

MEMORIES

Are You Being Served?

Everyone is family in this Indian home kitchen

BY INDRANI SEN

LUNCH, the high point of the day at my grandmother's house in Santiniketan, a village outside of Calcutta, was always a mixed pleasure. I loved sitting down to the table, which was invariably covered with stainless-steel bowls of fish curry, fried eggplant, pumpkin and cauliflower stews. I'd take a surreptitious sip of pale yellow dal before I poured the soupy lentils over my rice. I'd wonder what kind of greens the garden had produced today—bitter leaves or mild ones; lime green or dark maroon? And what variety of luscious mishti (sweetmeats) would follow?

But lunch was also where I, as a half Indian raised in London and Boston, became the most aware of the least comfortable aspect of my annual visits to my grandmother's home: being waited on by the servants who lived and worked there. Their presence, as they stood near the table to refill water glasses, serve more rice, or

pass the chutney, made me nervous. I'd flinch when Indian relatives bellowed across the room at them. I'd try to help clear the plates, a gesture the servants greeted with good-humored bewilderment. I'd disagree with my grandmother when she complained of too much salt in the vegetables or not enough turmeric to brighten the fish curry. I'd praise every dish as lavishly as I could in my limited Bengali. My grandmother would look over at me mischievously and say, "Give all these compliments to me! I taught them how to cook!" Then she'd translate her retort into Bengali for the servants' benefit. I was horrified. They'd all collapse into giggles.

In our left-wing middle-class Bengali family, servants

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have always been treated with consideration. They are paid well, and their health and retirement costs are covered. We refer to those who are older than us with the respectfully affectionate honorifics *di* and *da*, meaning older sister and older brother. And yet the line is clearly drawn between their world and ours. They eat the same food, but only after we've finished our meal. They sleep in the same house, but on harder beds, with more patches on their mosquito nets. They share in our family dramas but are relegated to the role of bit players.

JOGGESHWAR-DA, THE COOK, came to our house as a boy of 14, and though he's now in his mid-70s, his lanky frame and warm smile make it easy to picture the teenager my great-grandmother first hired to help

Making lunch in the author's grandmother's kitchen in Santiniketan, near Calcutta (from left): Bina-di, Joggeshwar-da, and Rani-di.

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in the kitchen. Bina-di, who works with Joggeshwar-da, is tiny and frail, her body hunched after a lifetime of labor. She's several years older than Joggeshwar-da, but she shows no interest in retiring, even on a full salary. Rani-di is in her 40s but still reminiscent in her beauty of a Gauguin portrait; she is the housekeeper and helps with the morning's tasks of chopping vegetables, grinding spice pastes, and picking through the rice for small stones.

My grandmother's servants have been an important part of my life for as long as I can remember, but my smattering of Bengali has

never been adequate for more than the most basic conversations. It was only in my late teens that I discovered another way to communicate. Kneeling beside Rani-di as the morning sun warmed the patio, I learned how to use the *shil nora* to grind the essential spice pastes of Bengali cooking. She showed me how to glide the rolling pin-like pestle back and forth on the pocked stone mortar, pausing from time to time to reposition the paste with her wet fingertips.

Bina-di taught me how to use the *korani*, a tool shaped like half a circular-saw blade used for shredding coconut. Squatting on a

RECIPE

Khichuri

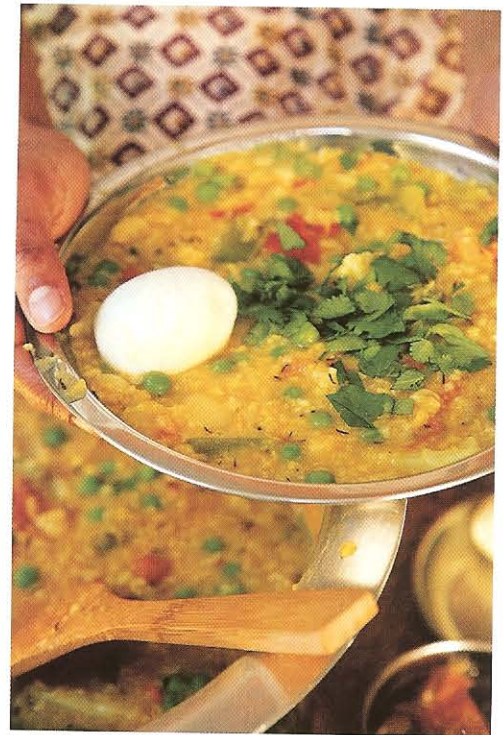
(Dal, Rice, and Vegetable Porridge)

SERVES 12

This rice and dal porridge—the inspiration for the Anglo-Indian breakfast dish called kedgerie—is traditionally eaten by Bengalis during the monsoon season (June through September). For more information on the Indian technique for frying spices, see IN THE SAVEUR KITCHEN, page 94. For hard-to-find Indian ingredients, see THE PANTRY, page 99.

