potato, for instance, is a much loved dish in the east. Not surprisingly, the rural fare in front of me included *khoshaar chorchori* with *piaz lonka* — a mix of peels (of potatoes, red pumpkins and bottle gourds) — cooked with vegetables, onions and chillies and tempered with onion seeds.

There were many other items on the menu — from crispy fries at the beginning of the meal to a delightful date chutney at the end, along with Burdwan's famous sweet, the *mihidana*. But the dish that I relished the most was the egg curry. It's my comfort food, in any case, but what made it special was that it had been cooked with duck's eggs, which you find rarely in cities such as Delhi. Duck's egg — or *haansher dim* — is big and brown, and has a taste that the poor chicken's egg just cannot produce.

It was odd to be in the lap of luxury — the picturesque resort has 16 plush rooms, all beautifully done up, and an infinity pool — and eat the food of rural folks. But that is what food is all about — even the simplest of fare can be the envy of the richest of tables. ♦

Photographs by Rashbehari Das

Kasha haansher dimer dalna (Duck egg curry) (serves 3)



Ingredients:

- 6 duck's eggs • 2 bay leaves • 30g onion paste • 15g ginger paste
- 200g chopped tomatoes • 20g chopped coriander leaves • 5g slit green chillies • salt to taste • 2g turmeric powder • 10g sugar • 5g red chilli powder • 45ml refined oil

Method:

Half boil the eggs. Fry them in hot oil till golden brown in colour. In the hot oil add the bay leaves. And then add the onion, ginger, and tomato pastes. Add salt, turmeric, red chilli powder and sugar and fry till the oil leaves the mixture. Add a little water to this. Add the semi-boiled eggs. Make sure the gravy is just enough to coat the eggs. Finish with chopped coriander leaves and slit green chillies.

GRAMEEN KUCHO CHINGRI

