

# One of the Most Pleasant Places: Prabin Bhat and B-Hat's Curry

BY CAMILLA AMMIRATI

Northern New York's Tug Hill is a little shorter than the Himalayas, to say the least. Not far from the foot of that plateau, however, at the edge of downtown Watertown, New York, I was fortunate to sit down recently with Prabin and Saranga Bhat of B-Hat's Curry House for a lovely visit, sharing some of their favorite Nepalese flavors.

Prabin and Saranga are both from Nepal's hilly middle region, between the Himalayas to the north and the Terai region to the south. About 15 years ago, after finishing a year in college in Kathmandu, with his BS in Physics, Prabin came to the United States to study nursing in Nebraska. In 2010, he had the opportunity to join the US Army, which brought him to the US Army base Fort Drum, in Watertown.

Throughout Prabin's six and a half years serving as a combat medic, during which time he was also dubbed B-Hat by his Army compatriots, he not only continued cooking many of the foods he'd grown up with, but would often share the dishes he made. Meanwhile, he was gaining a range of skills through his military experience. These skills, paired with the ways he'd connected with others through food all along, would soon pave the way for new endeavors, meeting a different kind of community need and interest. As he says, he became motivated to open the restaurant "for mainly two reasons: a niche market and my friends' love for the curry dishes I used to bring to work at Fort Drum." Indeed, just a couple weeks after his last day in the Army, he opened the doors of B-Hat's Curry House, where he continues to share those dishes while working alongside Saranga and his father Govinda, who also brought many years of experience as a restaurant cook and a lifetime of making much of what is on the menu.

B-Hat's Curry House is one of a number of veteran-owned eateries in the area,

## Kukhurako Masu (Chicken Curry)

Shared by Prabin Bhat

### Ingredients:

- 5 lb. whole chicken, bone-in (with liver, heart, and gizzard for traditional taste), cut in 1" by 1" cubes
- 5 tsp. mustard oil
- 1 tsp. each cumin seeds, fenugreek seeds, cloves, and cardamom, two cinnamon sticks, and three bay leaves
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 1 tsp. turmeric powder and salt to taste
- 4 tsp. each fresh garlic, ginger, and green chili paste
- 2 tsp. each cumin powder, coriander powder, and meat masala (can use garam masala, curry powder, or another meat masala mix)
- 2 medium-size tomatoes, chopped
- Several grams of finely chopped fresh cilantro

### Instructions:

Heat the mustard oil in a large size iron saucepan (Karahi) until steam is observed arising out of the oil.

Add the cumin and fenugreek seeds, cloves, cardamom, cinnamon sticks, and bay leaves, stirring them carefully until they turn dark brown.

Add chopped onion and stir the onions until they turn medium brown.

Drop in the chopped chicken, and add turmeric powder and salt to taste.

Stir the chicken frequently (about 20 minutes) until all the water evaporates from it in medium heat.

The chicken should turn light brown and get sticky on the pan.

Add garlic, ginger, and green chili paste and cook until the paste gets brown (about 5 minutes). Gently stir the curry frequently to ensure the chicken pieces do not break.

Add the cumin, coriander, and meat masala, and gently mix and cook them for another 3 minutes.

Add the chopped tomatoes and cook them until a thick gravy results. At this point, a cup of water can be added for extra gravy.

Finally, the kitchen must smell like one of the most pleasant places. The last step is to sprinkle the chopped fresh cilantro on top and let it rest for a few minutes, then serve it with white rice and daal (lentil).

*Note: If you don't like bone-in meat, use the boneless chicken thigh meat. Do not use the chicken breast meat since it lacks that authentic and deep flavor. Also, traditional Nepalese chicken curry is made out of young roosters. They take a little longer to cook, but the overall flavor of the curry is unrivaled*



Chicken Curry Platter: A platter including Kukhurako Masu, daal, rice, and a daikon pickle. Courtesy of Prabin Bhat.

from favorite taverns on snowmobile/ATV trails around Jefferson and Lewis Counties, to restaurants and cafés featuring cuisines from around the world. B-Hat's is unique

locally, though, in sharing Nepalese and north Indian traditional foods. Born and raised amid what he describes as the family, friend, and village community-oriented



B-Hat's Curry House, Watertown, New York. Photo by the author.