1 3" piece ginger, peeled and chopped	1/2 small head cauliflower, cored and cut into 1" x 2" florets
1 cup yellow moong dal	1 tbsp. ground cumin
1 cup masoor dal	1 tsp. sugar
1 cup basmati rice	Salt
3 bay leaves	2 cups frozen peas, thawed
1 tsp. turmeric	1/4 cup mustard oil, plus more for drizzling
2 large tomatoes, cored and cut into 8 wedges each	1 whole dried chile, such as árbol, halved, seeds discarded
2 carrots, cut crosswise into 1/3" slices	1 tbsp. whole black cumin seeds
1 medium onion, quartered and sliced crosswise	1 packed cup cilantro leaves
1 green bell pepper, cored, seeded, and cut into 1/2" strips	Sweet mango chutney
	12 hard-cooked eggs

- Put ginger into a mortar and crush with a pestle to form a paste. (Alternatively, put ginger into a small food processor along with 1 tbsp. water and pulse until a paste forms.) Set aside.
- Bring 3 quarts water to a boil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Meanwhile, combine dals and rice in a large bowl, cover with water, and swish around with your hand until water clouds. Drain and repeat process until water runs clear. Drain dals and rice; return to bowl.
- Once the water is boiling, add dals and rice, bay leaves, and turmeric and stir to combine. Return to a boil and skim off and discard any foam that rises to surface. Add ginger paste, tomatoes, carrots, onions, peppers, cauliflower, ground cumin, sugar, and salt to taste and stir to combine. Return to a boil, reduce heat to medium or medium-low to maintain a simmer, and cook, stirring occasionally, until rice is cooked through and vegetables are softened, 18-20 minutes. Stir in peas and cook until warmed through, about 2 minutes. Remove khichuri from heat.
- Heat mustard oil in a saucepan over high heat. Add halved chile and fry until almost black, 1-2 minutes. Add cumin seeds and fry briefly, 3-5 seconds. Carefully pour oil, chile, and cumin seeds over khichuri, stir to combine, and season with salt to taste. Spoon into soup bowls and garnish with cilantro and a drizzle of mustard oil. Serve with mango chutney and hard-boiled eggs, to be mashed up in the khichuri.



Khichuri (dal, rice, and vegetable porridge).

low stool, I'd scrape a halved fruit on the *korani*'s metal teeth, watching the lacy white flakes pile up; they'd be used in a malai shrimp curry or for narkel sandesh, a sweet flavored with gur (Indian brown sugar).

In the tiny, dark kitchen, smoky from the coal stove, Joggeshwar-da proudly showed me how to make the dishes my grandmother had taught him as a boy: eggplant cooked with ground poppy seed and mustard oil; egg curry fragrant with cardamom and cinnamon; chutneys made from tomatoes, cilantro, tamarind, or green papaya. I've learned that some of the preparations—his simple but delicious chicken curry, his eggplant slices fried in chickpea batter, his mellow dals—transfer well to my American kitchen. Indeed, Joggeshwar-da's khichuri, a rainy-day stew of rice, dal, and vegetables served with a hard-cooked egg and a drizzle of mustard oil, has become one of my staples.

Other dishes don't translate so well. *Mo-char ghanto*, a savory delicacy made from banana flowers, involves hours of preparation; the process requires separating the stamens from the flower buds, then soaking, boiling, straining, and finally frying them. Salty-sour lime pickles, a favorite condiment of mine, must ferment in the Bengali sun for weeks before they're ready

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to eat. The many preparations calling for local river fish—macher dimer bora (fried patties made from fish fat and roe) or cho-chori, in which the fibrous stalks cut from greens are simmered with fish heads—are hard dishes to reproduce with non-Indian fish. Some homesick Bengalis living in North America substitute catfish or trout for the Indian varieties, but I'm content to wait until I'm back at Joggeshwar-da's table.

Whatever connections I've made with them, I find that my discomfort about the servants in my grandmother's home has not diminished as I've grown up. On the contrary, the spectacle of being waited on by increasingly elderly people has, if anything, become more awkward. I know it's an inequality no worse than the many other inequalities I manage to ignore daily—the exhausted immigrant washing my dishes in a New York City restaurant, the laborer enduring toxic fumes and noise to lay the roads I drive on, the small hands somewhere far away that stitched my T-shirt. This one, perhaps, is just harder to overlook.

My grandmother, who died last August at the age of 93, once explained to me her complex relationship with the people of her household. "I am like a queen," she said, with her most beatific smile. "Sometimes I scold them, but they love me."

Then, becoming serious, she added, "The people of this house are truly my family. When I die, my children will cry, my grandchildren will cry, but then you will go on with your lives. The servants, though, will really miss me."

VISITING MY grandmother's house for the first time without her, I see the truth of her words in the faces of Joggeshwar-da, Bina-di, and Rani-di. The woman they called "Ma" was, to all of us, like a fairy-tale queen: beautiful, imperious, just. To them, she was also an exacting teacher, a trusted confidante, a friend.

Serving me a dollop of his tomato, ginger, and tangerine peel chutney at lunch recently, Joggeshwar-da himself offered the criticism my grandmother would surely have made. "Beshi mishti," he said apologetically. Too sweet.

"Yes," I replied after tasting it. "Ektu beshi mishti." A little too sweet. 🍴

THE PANTRY, page 99: Sources for yellow moong dal, masoor dal, mustard oil, and black cumin seeds.



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