There is a special saying in Bengali - "Baro mashe Tero parbon" which means Bengal is a land with thirteen festivals in twelve months. I design my menus around the festivals to bring eternal gems from Bengal as well as my fusion Bengali food that appeals to today's generation.

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Malobika’s PartyPal Rocks in London

Asian Lite FnB columnist Riccha Grrover in conversation with chefpreneur Malobika Roy on her London based home chef brand PartyPals

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“What was once a hobby and passion, has become a vocation. That is not something many people can say about their work. Cooking has always been a passion of mine since childhood. I picked up my skills and craft from my mother. Though we grew up hundreds of miles away from Kolkata, she brought me up in an environment ‘more Bengali’ than many households in Kolkata I feel.

But since moving to London some years ago, the one thing that I always felt missing was a food destination serving authentic Bengali food. There were enough Indian food joints - serving Punjabi and Gujarati food. But none of the restaurants serving traditional Bengali dishes with original taste of Bengal.  Thus, it all started with the idea to fill this gap and to keep the authentic taste of Bengal alive in the heart of London.” commented Malobika Roy on the gist of her culinary journey as a home chef entrepreneur in London.

RICCHA GRROVER-Tell us about your home chef business brand Party Pals- when did you set it up, what inspired you and what cuisine do you offer?

MALOBIKA ROY- I am a home chef who runs my food business from my own faithful home kitchen. I set up PartyPals back in 2016. It is my fifth year running. What an incredible journey it has been so far! What started as an idea, hatched over a meal out in a restaurant once has become an integral part of my life.

The name PartyPals was born with the thought of helping "take the stress of cooking away from hosts at parties".   While Party Pals catered to requests from patrons, mostly within the Bengali/ Asian community, the thought of showcasing our rich heritage to all Londoners gave birth to my supper club – Aahare Bangla. Aahare Bangla literally means “Discovering Bengal through food”.

RG- What have been the challenges to the FnB industry in Covid times and what difficulties have you overcome an a FnB chefpreneur in these times?

MR-Food business, much like most other hospitality businesses has had to bear the brunt of the pandemic. It was in March 2020, that I was all set with the latest chapter of my Supper Club – Aahare Bangla – with guests invited. When the warning bells of the pandemic started ringing, it was with abundance of caution, and thought for the wellbeing of guests that I took the painful decision to cancel the event. The lockdown and restrictions to social distancing had all but severed my traditional sources – party orders and gatherings (supper clubs).

While getting accustomed to the new ways of life in pandemic, in June 2020 PartyPals reinvented itself as a takeaway joint. I have kept the flames burning ever brightly, hosting a special weekend menu every fortnight. Our patrons have supported us, at these trying times, sometimes travelling half of London to pick up their food.

RG- How is a meal from PartyPals different from other takeaways and cloud kitchens these days? What makes it unique. What are the top 5 dishes you recommend a first time diner to try from your menu?

MR-The food at PartyPals is genuinely Bengali. I ensure that every item I present on my menu is true to its roots. Hours are spent in research, trials to perfect the recipe before they make it to the menu. There are no shortcuts. Each ingredient is sourced from distributors who bear links to farmers, or for traditional items - have a direct link to sources back home (in India/ Bangladesh). Each spice is ground from raw ingredients and blended in the PartyPals kitchen.

Some of my most loved dishes include:

**Shukto** – a traditional recipe made from a plethora of vegetables cooked in the most unique blend of spices with a creamy, milky gravy with the slightest hint of sweetness and a core taste of bitterness

**Ilish Bhapa**, a classic Hilsa preparation of Bengali cuisine where fresh hilsa is marinated in special mustard and cooked in a steamer

**Kolkata Kathi Egg**-Chicken Roll - a most scrumptious and beloved street food of Kolkata prepared from juicy morsels of chicken kabab pieces, wrapped in a paratha coated in egg.

**Chicken Chaap** – A unique combination of juicy and moist chicken leg pieces and thick gravy of poppy seeds-cashew nut paste with saffron (zafran) lending a beautiful colour and aroma

**Baked Rasogulla** – a baked syrupy recipe made from date jaggery and fresh rasogulla

RG- Tell us about your menu, seasonal specials, festive menus. What does your menu take its inspiration from?

MR- As stated, my love for cooking draws inspiration from my mother. A lot of the dishes on my menu have made it straight from her kitchen. I have been fascinated by the dishes from Thakur Bari (Rabindranath Tagore’s) kitchen and the distinct Mughlai influences on quintessential Bengali delights. Several of my menu items and weekend menus bear testament to this influence.

I do have two additional inspirations at home- my kids, who have inspired some of my fusion recipes – themed “East meets West” – blending traditional Bengali ingredients and/ or cooking techniques with western delights.

Most recently, I had served “Nalen gurer mousse”, blending fresh date jaggery, an eternal winter favourite in Bengal as a mousse. I was overwhelmed by the reception.

My husband remains my greatest critique ensuring my recipes remain authentic in their as well as my support in day to day running PartyPals.

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RG - What words of advice do you have for budding chefpreneurs? What is your aspiration for the future for your home chef delivery brand ?

MR- Love your craft and remain true to your roots.

RG- Do you cater for parties and events too? What have been your biggest highs in your career as a chefpreneur?

MR- I started with catering to small parties and occasions. These five years I have had the privilege to cater to numerous occasions and get-togethers of upto 200 guests. From hosting Bengali special menus to serving Bengali menus to sell out Supper Clubs we have done it all.

It has been a humble attempt to showcase our richness and breadth of Bengali cuisine here in the heart of London.

Party Pals catered to Kolkata foodies club’s first ever London chapter.

We also catered to a 150 strong sit-down party celebrating the silver anniversary at Southampton. PartyPals was also the first to bring food to guests at DurgaPuja in Solugh, one of the oldest and most popular Durga Pujas in London. We have been a regular feature since.

As she signed off Chef Malobika said “My entire business has grown from the word of mouth and it would not be complete if I did not thank my faithful clientele who have stood rock solid throughout these years, and even today even during lockdown. It is this encouragement that has enabled me to spread my wings and lend the opportunity to fly!”