

# Waiter, There's an Economist in My Soup!

Take one Bengali Nobel laureate and one French illustrator. Stir them in a cookbook and make them talk about food. Add salt and serve

## FUNNY BUSINESS



ANUVAB PAL

As Christmas nears, and families gather for meals, it is not often they reach for a cookbook written by a Nobel laureate. And yet, that's what I did when I bought *Cooking to Save Your Life* by Abhijit V Banerjee with illustrations by Chayenne Olivier.

Given I can barely cook to save my life, I reached out to Banerjee and Olivier. We were on Zoom and he was in Boston. A chat with him proved that he can solve world poverty and make an excellent tomato soup at the same time.

Anuvab Pal: The book is very funny. You write about the evolution of chicken tikka masala where it is put in bread to make 'the vilest sandwich you have ever eaten'. Please elaborate.

Abhijit V Banerjee: Pret a Manger in Britain has a chicken tikka masala sandwich. The mediocre British baguette filled with a thin sauce and pieces of chicken breast is my nadir. There's nothing in it I like, borderline edible.

AP: Chicken is a tough meat.  
AVB: Use the thigh. Or wings. Wings will take any beating. That's why the

Americans turn it into a vile thing called buffalo wings.

AP: Your book is organised like a meal.

AVB: We wanted people to construct meals. I think in meals, not dishes. Sometimes you can have a great dish, but if you serve foie gras with daal, for example... [laughs]

AP: Several Bengali food characteristics pop up in the book. For example, when a Bengali person says please eat some daal and rice, he always means fish.

AVB: If you want just daal and bhaat in Bengal, you will be disappointed every time. Bengalis love to downplay what they are about to offer.

AP: You mention a Bengali uncle known for a legendary meat dish. An uncle who boasts but never cooks. A mythical stereotype...

AVB: I grew up around a lot of Ben-

gali short stories around meal disasters.

AP: I love Bengali wedding catering negotiations where the conversation is gluttonous, fatalistic and budget-driven. The wedding party tells the caterer, 'How will the wedding happen without large prawns?'

AVB: When I was a kid there was a formula. Weddings *had* to have rui machh kalia or korma. Sweetish. Suddenly, it was ok to serve paneer in a Chinese way. Now, there's a revival of old Bengali. Indian weddings for a while had global aspirations: a pasta 'station,' a chaat 'station.'

AP: How are the illustrations in the book so abstract but so accurate. A pork chop drawing is three lines, looks nothing like a pork chop, but exactly like it.

Chayenne Olivier: Sometimes Indian dishes can almost be like an ab-

stract painting.

AVB: When I was at JNU, there were several dishes I would call UFO -- Unidentified Fried Objects.

AP: What do you say was the favourite dish of economist Karl Marx?

AVB: Wiener schnitzel. With nicely fatty potatoes. I'm just stereotyping.

AP: If the following French and Bengali legends came to a potluck dinner hosted by the two of you, who would bring what? Satyajit Ray, Rabindranath Tagore, Napoleon Bonaparte and Jean Paul Sartre?

AVB: They are so proper. Ray would probably bring thin chicken curry, delicate, tasty, bloodless. Tagore would bring sandesh. Sartre would bring a low-fat salad. Napoleon would definitely bring meat. He's macho.

AP: What would you cook for the Indian PM and RBI governor?

AVB: I've been asked this before. I would cook Bengali vegetarian food.

AP: The French and Bengalis are very opinionated. They often think every other food and culture is unsophisticated. Is that the bond between the French and the Bengalis?

CO: What unites us is that we constantly talk about food before eating it, during eating it, and after eating it.

AP: My last question. Every part of India thinks they have the best biryani. Calcutta vs Hyderabad vs Sindh vs Kashmiri vs Delhi vs Lucknow. Tell us, you with your great intellect, which is the best biryani and let's end the debate forever.

AVB: I won't end the debate. Sometimes you need a big bang biryani, or a small bang biryani. The most delicious thing about the Calcutta biryani is the potato. A masterpiece!

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BANERJEE & OLIVIER PEELING GROOVY