

# CALCUTTA

## A feast for the senses

Autumn in Bengal's capital is the season of festivals and celebration – think Bonfire Night, Christmas and New Year's Eve all wrapped up into one. When Susan Low visited with former Calcutta-ite Vivek Singh as her expert guide, she found a world of noise, colour and frantic energy, fuelled by a cornucopia of sweet treats worth crossing the globe for

PHOTOGRAPHS HOWARD SOOLEY



Nothing can prepare you for Calcutta's riotous cacophony. To the gloom-adjusted eye of a traveller arriving

from autumnal London, it seems the gauge on everything has been jacked right up to 11 – the temperature, the volume, the colour saturation levels, the smells, even the number of bodies that can feasibly be crammed into a square foot.

On our traffic-clogged journey from the airport, the experience is given a surreal twist in the form of blue-painted plaster body parts piled up higgledy-piggledy on flatbed lorries and bullock carts. Arms outstretched, they seem to be waving to welcome us into the city.

The festive season is underway in this metropolis of 14 million people and we've arrived slap-bang in the middle of it. Those blue body parts will be assembled into statues of the goddess Kali, after whom Calcutta is named, and will become the focus of the music, feasting and prayer of Kali Puja, the annual festival of the many-armed Hindu goddess.

I'm travelling with Vivek Singh, the chef of London's Cinnamon Club restaurants. Vivek was born west of Calcutta and worked as a chef at the city's top hotel, The Oberoi Grand. "Usually after a festival you feel disappointed that you have to get back to work," says Vivek, "but not in Bengal because you still have so much to look forward to; before Kali Puja there's Durga Puja, then Lakshmi Puja. And afterwards there's Diwali, the festival of lights, when everybody visits other people's houses, exchanging sweets and gifts. Each dinner is more lavish than the last."

### SAY IT WITH SUGAR

This being India, food is a central part of the celebrations, with sweets (called mithai in Hindi) featuring more than any other foodstuff. West Bengal is India's version of the land of milk and honey, with Calcutta said to have more sweet →

AUTUMN SPECTACULAR  
People making  
garlands for the  
many festivities



**hungry traveller.**  
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Goddess in transit; a grand 'pandal' (stage); Ganguram, a famous sweet shop; mishti doi a sweet take on yogurt; New Market; sandesh for sale; Vivek stocks up; let the fireworks begin...

### THREE CALCUTTA SIGHTS YOU DON'T WANT TO MISS

If you can tear yourself away from the sweets and street food, feed your curiosity about the city by visiting these landmarks:

- **NEW MARKET (also called SS Hogg Market), Lindsay Street, off Chowringhee Road** Built in the Victorian era, this sprawling market is the antithesis of a modern western supermarket (no fluorescent lights and air con here). There's a dazzling selection of fish, piles of colourful spices and an array of gleaming vegetables. Expect to be jostled, but it's worth it for the Instagram opps alone.
- **VICTORIA MEMORIAL (victoriamemorial-cal.org)** This exquisite marble monument opened in 1921 to honour the reign of the British monarch, following her death in 1901. Inside the soaring space, the Calcutta Gallery traces the city's history. Take a bright yellow taxi to the monument for the full experience.
- **SOUTH PARK STREET CEMETERY, Mother Theresa Sarani** The mossy, cool eeriness of this disused necropolis is a world away from Calcutta's full-on noise and dust. Opened in 1767 as a burial ground for the British Empire builders of the Raj. 'Donation' 20 rupees.

shops per square mile than any other Indian city – and sweet-eating hits its apogee at festival time, when people swarm like bees to nectar.

Vivek, who is trained in the art of sweet-making, takes me to one of Calcutta's best-known shops, the family-run **Balaram Mullick** (2 Paddapukur Road, Bhowanipore). Sudip Mullick, son of the owner, emerges to talk me through the bewildering range. He's most proud of the house speciality, baked rasgulla (a sort of cottage cheese dumpling boiled in sugar syrup, then baked in a condensed milk sauce) and a Diwali special filled with freshly harvested jaggery (raw cane sugar).

