

## IN CONVERSATION WITH

Imagine this: a coterie of girls, with Twiggy-esque hairdos and eyelids dusted with an aquamarine colour, sitting in the shade of mango trees, sipping on coca-cola drinks as Bobby Darin's Dream Lover plays. This is Lahore in the 1960s, its verdant parks recalled by Shayma Saadat's father, simply named 'Baba', in one among dozens of entries - odes to the cities this "child of a wandering development economist" has lived in - on her food-memoir blog, *The Spice Spoon*.

With her Afghan, Irani and Pakistani heritage, Saadat's gastronomical proclivities are diverse - even as she writes of "clotted cream-like burrata cheese" or "gamey venison pâté with juniper berries," she craves daal with a tarty *tarka*. While nostalgia guides her tastes, Saadat's fusion of sensibilities (the daal is scooped up with pizza bianca, a bread sprinkled with olive oil, salt and sprigs of rosemary) lends a twist to our most beloved and ordinary foods. Saadat, who works as a senior policy adviser for the Canadian government, speaks with the Herald about her fascination with food.



Courtesy Shayma Saadat

By Sanam Maher

**"I find my inspiration by watching, listening, eating, recreating and adapting dishes"**

**Q.** How did the blog, *The Spice Spoon*, come about?

**A.** In 2009, I moved from Rome where I worked for the United Nations, to Toronto after getting married. Having moved to a new city, I initially spent my time recreating the smells and tastes of my childhood in my kitchen to feel rooted. The women in my family have always cooked intuitively; passing on their recipes through oral tradition. I had learnt to cook in the same way. Inspired by my mother and my father's side of the family - who is an Afghan with a hint of Irani lineage - I started to put pencil to paper to document these recipes. I began

photographing my food and writing small vignettes from my childhood related to these dishes. Eventually, this turned into a food memoir-style blog. And given the current milieu in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, I would like to think that my stories provide readers with a much needed antidote of humanity and romanticism about our peoples and cultures.

**Q. What is one of your earliest food memories?**

**A.** Evening walks with my family to Mini Market from our home in Lahore to have a Pappu burger for my cousin Ashi and myself. During my childhood, there was a small kiosk in Mini Market (sadly this has since been taken over by a western-style burger kiosk) where a man made delicious Pakistani-style burgers for a mere five rupees. The Pappu burger comprised of a shami kebab tucked into an oblong, soft, pillowy bun, layered with onions, tomatoes and the pièce de résistance – an omelet. Total comfort food. Before wrapping it in a khaki paper bag, he would smother the burger with a suspicious looking neon-orange “tomato sauce” which, according to our parents, was verboten for us (we ate it behind their backs anyway, washing the burger down with ultra-sweet, chilled bottles of RC Cola).

**Q. Who taught you how to cook?**

**A.** I started cooking when I was around nine years old, mostly from recipes from my mother’s Cantonese Chinese or Thai cookbooks and I’d try my hand (though quite disastrously) at fruit cobblers. Because Pakistani food was prepared in our home by my mother or the household staff, I never had a passion to learn about our cuisine. It was only when I went to university and had the craving for daal chawal that I asked my mother for recipes and started preparing Pakistani food. All the Pakistani and Afghan dishes I now create, I have learned from my mother and my paternal and maternal aunts (which makes for very expensive phone bills). Besides the inspiration which comes from my grandmothers, who were fascinating cooks, I am also that irritating friend you have dinner with in a restaurant who will invariably ask the server if he’d be so kind as to ask the chef what sort of cheese went into the dish or discuss which region of the country the tomatoes used in the sauce came from. That is how I find my inspiration — by watching, listening, eating, recreating and adapting dishes to my own palate.

**Q. You’ve lived in several countries as a child and an adult — how do these experiences find their way into your cooking?**

**A.** Born in Lahore, I grew up in Nigeria, Kenya, Bangladesh, UK, US, and Italy. Strangely enough, the more we moved around as a family, the more we wanted to preserve the originality of those particular dishes which reminded us of our heritage. Being the product of an Afghan and Pakistani household, I feel dishes evolve over time, incorporating ingredients and methodologies from different cultures. The Afghan dishes made by my father’s side of the family have come to include some elements from the Pakistani kitchen. For example, Aush, an Afghan soup which is my paternal aunt Shahla’s culinary opus magnus, has a heady kick of Pakistani spices which have been incorporated into the recipe over time.

