

# The Ninja's apprentice

**What good is a Goan male who can't clean a fish?** A local super-chef tries instilling some manhood into a squeamish son of the soil

WRITTEN BY VIVEK MENEZES PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM PARKER

## FISHER KING

Bawmra Jap, from Burma, became a chef in the UK, picking up English along the way in less than a year. His restaurant in Candolim, Goa, named Bomra's, has been hailed as one of the finest Burmese restaurants in the world



**BAWMRA JAP MOVES LIKE A blur** through Calangute market. Two steps ahead, and then he's gone, plain disappeared into a scrum of fruit vendors. This is the second time I've lost him, the second time I'm forced to wait in the sun, scanning the crowd anxiously while sweat pours down my back. A minute ticks by, and he materialises out of thin air like a Burmese ninja, toting a trophy of a dozen limes and a sturdy stalk of sugarcane that is quickly demolished between his teeth. "You're too slow!" he laughs at me over his shoulder as we tear back to his jeep at full sprint.

A few minutes later, at the Betim jetty on the Mandovi riverfront, there are wider sight lines. It's easier to keep track of Bawmra as he surges back and forth among the iceboxes, sorting through piles of tiger prawns and baby squid, hoisting huge silvery chonak aside to find the freshest possible item. Nothing qualifies, and he's off at breakneck speed again, with me huffing behind, making a beeline for the boat that is just pulling into its berth. Before the startled captain can even cut his engine, the master chef clambers on board. With a disarming grin on his broad face, and a request in Konkani to check out the catch up close, we've got what we've been looking for.

Bawmra hands me a gleaming snapper that's as long as my arm and as plump as a piglet, and the young chef stops moving for the first time all morning. Exactly 20 seconds later, the purposeful look reappears in his eyes and my stomach muscles clench in anticipation of the next dash. I allow myself to eye the prize that's dripping brine steadily on to my leather sandals. The day of reckoning has arrived, I think to myself. I will be master of this fish, even if every sinew in my body screams at me to run away. I'm determined. This fish will shortly be on a plate, and Bawmra Jap is going to show me how to make a meal of it.

Don't get me wrong – I am a committed piscivore, like every other Goan. Along with my countrymen, I lustily partake of the bounty of the oceans all year round; and in the monsoon months of the coastal fishing ban, I happily yield alongside them to the singular pleasures of the buttery muddoshi. Park in front of me some

modso grilled with garlic and lime, or a cloud of tiny crisp-fried velle netted in the vicinity of my native Divar, and you will witness a man entirely satisfied with his lot in life. Be it crisp-fried or silken sashimi, or piquant ceviche, it all suits me just fine. I love this stuff and would be happy to eat it every single day.

But then there's the dark secret that has rankled in my bosom these many years. It is the reason why I do not eat fish every day. The shameful truth is that I can't stand to touch fish when it's not already garnished and sitting ready to be devoured on my plate. The untreated item on a market slab makes me queasy. I feel sick even thinking of the guts. To this day, the mere sight of the Betim fish market, even from the outside, makes me want to vigorously wash my hands with strong soap.

Even after becoming an enthusiastic cook, and after achieving hard-won comfort in the family kitchen, seafood still never makes an appearance on my cutting boards unless it comes pre-cleaned, supermarket-style, which, of course, it never does in Goa. And so the embarrassment deepens, because adroit fish-wrangling is a central tenet of Konkani manhood. It must not have gone unnoticed that I never ever stride amongst the fishmongers like I'm meant to, like it is my birthright. I imagine them whispering as I scoot ashamedly in the opposite direction, "What good is a Goenkar male who can't clean a fish? See that big fellow, he screamed when I showed him this prawn." This is what's been on my mind all this past year. This is why I am jogging furiously back through the Betim fish market, ankle-deep in fish guts and blood, my eyes trained unblinkingly on the rapidly accelerating Burmese man just ahead.

The first time I ate at Bomra's, the deceptively dim and quiet restaurant on the main North Goa tourism belt, the meal came as a series of explosive surprises to the palate. There was lush tofu made out of chana dal, quick-fried in bite-sized portions that were chewy, crispy and molten at the same time. Another marvel was an addictive (and subtly caffeinated) pickled tea leaf salad, a symphony of complementary textures in each bite. Even at that first meal, the fish stood out

**MAKING THE CUT**

During the tourist season, Jap hits the docks and the market first thing every morning to grab the finest produce available in Goa



– an eye-wateringly succulent seared tuna, and a wedge of snapper exquisitely poached in a sauce with notes of lemongrass and Thai ginger. This was inspired modern cooking of the highest international standard. Here, clearly, was a master chef attuned to the world, turning the produce of the Goan marketplace into spectacular and unique haute cuisine. How did he do it? And then the next, thrilling question: if he can do it, could I possibly do it? Could I learn from him to do it, too?