I try to keep up as Sudip brings out creations in a rainbow of colours and varying textures: soft, firm, bathed in syrup, fried, baked... Some are multi-layered, others are stuffed with sweetmeats or flavoured with pistachio, cardamom, coconut, cashew and mango. There are said to be 237 varieties of sweet in the region, but it defies counting: it's as mind-boggling as the ensuing sugar rush.

"Sweets have acquired something of an auspicious status," says Vivek. "They're used to express celebration, warmth and love – a bit like a Christmas card." Vivek reckons there's something special about the sweets of this part of India. "Nowhere else has the depth, breadth, variety or complexity of techniques that the Bengalis employ in making sweets."

The sugar high continues at other sweet shops we visit in Calcutta. At the upmarket **Gangaur** (2 Russel Street), hand-picked selections are packed into posh boxes. At nearby **Banchharam**, I try patishapta (a rice pancake filled with coconut, jaggery and cardamom) and sandesh (a kind of cottage cheese fudge) shaped in 'Happy Diwali' moulds. Along with mishti doi (yogurt sweetened with jaggery), sandesh is the quintessential Bengali sweet, made with pressed milk curds into which powdered sugar and flavourings are kneaded. At **Ganguram** (ganguram.com), which has 20-plus shops in the city, the foil-wrapped sandesh is cooked to a more fudgy consistency;

other versions have liquid palm syrup in their squishy centre.

### CHANGING TIMES

You'd never know it from the crowds, but the time-honoured method of sweet-making may soon be gone. Bengalis haven't lost their sweet tooth (no sugar tax here), but the manpower needed is on the wane. Transforming vast quantities of milk and sugar into sweetmeats is hard, sweaty work and, even in Calcutta, where the poverty hits you in the face, it's difficult to find people willing to put in such a slog.

As Sudip explains, much of what was once done exclusively by hand has recently been taken over by shiny new machines imported from Japan. "The young people don't want to do this kind of work," he says ruefully. "This may be the last generation." For the time being, though, the traditional thronging of the sweet shop at festival time shows little sign of abating.

### STREETWISE EATING

In Calcutta, 'street food' carries no cool cachet. Legions of people live

in squalor on the pavements and under bridges. The street is their bedroom, living room and kitchen; street food is a fact of life, not a foodie badge of honour.

Yet none of that can make a late-evening, on-the-hoof meal at **Kusum Roll's** (21 Karnani Mansion, A J C Bose Road) any less alluring. This famed takeaway is in a small turning off Park Street, Calcutta's equivalent of London's Regent Street. The festivities may have brought more families out onto the streets to celebrate, but, says Vivek, this place is always thronged. A crowd has gathered around the grill, from which emanate enticing, smoky aromas. Everyone waits their turn to get their hands on a fresh kati roll – a flat paratha bread that's coated in beaten egg, grilled, then piled up with grilled chicken, mutton or paneer. It's then topped with chilli sauce, coriander chutney and pickled onions before being wrapped up burrito-style. The rolls originate from this city and are a popular lunch for local office workers – as well as a spicy revelation to →

### WHERE TO STAY

- **THE OBEROI GRAND (oberoihotels.com)** This graceful colonial building lives up to its name. Dating back to the 1880s, with wood panelling and high ceilings, it's arranged around a courtyard with a pool. Centrally located near the northern end of the Maidan, the city's main park, it feels a world away from the craziness of the city. The (nominally French) **Terrasse** restaurant, where Vivek Singh trained, serves pan-European food alongside a few Indian dishes. *Doubles from 9,000 rupees (£102)*
- **TAJ BENGAL (tajhotels.com)** The Taj, between the Victoria Memorial and the Zoological Gardens, is in one of the greener parts of the city. It's big, modern and glitzy with all mod cons including a pool and spa. Of its three restaurants, **Sonargaon** serves Indian food including some excellent Bengali specialities – harder to find in local restaurants than you might think. It's well worth a visit even if you're not a guest. *Doubles from 8,550 rupees (£97)*

