

LIFESTYLE

Cooking clever and quick: Lessons from the wonders of 'bhaté bhat'

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Abhijit Banerjee

Cooking, and eating, are often on Abhijit Banerjee's mind. But for the Nobel-winning economist, what starts with planning the night's dinner usually ends up in questions about the consumption, production, distribution of food, and their intimate relation to the broader economic issues of our times. His new monthly column for The Sunday Times, is about eating and thinking, about pleasure and responsibility, about global food and the Indian palate. Illustrated by Cheyenne Olivier, it offers recipes for life and lunch LESS



Illustration by Cheyenne Olivier

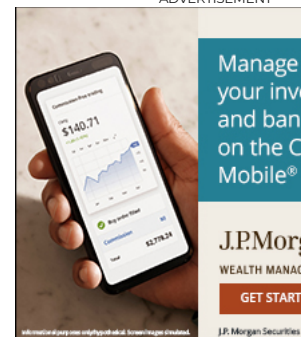
The world is facing an energy crisis, partly driven by Putin's war, but only partly, since the path to minimise the climate crisis demands that we all use less energy. And one place where we can help is by changing the way we eat. Less meat and eating local are often highlighted, but cooking is another big one, with a carbon footprint of 500 million tonnes a year, only slightly below the 800 contributed by transporting food.

Energy-efficient cooking came up often in my childhood, for an entirely different reason. Foreign exchange was scarce in those days and OPEC had just boosted oil prices. Imported cooking gas was being rationed: when our assigned one cylinder of gas ran out, the cook would put on a glum face, my mother would talk darkly about wasting gas and someone would run to the Indane store to apply for the next one, which could take several days.

On days when the gas was gone, cooking had a very different shape. Each family had its small kerosene stove and a small bottle of kerosene stored

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up, to last until the gasman showed up. Ambitions needed to be scaled down.

But this was a Bengali family, and anything below four courses would invite groans and grumpy faces. The cook would quietly announce 'bhaté bhat', a meal of boiled foods, all cooked together in the same pot with the rice.

I must confess that I was always delighted by this enforced diversion. For one, it was an opportunity to pull out all the pickles since the dishes were supposedly too bland. Some dried mango (amshi) cured with a paste redolent in fennel and nigella seeds, fat red chillies stuffed with dark matter, thin green ones dressed in ground mustard, and the wonderful rosogollar achar (rasgulla pickle), whole yellow limes pickled sweet and spicy.

And each bhaté, each mash made from something that had been boiled with the rice, would come with its own promise: the boiled potato would perhaps get a lift from chopped tomatoes, cilantro, onions, chillies and mustard oil. For the boiled masur dal, it was chopped onions and lemon juice, and a dressing of ghee and spices. The steamed spinach may get something very different, perhaps toasted coconut and garlic. And so on.

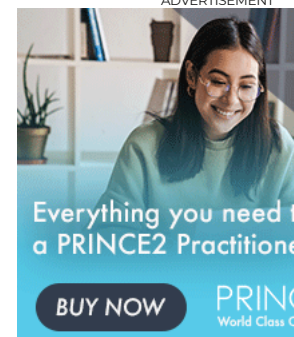
Throw in some home-made yogurt, flavoured with a dribble of date syrup (what Bengalis call poira gur), and you have a wonderful meal and the satisfaction of having made the kerosene last another day.

The point, of course, is not that we should live our lives on boiled potatoes and rice cooked on a kerosene stove. Neither the climate scientist nor our dietician will want that, for not dissimilar reasons: both burn too quickly, and neither our bodies nor the earth can afford that any more.

On the other hand, the idea that a scrumptious meal can be produced on a small stove within an hour opens up an exciting possibility for the lucky few who can still afford to not pay attention to energy costs. After all, the difference between a satisfyingly difficult hike and a painfully steep walk lies mostly in our attitude, in whether we wanted the challenge to start with or not. If we accept to join the sport of how to cook well with (say) two-thirds the energy, we can (probably) do it and feel good about that. It will require planning the pasta so that the cauliflower or broccoli rabe that go in the sauce get parboiled in the water being heated for the pasta and organising the menu so that mutton curry can cook in the oven next to the roasting eggplant and the oven-fried Brussels sprouts. Using the pressure cooker to cook the dal, with a couple of extra containers inserted to simultaneously steam the eggplant and cook the already spiced and briefly stir-fried sem, might save up to 70% of the energy used for cooking.