Bawmra Jap's Kachin people have their roots among ancient Tibetan highlanders, who migrated southwards through what is now China to settle in territories that are divided between India's Arunachal Pradesh, the Kachin State in modern Burma and China's Yunnan Province. They are known for fierce independence and formidable jungle survival skills, which made them valued fighters during WWII. The Americans and the British raised Kachin units to oppose the Japanese. These "Gurkhas of South-East Asia" waged a highly successful guerrilla campaign (along with the Chindits) against Japanese supply lines, and are credited with wrecking the enemy advance into India. Like the Gurkhas, the Kachins carry a traditional short sword, the "dah", which is considered "the most unique and indispensable tool of life". The Kachins have battled for self-rule for more than 100 years, first against the British, and now (calmed somewhat by a treaty) with the oligarchic leaders of Myanmar, where the Kachin state is de facto autonomous. They seem an indomitable people, and that charged ebullience runs through Bawmra Jap's veins.

When this young Kachin arrived in England along with Maryam Shahmanesh, a Cambridge-trained doctor and former aid worker whom he later married, he had no idea that you could make a decent career from being a chef. "From being a rudimentary speaker, Bawmra picked up accentless English in less than a year, knowing all the idioms and expressions," says Maryam. "He had never left Burma before, but in a few months, he established himself in the UK, started working and made friends. The learning of such a new culture was amazingly →

effortless, as if by magic. He seems to pick things up by osmosis.” This is what Bawmra is like as a chef – he masters advanced techniques in days and reproduces complex dishes after a single taste. He says, “I was already happy not to be in computing or something like that, to have a respectable career. But once I had the experience of working in some of the UK’s best-known restaurants, I realized that this is exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

Bawmra Jap arrived in India when Maryam Shahmanesh received a grant from the Wellcome Trust to conduct research in Goa. Bomra’s came into being as a little restaurant serving stylish, modern European food. And then, an epiphany: he decided he would showcase the food of Burma, using all the up-to-date skills he had developed. The move was a success – Bomra’s was soon hailed as the best restaurant in Goa’s crowded, ultra-competitive scene. Eventually, the novelist Amitav Ghosh, whose best-seller *The Glass Palace* surveys a century of Burmese history, offered an endorsement, which has had a lasting impact. Ghosh, who has a house in Goa, declared, “Bomra’s is the best Burmese restaurant I’ve ever eaten in, anywhere (including Burma). I would go beyond that and say it’s one of the finest South-East Asian restaurants in the world. I’m always astonished that there aren’t long lines at his gates. There certainly would be if his restaurant was situated in London or New York.”

I’ve felt the same way ever since my first taste of Bawmra’s amazing food – but the warm and fuzzies are far away now, as the chef glowers at my beloved Sabatier knife before dismissing it. “Not sharp enough.” The custom-forged German sharpener I’ve brought earns another sniff, and a whetstone from Mapusa is handed to me: “Use this.” Tut-tut, and tut-tut again, and the knife is taken away from me. It gleams with menace when returned, far sharper than I have ever seen it before, and then, with a solemn nod from Bawmra, the kitchen clicks into gear for the first customers of the day. I’m supposed to be helping with prep work, but it’s all I can do to keep on my feet as the kitchen erupts into a controlled frenzy. Bawmra shouts instructions, steam

**AT YOUR CEVICHE**

The trickiest part of making Jap’s outrageously good snapper ceviche is chopping the ginger



**Bawmra Jap’s Red Snapper Ceviche**

This is my interpretation of the Latin American ceviche or Filipino kinilaw, which relies on a sour agent to sort of cook the raw fish. It’s easy to make, but ensure that you get the freshest ingredients available

– the tastiness of this dish depends on the freshness of the fish

**INGREDIENTS**

- 500g very fresh, thin slices of red snapper
- For the marinade:**
- 3 tbsp lime juice
- 1 tbsp coriander
- ½ tbsp lemongrass
- ½ tbsp finely chopped ginger root

- ½ tbsp roughly chopped Thai basil
- ½ tbsp Vietnamese coriander (*ngashaban*)
- 2 tbsp fish sauce
- 1 tbsp infused (star anise and Sichuan pepper) oil
- ½ tbsp garlic
- 1 tbsp jaggery
- 1 tbsp finely chopped bird’s-eye chillies

**METHOD**

Make the marinade by combining all the ingredients in a bowl. Arrange the fish slices on a plate, making sure that they do not overlap, and pour the sauce over the fish. Once the translucent fish becomes opaque, the dish is ready to serve.