Spice Center: MoMo Masala spice mix box. Prabin sources most spices, along with items like chickpea flour and other kinds of grams, directly from Nepal and India, both to find the needed quantities and to create the authentic depth of flavor they want to share with their customers. Photo by author.

culture of his home there, Prabin grew up cooking with his parents, grandparents, and others in his family. Much of what they ate came from their farm or that of a family member, or from close by in the community—from their garden vegetables to the rice his grandfather grew, to the ghee they would make from the butter from their buffaloes' and cows' milks. Prabin recalls that when he was growing up, they said the only two things they had to buy were kerosene and salt.

These days, running the kitchen requires different kinds of sourcing. The food is also shared in different ways, with an extensive menu, including some items (like the creamy kormas) adapted to American tastes, and the restaurant setting departing from many of the daily and seasonal rhythms that Prabin grew up with—whether it's mealtimes, cooking meat more sparingly, or saving certain dishes for special occasions. And many of Prabin's current customers come to the table from backgrounds different than his own.

Still, sharing food through the restaurant involves a lot of family, community, and cultural connections, from the family

recipes on the menu—often cooked up by Govinda—and their shared work in the business, to the ways the space serves as a gathering place. Thanks largely to Fort Drum, there is a small South Asian community for whom the restaurant offers an

important culinary and cultural connection. Alongside other longtime locals, B-Hat's is also a go-to spot for groups from the Army base for their own dining, holding a meeting over a meal, or catering. Soldiers and their families often gravitate to it as a friendly

spot—and for some, a culturally more familiar one, whether because of their own heritage, experiences abroad, or the diverse dining options they've been accustomed to elsewhere. Prabin also notes that the restaurant is a big draw for vegan diners, as well as for many members of the LGBTQ community who find it to be a welcoming space. Especially in light of the challenges of the last few years, Prabin deeply appreciates the connections he's built with so many in the community, as "the customer relationship is something that has kept us afloat during these rough times."

From their generous energy in welcoming visitors, to the spice and savor of dishes that warm diners in many ways at once, it's clear that being able to stop in at B-Hat's Curry House helps keep the community afloat. Prabin notes in the traditional Kukhurako Masu (chicken curry) recipe, shared here, that once you have fully fried and simmered the ingredients into their full flavor, you'll know you're just about done, because "the kitchen must smell like one of the most pleasant places." B-Hat's Curry House is a pleasant and delicious place indeed. Should you find yourself in Watertown, be sure to stop by, and don't skip the MoMo! ▼



Talking with Prabin and Saranga over a plate of MoMo. On my visit, Prabin and Saranga kindly shared some MoMo—Nepalese steamed chicken dumplings (vegetable MoMo are also on the menu)—a dish important to Prabin, along with a delicious onion tomato chutney, a steaming cup of chi, and a taste of chana masala. Made with a specially imported spice mix to get the right flavor, MoMo are Prabin's favorite "tiffin." He explained: "Tiffin is a very uncommonly used word in America despite the fact that it is an English word that simply means snack between lunch and dinner. In Nepal, a traditional breakfast is composed of only a cup of tea. Since people usually don't eat breakfast, they would rather eat their lunch (*khana*) at around 9 a.m. A tiffin (*khaja* in Nepali), if one can afford it, is served around 2–3 p.m. And the dinner (*khana*, or *bhuja* if you are of higher class) is served around 7–8 p.m. I grew up eating popped corn or soybean or corn nuts as my tiffin until I went to college in Kathmandu, where MoMo became our new tiffin around the same time...They are very delicious, believe me. Usually, I don't brag, or trash talk about any foods because they are all delightful for [all who enjoy them], but Nepali/Indian foods do have, I would say, the best flavor in the world." Safe to say, the MoMo are now at the top of my list as well! Photo by author.

Camilla Ammirati lives in Canton, New York, where she teaches in the First-Year Program and is Faculty Co-Director of the Sustainability Program at St. Lawrence University. Over



the previous several years, she was honored to learn about New York's North Country while serving as the Director of Research and Programs at TAUNY (Traditional Arts in Upstate New York). From her childhood as part of a big Italian American family, to her graduate work on domestic space and national belonging, to more recent adventures folkloring in northern New York, foodways have been an important part of her interests, and she is excited to continue exploring and sharing the rich and varied food cultures of the area here. Photo courtesy of the author.