



Flavors of India in London

Brick Lane's best curry houses

In England, "going for an Indian" has become an essential Friday night dinner tradition, and in London, Brick Lane—the curry hub of the capital—is the only place for it. The curries on Brick Lane, which have more than 50 restaurants on just one street, are truly authentic. In fact, the area is often referred to as Banglatown because of its Bangladeshi eateries.

Cindy-Lou Dale

Spicy popadoms, accompanied with onion-mango chutney and tamarind-lime pickle, is the time-honored way to start a curry meal at Nazrul (130 Brick Lane), the oldest Bangladeshi curry house on Brick Lane which opened in 1971 to primarily serve the local 50,000-strong Bangladeshi community. Nazrul's is owned by four brothers who entertained Prince Charles on one of his visits to the area.

Chicken Tikka Masala is the UK's national dish—We kid you not!

UK'S FIRST BANGLADESHI SUPERMARKET

Think exotic spice then step into the UK's first Bangladeshi supermarket at Taj Store (112 Brick Lane). Along with many exotic vegetables and unfamiliar river fish, it has fresh supplies flown in daily from Bangladesh. Abdul is the oldest Bangladeshi green-grocer in the UK and has commanded this spot since 1936. Bamboo stools stacked on the top-most shelves are handmade by Bangladeshi prisoners.

Curry houses run the full length of Brick Lane but it takes a trained Bengali eye to spot the good ones.



SAVORY FARE

The deep-fried snacking goodness of Bengali “telebhaja” caught my eye at Arzu (55 Brick Lane). Arzu started as a sweet shop but now focuses on savory fare. The variety of tempting morsels are immense; deep-fried takeaway snacks like spring rolls and pakoras fritters, and their dangerously moreish dhokla (fermented batter derived from rice and split chickpeas). They make awesome mishti doi (sweet yogurt set in a mud pot) and dahi bhallas (lentil dumplings in a yogurt sauce). Mr. Patel’s homemade vegetarian samosas are simply the best—they’re rounder and fatter than their Indian cousin’s, with a crisp pastry encasing a spiced potato filling.

INDIAN? YOU MEAN BANGLADESHI!

We all have our bucket list, and the best things to tick off that list are ultimately the ones that may bring you closer to that bucket, which is what I did when walking into Gram Bangla (68 Brick Lane). It is a little-known fact that most of the food we call “Indian” in London is actually Bangladeshi. Forget chicken Tikka Masala, Prawn Bhuna and Lamb Saag—these are not what most Bengalis eat at home where river fish is the order of the day. Here it’s uniquely spiced fresh-water fish curries or dry fish bhuna, the kind of food only people with a Bangladeshi heritage would recognize. This tiny family-run Bangladeshi café doesn’t do candlelight or table linen. It’s basic, with a little traditional décor; there’s no menu to speak of. You walk up to the canteen-style counter and have a look what’s on offer. Once you’ve placed your order, step to the back, wash your hands, then proceed to eat as the Bengalis do—with your hands (I’ve been told there are a few cutlery pieces, somewhere). The tastes are not modified for the Western palette as it’s authentic Bangladeshi home-style cuisine. Abdul Shadid explains that his love of traditional Bangladeshi home cooking led to his opening the Gram Bangla in 1999. “I couldn’t have been the only Bengali longing for his mother’s cooking and saw a gap in the market place. Look here,” he waived at his eatery, swarming with locals and a few Bengali out-of-towners, “today we are all thinking of our mother’s food.”

A wave of Bangladeshi immigrants (mostly from the Sylhet region) came to London after WW2 and the city gained a distinctive flavor thanks to the new East End curry houses.

HUMBLE CURRY AND DELICIOUS DESSERTS

The intoxicating rush of spicy aromas and freshly-baked buttery naan bread drew me into Tayyabs (83-89 Fieldgate St). In 1971 Mohammed Tayyab started out serving tea and toast to passing trade, then curries.

This turned his humble eatery into London’s most popular Pakistani curry house, serving traditional Punjabi curries like their Karaki King Prawn that need to be soaked up with their famed naan bread.

For dessert, head to Rajmahal Sweets (57 Brick Lane) which will easily become your favorite shop in London as it’s a much loved and well-frequented Bengali sweet shop whose long counter displays a huge variety of mouth-watering and colorful delicacies. It’s the place to go for extravagant desserts like jalebi (fried doughnuts), ball-shaped sweets like Besan laddu, milk cake, dense milk-based sweet confectionaries like chocolate barfi and coconut barfi, and festive chickpea laddus. You’ll be pleased to hear this is a portable dessert shop, Mohammad Islam is mindful of his wares when boxing up biscuits, cakes and marzipan-based sweets.

WHO KNEW FOOD HAS SO MUCH TO SAY?

Taste the food that shapes Brick Lane, and you’ll learn the stories of the people behind the fare. In “Banglatown” the street signs are in both Bengali and English, and Banglatown’s curries speak of its residents, immigration, wars, social issues and power struggles. The cultural make-up over the centuries has been rich and diverse, communities from around the world enriching the neighborhood with their regional cuisines. Brick Lane is a world in a city, a culinary tapestry stitched with unique architecture and a checkered past. Even Brick Lane’s place of worship is an ethnic palimpsest. It was initially built as a French Protestant Chapel, then a Methodist Chapel, a Jewish Synagogue, and +40 years ago, it became a Mosque.

What begins as an exploration of the culinary delights along one of London’s most storied streets, expands and gives insight into the traditions of the migrant community who created a Little Sylhet in the East End. It’s spicy, aromatic, and helplessly satisfying. There’s no place like Banglatown, not even in India.



There’s nothing quite like a knowledgeable guide to walk you through it all. Tables are reserved, service is pin-sharp with curries and mango lassies appearing in minutes, ready for the cultural stories to unfold.
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WOW Just like the shortest way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, the shortest route to Bangladesh and India is London.