I seize the fish, and here I go: I’m cutting the head off. It’s a triumph, a great shining victory of man over beast

billows, plates appear at just the right time, become loaded with orders in the blink of an eye, pass the chef’s inspection and disappear out the door. I’m gently nudged this way and that in the assembly line, the only slow-moving turtle in this full-speed ballet of porpoises. Then the inevitable retreat; I back into an open space near the sink and simply watch. This kitchen swings like a great jazz orchestra, its expertise twined together with tremendous flair. The thought comes: this is Brazilian football, the full-on *jogo bonito*, but I’ve still got to learn to dribble. My heart leaps again with the insight – if I am going to learn from the best, the way to do it is *mano-a-mano*.

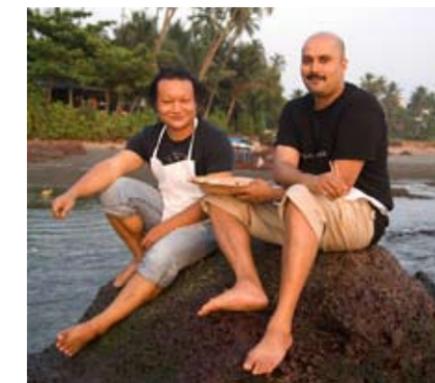
Which brings us to the waterline of Coco Beach, just a quick scooter ride from Bawmra’s restaurant, just us on a quiet patch of sand under the coconuts. Now this is what I’m talking about. Surely this is the right setting for the breakthrough. Out in the open, hungry, with sharp knives and a big fish, it is just us men and the elements. I’m sure this is going to be the moment I’ve been waiting for, this fateful day in my 40th year when I truly become a man among men. Giddy with emotion, I seize the fish and weigh my trusty knife in my palm. A deep breath, and here I go: I’m cutting the head off, and look, there’s the blood and gristle, and I’m not afraid this time. It is a triumph, it is a great shining victory of man over beast. Free at last, free at last – and then I look up to see Bawmra quivering with horror.

“Not that way,” he says, quite gently, but with a note of uncharacteristic anxiety in his voice, something I’ve never heard from him before. “You’ve wasted that nice piece,” he points to what must be a microscopic sliver

because I can’t actually see it. Now quite aware that something is going wrong, very wrong, I turn back to the snapper with my confidence in tatters. Fish scales fly. “Not up to standard,” I hear Bawmra whisper almost involuntarily, and I find myself sweating again and becoming aware of a migraine gathering like a black cloud in my frontal lobe. “Not up to standard,” he says once more, with emotion enough to stop me cold. The words sound like a prayer, a plea.

I lift my eyes from the snapper, and there can be no doubt that this man in front of me is in real pain. Why deny it? My glorious breakthrough is causing distress to Bawmra. We’re both trying very hard, but there is obviously something terribly disordered about the exercise. The world feels upside-down. The mind races with questions in this moment of pure clarity. Should my liberation be the cause of such distress for this genius of a chef? Should I not care about the feelings of this fine man who is veritably my brother, especially since he is in a position to feed us both almost instantly? Would I doodle with a pencil on the canvases of a great painter, or burble nursery rhymes in the ear of an ustad? All besides, can a man be truly free on a stomach as empty as mine? I look at Bawmra, and he looks at me. I lay down the knife and go to get a plate, and the natural order of the universe is restored, harmony once again reigns on this enchanted coastline. Like magic, it appears before me – snapper ceviche fresh from the ocean, translucent with lime, loaded with tang and heat, like an indescribably alluring dream, like a turquoise oasis in the bone-dry desert.

“Now eat,” says Bawmra. ☺



**Bomra’s** is located on Fort Aguada Road in Candolim, Goa. GQ unreservedly recommends everything on the menu, but you should order at least two of the seared tuna. For reservations, call 098221 06236.