**Q. What food invokes the memory of a particular city for you?**

**A.** Sizzling and sputtering garlic prawns in small terracotta dishes always

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Shayma and her father

remind me of the trip I made through Spain and Portugal with my parents and sisters by car. After crossing the Portuguese border into Spain, we got lost for a bit and were unable to eat for hours. We spotted a tiny roadside café where I can still remember the large, plump garlic prawns we greedily ate out of small terracotta dishes, soaking up the garlicky, buttery juices with crusty bread.

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**Q. Can you recall a memorable meal you might have prepared?**

**A.** I went back to Italy this summer with my husband for a reunion with friends. We spent a few days in Tuscany and while driving around through the small towns, we stumbled upon a small organic products store. The proprietor was very curious about Pakistan and spoke to us about it extensively. In the end, she gifted us a large bag of heirloom tomatoes. I prepared a simple pasta dish for my friends that afternoon using the tomatoes, poaching them for a few minutes with a clove of garlic in some olive oil from my friend's olive trees grove. I tossed the tomatoes in linguine, adding chunks of milky, creamy buffalo mozzarella and hand-torn basil. We ate our food sitting under the gazebo next to the lavender shrubs for hours, eating, chattering and laughing.

**Q. Are you interested in any food movements — the modernist cuisine movement, for example?**

**A.** I don't have much interest in eating at fancy establishments or Michelin Star restaurants where the emphasis is on molecular gastronomy or progressive cuisine. Though I have great respect for Ferran Adrià and Grant Achatz as creative geniuses, it is the home-cooked style of food, the food your grandmother made for you, which I love and which prompted me to start my blog in the first place.

**Q. What is one dish you're still struggling to perfect?**

**A.** When in Pakistan for Eid, we would all go to my father's aunt's home for a luncheon, where she would always prepare an aromatic Kabuli pulao. It was layered with currants and almonds and had a smoky, almost earthy flavour. Before being served, it would be adorned with fall-off-the-bone mutton. I have tried to recreate this dish but in vain. I am still looking for someone in our family who can teach me how to make this dish.

**Q. What are some tips or tricks you've learned over the years which you think every cook should know?**

**A.** I am sure many Pakistanis already know this but my mother taught me that the rule of thumb when cooking *bhindi* is never stir the dish initially — instead, one must shuffle the pan on the burner rigorously, otherwise a sticky mess will ooze out of the ladyfingers. From my maternal aunt I have learned to always add a cardamom pod and cinnamon stick to your rice — it makes it all the more fragrant.

**Q. One food trend you wish Pakistanis would catch up to?**

**A.** I can't say anything in relation to a particular food trend, but it would be lovely to be able to have a thin-crust pizza in Pakistan — the way it is made in Rome. After all, Pakistanis have such finesse for working with dough — we are adept at making *puris*, parathas, naan, and tandoori roti, so why not a good pizza instead of that awful lump of dough that pizza chains create and dare to call pizza?

**Q. Have you ever considered publishing the work on The Spice Spoon?**

**A.** It would be quite an honour for me to have my work compiled into a cookery book one day but at the moment I am just enjoying penning the blog and am concentrating on improving my photography skills.

**Q. Who do you admire in the culinary world?**

**A.** There are a handful of bloggers I admire very much — for their photography, Cannelle et Vanille, and if you want to transport yourself to Paris and get vicarious pleasure out of looking at photos of creamy, pungent Brie, butter or Confit de Canard, then visit David Lebovitz' eponymous blog. I also devour the work of The Dog's Breakfast and Il Cavoletto di Bruxelles. The chef I admire immensely is Jacques Pépin. His mother's cooking was an inspiration for him and I love the way he cooks with his daughter.

**Q. Do you ever judge people on their eating habits — if you were, for example, taken on a date to a terrible restaurant?**

**A.** If my date were to take me to a chain like Red Lobster or Olive Garden, I think there would be an issue there — but if the next day I were taken to a hole-in-the-wall which serves the best *papri chaat* in the city, I think all would be forgiven and forgotten! ■