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Can Bengali 'Mishti' Go Global?

By **Swati Sengupta** April 15, 2013 2:12 am

KOLKATA— In West Bengal, it's easy to find confectioners that have been making Bengali sweets, known as mishti, for more than a century. There, you will find sandesh (a soft, fudge-like confection made with cottage cheese and sugar), and roshogolla (balls of cottage cheese poured into hot sugary syrup) as they have been made for decades.

But the secret to these shops' longevity lies not just in their dedication to tradition but their willingness over the years to adapt to modern times, by borrowing from flavors and cooking techniques outside of India.

For example, Prashanta Nandy, the fourth-generation owner of **Girish Chandra Dey & Nakur Chandra Nandy**, which was set up in 1844, is considered a visionary for his openness to different tastes. Mr. Nandy, who died in January at age 53, was arguably the first to introduce black currant, strawberry and kiwi sandesh to India, about 15 years ago.

"Whatever he tasted, he would try to bring its influence in some form, into sweets – from chicken rolls to mocktails," said Mr. Nandy's nephew, Partha Nandy.

Among first major foreign influences on mishti was chocolate. In 1868, Nobin Chandra Das created the spongy and tender roshogolla, and his physicist grandson, Sarada Charan Das, created canned roshogolla, which helped it travel outside India. The younger Mr. Das, always looking for ways to innovate, visited chocolate factories in Switzerland in the 1940s, as well as traveling to Japan to learn about machines used in food manufacturing. He used what he learned to set up machines back in Kolkata to steam sweets instead of cooking them over an open fire and to knead cottage cheese.

These days, liquid chocolate fillings, chocolate chips and grated chocolate are used abundantly in Bengali sweets. Chocolate mudpie sandesh is particularly popular – the gooey, sticky chocolate is as much an attraction as the soft sandesh.

Continuing the tradition of the younger Mr. Das, the current generation of sweet shop owners is also thinking of ways to attract a young customer base that is increasingly developing a global palate.

Sudip Mullick is the fourth-generation owner of the Balaram Mullick and Radharaman Mullick shop in south Kolkata. The store, established in 1885, is marked by a line of sport utility vehicles that idle outside its glass door as customers rush in to pick up their favorite desserts. The confectioner has several swanky outlets across the city, including in affluent Ballygunge and Park Street.

Mr. Mullick, a 30-year-old hotel management graduate who began running the family business with his father in 2002, has been influenced by a variety of non-Indian desserts. His kheer-filled goja – which has a cream center and a fried or baked outer crust – is derived from baklava. Colorful sweets like mango sandesh are shaped like the fruit, similar to Japanese wagashi.

Mr. Mullick also found inspiration in French cuisine like au gratin dishes, which led him to experiment with the roshogolla. He bakes the sweet cheese balls in condensed milk and date syrup, known as nolen gur. His crème brûlée sandesh has a cottage cheese center with the French dessert's signature caramelized sugar crust.

Bengalis have welcomed the novelties, Mr. Mullick said. Although some customers have scorned the modern twists, Mr. Mullick said business has grown five times over the past 10 years.

These days, owners of Bengali sweet shops are looking to push the evolution of mishti even further by traveling the world in search of technologies that will make it possible to export.

Bengali sweets have a disadvantage in their short shelf life, which is only up to eight hours. This is where Amitava Modak – a computer science engineer and sixth-generation owner of Felu Modak, which was established 164 years ago – is trying to rectify.

Mr. Modak is planning a line of packaged Bengali sweets that he says will soon hit stores, featuring special five-layered containers that can keep the sweets frozen at minus-17 degrees centigrade (1.4 Fahrenheit) and can be put directly into a microwave to warm the desserts before eating. He contends that the packaging will keep the flavors intact during both the freezing and thawing process.

Mishti-making still relies heavily on skilled *moiras*, the makers of sweets, working for generations in this profession. There are approximately 200,000 *moiras* in Bengal, says Sandip Sen, owner of Sen Mahasay in Kolkata, who is also the vice-president of Paschim Banga Mistanna Byabsayi Samiti, a state-level organization of sweets shop owners.

But if sweet shops are looking to export on a large scale, they are going to need to ramp up production. And for that, store owners are looking to use more machinery.

Mr. Modak was in Taiwan to hunt for machines, and Mr. Mullick recently bought a machine from Japan that was used to fill liquid chocolate into hard chocolate. Now this machine is being used in Kolkata to prepare nolen guri-filled sandesh.

The increasing reliance on machinery seems to be where longtime mishti lovers draw the line, even those who enjoy the modern versions, like the renowned Bengali filmmaker Goutam Ghose. “The connoisseurs will feel the difference. The feel and texture are not the same.” he said.

“I would insist that no matter how perfect machine-made sweets are, the handmade texture and taste is lost in it,” he said.

Mr. Mullick, however, insisted that there is no difference at all. “It’s all in the mind. If you don’t tell customers that a product is machine-made, they won’t feel any difference,” he said.

Partha Nandy, the fifth-generation owner of Girish Chandra Dey & Nakur Chandra Nandy, acknowledged that there are disadvantages to using machines. He said the specialty of the store’s sandesh is the “coarse and granular” texture, and that has to be made by hand. “The feel would be lost in machines,” he said.

“We use machines for basic things like boiling milk, and that would amount to only 1 percent of our total work.”

But he predicted that machine use would become more common because of the dwindling numbers of *moiras*.

In the end, mishti-making is likely to change with the times, as pragmatic business owners in West Bengal have done for decades.

Siddhartha Bose, one of the directors at Bhojohori Manna, a nationwide chain of Bengali restaurants, would pick a handmade sandesh over a machine-made one. And yet he makes the case for machine-made mishti: “One must remember that when it comes to wooing the younger generation, there is need for new flavors and good presentation,” he said. “These are also more hygienic.

“And it may be only a matter of time before even the texture of handmade mishti can be mastered by machines,” Mr. Bose said.