## WHERE TO FIND BENGALI HOME COOKING IN THE CITY

Sweets and kati rolls are just one small part of Calcutta's food history. Bengali cooking is recognised throughout the subcontinent for its refinement and delicacy, and you might say that Bengalis are food-obsessed. However, authentic cuisine is rarely served in city restaurants (Taj Bengal is a notable exception; see Where To Stay).

We were lucky enough to enjoy a home-cooked feast courtesy of art dealer and Calcutta resident Surajit 'Bomti' Iyengar. For guests hungry for a taste of real Bengali cooking, the food (and Bomti's art-stuffed heritage home) is exquisite and like nothing outside West Bengal.

For more details, email [bomtiyengar@yahoo.com](mailto:bomtiyengar@yahoo.com) or call +91 98313 14990. "Individuals possible but small groups preferred," says Bomti. 3,500 rupees (£40) per person for multiple courses and drinks

anyone tasting one for the first time. Vivek tells me Kusum is a Calcutta institution. He used to eat here when he was starting out as a chef and remembers the kati rolls tasting the same then as they do now.

As we savour the incendiary flavours, the smell of smoke and grilled meat mingles with that of the fireworks being set off during the celebrations. We find ourselves part of the crowd, drawn along by the bright lights. Those blue, many-armed Kali statues we'd seen on our arrival now greet us from the various temporary street-side stages (pandals). Calcutta's flavours certainly live up to the surrounding pyrotechnics and, even before I've left, I can feel this city pulling me back for another taste.

### NEXT MONTH

Guy Dimond takes a fresh look at Glasgow's thriving food scene – a perfect destination for a weekend escape



Free apostrophe with every roll...



## BAKE YOUR OWN DIWALI CELEBRATION TREATS

### Vivek Singh's carrot halwa spring rolls

MAKES 6. HANDS-ON TIME 45 MIN, OVEN TIME 20-25 MIN, PLUS CHILLING

“These sweet rolls are great for a Diwali or Bonfire Night celebration. You could cut the filo into smaller pieces for canapé versions.”



The finished rolls will keep for 24 hours in a sealed container. Warm through before serving.

- 100g ghee or clarified butter
- 500g carrots, grated
- 3 green cardamom pods, seeds removed and ground in a pestle and mortar
- 100g caster sugar
- 2 tbsp raisins
- 250ml evaporated milk
- 3 filo pastry sheets, cut in half widthways into squares
- 40g unsalted butter, melted
- Icing sugar to dust

1 Heat the oven to 200°C/180°C fan/gas 6. Melt the ghee or clarified butter in a large frying

pan, then add the grated carrots and ground cardamom seeds and fry gently for 10 minutes or until the juice from the carrots has evaporated. Sprinkle in the sugar and raisins, then cook for another 5 minutes or until the sugar melts. 2 Add the evaporated milk and cook for about 20 minutes, stirring often, until the mixture takes on the look of orange-coloured fudge. 3 Spread out on a baking tray and cool a little, then chill for about 30 minutes until completely cold. 4 Brush a piece of filo with melted butter. Put a sixth of the carrot mixture towards one corner of the filo. Fold the corner over the mixture, then keep rolling the filo diagonally almost to the end of the strip. Fold in both ends, then roll up the last corner and seal with melted butter – it should look like a spring roll. Put on a baking sheet, seam-side down. Repeat to make 6 rolls. Brush the rolls with the remaining melted butter, then bake for 20-25 minutes until golden and crisp. Serve straightaway, dusted with icing sugar.

**PER ROLL** 440kcal, 26.8g fat (15.9g saturated), 6.2g protein, 42g carbs (32g sugars), 0.3g salt, 3.4g fibre