

THE BEST IN THE WORLD

IT'S a big deal because, like everything else in the gastronomic sphere that Kolkata calls its own, it is, to the locals, the best in the world. It's not something you can question beyond a point – after all, if *sandesh* comes from Bengal, it's only logical that Kolkata would have the best of it. And if Kolkata's got the best *sandesh* in Bengal, it follows that it is, by default, the best in the world, right? It's a conversation Iyothy had with a *sandesh* shop owner on an earlier trip to the city, one she recounts as we hunt down the grill-fronted store belonging to **Girish C Dey and Nakur Nandy**, sellers of what we hear are the best sweets in town.

They're pretty darn good. I'm not one for the

sweet stuff, but even the simple *chhond* item – the mother of most *sandesh* – is great. Spicy and sweet, but not overwhelmingly so, you can buy it for ₹ 10 a pop and carry a small bag around to keep you going all day. Not that you'll need to, because you'll find *masa shingara* (sweet samosas), *roshogullas*, *roshbharis*, *malpuas* (with a touch of pepper thrown in) at street vendors across the city.

Kolkata's street-side stalls have, like all respectable street-side stalls, invented a whole slew of dishes that are unique to the city. Walk down Dacres Lane in the Dalhousie Square area at lunchtime on working days and you'll find the office crowd packing in a bowl of stew – a light broth filled with veggies or chicken served with a thick slab of hot, buttered toast, or tucking into a plate of 'Calcutta *chow mein*' – again, not

like the *chow mein* you'll find elsewhere in the country, or a *kathi roll* – another Kolkata invention apparently, created, according to the menu at **Nizam's** in New Market, which claims dibs on the recipe, to keep the grease of the *seekh* off the *bread*.

And then, there's Bengali food proper. This is where mustard and seafood rule the roost, and it's an acquired taste that I'm not sure I've acquired. At least, not until I step into the no-nonsense **Bhojohari Manna** at Ekdalia, where you share tables with other hungry diners and eat whatever's fresh and available. We've got *beekhi palari*, fish marinated in mustard and steamed in banana leaves. We've got the *chingri malakari*, huge prawns in a spicy yet flavourful gravy. We've got *kankra jhal*, a crab curry. We've got *mochar ghonto* (banana blossoms) and we've ►



got the *bhaja moong dal*, best eaten with a squirt of the juice of *gondhoraj lebu*, a type of lemon found in Bengal. And none of it is what I expected. The flavours aren't overwhelming; the mustard's just right, and I can taste the fish it coats. The prawns are disappearing fast and the crab leaves us in a delightful mess. The *dal* is mild, with a pleasantly bitter aftertaste, and the banana blossom's an absolute surprise, like nothing I've ever tasted before. I am a convert.



WE ATE AT

Bhojohari Manna

has delicious Bengali food, served in no-frills surrounds.

We loved the *bhetki paturi*

(00-91-33-24401933; *bhojoharimanna.com*; 9/ 18, *Ekdalia Rd*; *bhetki paturi*: ₹ 95, *bhaja moong dal*: ₹ 20, *mochar ghonto*: ₹ 45, *chingri malaikan*: ₹ 95, *medium kankra jhal*: ₹ 90).

Sare Chuattar is another no-fuss Bengali eatery. We had the *daab chingri* – prawns steamed inside a tender coconut – that's got a very different, smoky flavour (00-91-33-24658976; 213, *opposite Post Office, Sarat Bose Rd*; *daab chingri*: ₹ 180).

6 Ballygunge Place is a good option for a leisurely evening out, with both buffet and à la carte options (00-91-33-24603922; 6, *Ballygunge Place, Ballygunge*; *mains from* ₹ 140).

Hot-Kati, outside Kamani Mansion, does yummy *kathi* rolls (*Park St*; *egg roll*: ₹ 20, *chicken roll*: ₹ 30, *egg-chicken roll*: ₹ 40).

Nizam's claims to have invented the *kathi roll*, though we found them a bit greasy (00-91-9830017576, 00-91-9830021035; 23/ 24, *Hogg St, New Market area*; *aloo roll*: ₹ 20, *chicken roll*: ₹ 30).

Dacres Lane is worth trundling down come lunchtime on a working day – you'll have an array of street eats to pick from. We ate the veg stew with hot, buttered toast at **Chittar Babu's Dukaan** (₹ 27).

Girish C Dey and Nakur Nandy Dey dish out fresh, traditional Bengali sweets, alongside more nouveau creations like chocolate *sandesh* (00-91-33-22410048, 00-91-9830571619; 56, *Ramdulal Sarkar St, Hedua Park, near Hatibagan*; *chhanar sandesh from* ₹ 10).

Ghosh Sweets is another great place at which to try traditional Bengali *sandesh* (00-91-9830245019; 55, *Ramdulal Sarkar St*; *rosbhari*: ₹ 4, *kheer kodom*: ₹ 3).



1. Beware of (and plan for) the serious traffic jams that you will encounter in this chaotic city

2. Saldanha's Bakery creates made-to-order goodies like this walnut cake

3. Mukhtar, a street-side entrepreneur, uses a creative, homegrown thumb protection unit to speed up his prep

4. Bengali non-veg eats aren't limited to creatures from the sea – the *kachalanka dhonepata murgi* at 6 Ballygunge Place is delicately flavoured

Facing page: Jessica, an adorable two-year-old, and her brother ham it up for Jyothy as we eat our way across the breakfast spread in Tiretty Bazar



1. *Dahi phuchkas* may not be as 'traditional' as the regular type, but they're just as delicious
2. The absolutely divine *chingri malikaari* at Bhojohari Manna
3. Kolkata's iconic Victoria Memorial is a great place at which to take a break from all that face-stuffing
- 4 & 5. Flurys's Viennese coffee and Rahim SK (who's been around for 34 years) are as much of an institution as the place itself
6. *Kool* (the Bengali name for a variety of plum) is prime property come Saraswati Puja time
7. The Barabazar area in North Kolkata is always a hotbed of activity
8. Golden Joy is one of the many tanneries-turned-eateries in Tangra, and serves a mix of Indianised Chinese as well as the more authentic stuff

