

MEAT FOR TEA



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BLACKCURRANT

my mother's culinary journey

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When my mother passed away at the advent of 2020, an overwhelming number of my friends said that mothers were more precious people and their love were irreplaceable. I witnessed and imbibed the preciousness and the irreplaceable love throughout my life from far and near, through gestures and phone calls and examples and food. Yes, mothers have a way of showing love with food and my mother had plenty of opportunity to showcase it to us and multitude of people in our universe.

Our lives began in Digboi oil town. I remember a picnic. I was six years old. I swam in a pebbled river, Lekhapani, with my brother and his two friends. My mother cooked mutton curry on a fire kindled by Tuloxi, our Man Friday, using dry bamboo, branches and twigs. She added chopped onions, sliced ginger and minced garlic. She dropped peeled potatoes into the pan, and sprinkled cumin, coriander, turmeric, salt and pepper. Plain rice boiled and steamed as an accompaniment. Father and uncle drank chilled beer from bottles tucked away in the riverbed. We came out hungry from the water and wiped our bodies and changed into dry clothes. We sat on the pebbled bank over a folded bedcover. Tuloxi brought fresh cut banana leaves and placed them in front of us as plates. My mother served us rice and mutton as Tuloxi held and balanced the heavy pot. We ate one of the most delicious meals ever in our life with our leaky fingers and had no idea that more diverse culinary experience awaited us in the future.

138 My mother was the only woman in Digboi who played golf in sari and brought home stuck *bonguti*, thorny spear grass, that needed meticulously removed by hand, by the nanny. Also, a ladies' club and golf secretary winning silver trophies of napkin holders and serving spoons in Digboi and the neighboring clubs, she once played the game in Delhi with India's Vice-President and his wife and my father, as a double-couple. Their son, a tea-planter in Assam as their common link. In those golf gatherings tea was served sometimes with blackcurrant scones and cucumber sandwiches to which my mother introduced her signature *nimki*, savory triangular treats sprinkled with black onion seeds which furthered its legacy into the future.

Digboi had a coterie of cooks who brought the Burmese dining experience *khow suey* with them from Myanmar when Burmah Oil Company employees shifted in great numbers to the oil town after the second world war. Our cook was an expert *khow suey* chef and our mother extended this borrowed cuisine to the rest of our family, friends and later to tourists in Kaziranga, when Diphlu River Lodge existed as Kamrup Komplex, a pioneering entity in the early 1970s.

At Kamrup Komplex my mother introduced 'bambique', mutton cooked in bamboo cylinders over a big fire. She also steamed *bora saul*, sticky rice, in bamboo, then offered them as dessert mixed with cream, jaggery and oranges pulps. All this in front of diplomatic dignitaries from Delhi and other tourists who simultaneously sampled folk dances and cultural presentations. At the Komplex, if our long-term guests craved food from back home, my mother graciously made it for them. She also served scones, date loaf, eggplant parmesan, lemon soufflé, and homemade ice cream flavored with coffee or mango to please visitors from European countries, Canada and the U.S.

When visiting us in the States, her favorite food was the simple baked Idaho potato. Yet, she cooked her brand of Chinese food and *khow suey* again for all of us here or in Hong Kong. My consultations for recipes over the seas became another constant in our culinary life.

Freshly cooked food tasted delicious even if not many ingredients go into it. Later, I would hear that the bird's nest soup and *foie gras* were banned from serving in some world class restaurants because of the cruelty applied in procuring and making such connoisseur food. Later still, I would know of molecular gastronomy and how my daughter and her cousins delightfully experienced it at Chef Grant Achatz's Chicago restaurant, Alinea. Later even still I would read, what Chef Alice Waters champions in her Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse apparently became the basis of new American cooking, which was to cook and serve fresh organic food; and now ubiquitous ancient *Ayurvedic* food sold as expensive spa food; all of these stemmed from and go back to the same simple knowledge I gathered from my mother one picnic day, by a pebbled river, when I was just six years old. That is, when fresh food is cooked with love and compassion, and enjoyed with friends and family, the simplest of cooking tastes like heaven. Mothers are indeed precious, and their love is irreplaceable. Mine infused me with gastronomic memories.



the
**MEAT
FOR
TEA
CAST**

An illustration of a glass of iced tea with a pink flower. The glass is filled with ice and a clear liquid, and the pink flower is partially submerged in the liquid. The glass is positioned behind the text 'MEAT FOR TEA CAST'.

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