And for that night when you could really do with a little bit of comforting, before that "casual coffee with your boss" or after an urgent email from your child's headteacher, why not a bhaté bhat? For those who feel that this is drifting too far into the unhip, especially my fellow Bongs, this is my attempt to stake out a piece of the cool for this modest meal: I am sure you can do better. The rules are that you start with boiled vegetables, eggs, dal, etc. Ideally boil them with the rice, but there is no cause to be religious about it: if it can be done quickly in the microwave, so be it. Then play with the mix-ins, chopped onions, cilantro, chillies, ginger, peanuts,

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etc. and different oils — mustard is traditional, but why not toasted sesame, peanut or olive? Cooked mix-ins (toasted coconut, say) are fine, but the cooking should be quick. And keep innovating: I dream of the day when I will be offered the perfect parsnip bhaté with butter infused with horseradish, and mashed artichoke hearts dressed with olive oil and lemon.

Bhaté bhat



PHOTO CREDIT: Fromthekitchenstothetastebuds

Wash 250 gm of peeled and cubed (1") sweet potato and place in a closed metal container with 1 cup of water and $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt. Place 250 gm of washed and stemmed amaranth leaves in a steamer basket. Bring 3 cups of water to boil in a large (8 quart) pot and place the steamer in it on a trivet and cover. After five minutes remove the leaves and set aside. Add 5 more cups of water, drop in the container with the sweet potato, and bring the whole thing to a boil. Add 1 cup of rice, cook for 13 minutes and then add 6 eggs that were in warm water already. Break the tips of 250 gm of sem, pull out the string and place in another closed metal container with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of water and $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp salt. At minute 15, drop the sem container in the boiling water, and at minute 20 remove the eggs and plunge into ice water, drain the rice, open the containers and the vegetables out of the water.

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Remove the boiled sweet potatoes. Mash them with ½ tsp deghi mirch, 1 tb finely chopped ginger, 100 gm firm, sweet grapes, quartered, 100 gm walnuts, toasted and broken, 1 tb lemon juice, 1.5 tb olive oil and salt to taste.

Prepare a relish with 1 cup finely chopped juicy and tasty tomato, 1/3 cup finely chopped onion, 1 thinly sliced green chili, 3 tb finely chopped cilantro and salt to taste. Slice the peeled boiled eggs (careful they may be still pretty soft) and arrange them on a nice plate in concentric circles. Dribble ¼ tsp oil from a lemon or mango pickle on each slice of egg and just before serving, drain the accumulated liquid from the relish and spoon it over the eggs, saving some for extras.

Carefully squeeze the water out of the amaranth leaves with your hands (let them cool a bit first). In a small fry pan, heat 1 tb coconut oil to medium high, and throw in 1 tsp mustard seeds, and when the popping slows, a pinch of hing and some curry leaves, followed by ¼ cup thin sliced shallots or finely chopped onion. When the shallots soften slightly (1 minute) throw in 3 tb fresh ground coconut, lower heat to medium and fry for two minutes, letting the coconut brown. Mix into the amaranth with one thinly sliced green chilli and heat the whole mixture in the microwave before serving.

Mash the sem slightly with your hands or the back of a spoon. Heat 2 tb mustard oil at medium heat in a small fry pan and when hot, throw in ½ tsp kalonji and 1 green chilli. After 40 seconds, add some homemade mustard paste (high quality prepared mustard also works, though it will bring its own unique taste) into the pan, let the oil separate (1 minute), add the sem and salt. Stir to coat the sem and remove. Get your pickles out (meat and sea-food pickles, too, if you have them), and let the softness wrap around you.

This is the first of a monthly column by Nobel-winning economist Abhijit Banerjee



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