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Mistress of Spices

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Mistress of Spices

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THESPICESPOON.COM/BLOG/
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Shayma Saadat's
award-winning blog
on Pakistani, Afghan
and Iranian food based
on family heritage
will make you want
to revisit your own
culinary past



Persian eggplant caviar served with traditional flat-bread and fresh herbs or *Kashk e bademjoon o sangak e sabzi khordan*. This is followed by *Zereshk Polow* or 'jeweled rice' adorned with almonds and pistachios, served with saffron-laced chicken and barberries. And finally, *Baghlava Cake*, a family heirloom recipe made with almond flour and pistachios and served with fragrant cardamom tea.

This was the \$40 meal Shayma Saadat prepared for her pop-up Nowruz Supperclub at The Depanneur in Toronto to herald in Spring. It was sold out. For if food be the language of heritage, Shayma has mastered the art of speaking it.

Her blog, The Spice Spoon, is



**We all have
our stories
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writing, I tell
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**Food writer Shayma Saadat
of the award-winning blog,
*The Spice Spoon***

**Morabayeh Holou
(Peach Compote)**



**Chana Dal
(Lentil Soup)**

a culinary guide through her Pakistani, Afghan and Iranian ancestry. Each recipe pays homage to the food she grew up eating and much of it will be familiar to any reader in Lahore or Peshawar. She has a knack for reminding us what exactly we love about our food. Take the description of the "humble samosa" which is "that flaky, deep-fried triangular parcel stuffed with cumin-laced, spicy potatoes." And almost everyone has a Nani Ami like hers who made some form of *Aloo Keema Bun*, a 'meat and potatoes' dish fragrant with notes of spicy ginger and black cardamom and cooked slowly over a low flame.

The recipes, stories surrounding them and mouth-watering photographs have landed The Spice Spoon on *The Independent's* list of the Top 50 Food Websites around the world. Her award-winning recipe for *Borani Esfanaaj*, a yoghurt and spinach dip, was published in the *Food52* cookbook. The cooking has more appeal than merely producing an attractive-looking plate of food.

However, just as the blog draws on a strong sense of place, it emerged from one of isolation 31

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that coloured her early days after moving to Toronto from Rome four years ago. “While my husband worked long hours, I found inspiration in the kitchen by recreating the tastes which reminded me of my childhood,” she told T magazine. An economist by training, Shayma had worked with the United Nations in Rome and when she moved to Canada, she took up the post of a senior policy adviser to the government. But her passion lay in the kitchen — a place where she not only explored her memories but also where she could capture her creations in stunning photographs.

Shayma grew up in Lahore, which features heavily in the posts. “I loved those kaanch ki churiyaan; glass bangles you’d find right before Eid at the Anarkali Bazaar in Lahore’s Old City... after churiyaan shopping I would grasp my grandmother’s hand and walk towards the sandal shop, passing the fruit chaat kiosk on the way,” she writes as a preface for that recipe.

The sepia-toned family photos pepper the posts and provide a window into a Pakistan that most people outside the country are unfamiliar with. “I feel that there are many narratives of Pakistan which need to be told... the ones you commonly hear are about a country riddled with violence and poverty,” she says. “We all have our stories to



Chicken kebab sliders

tell and through food writing, I tell mine.”

Initially, though, Shayma was not entirely sure if her readers would be necessarily interested in her personal stories. That did not turn out to be the case. “It was these highly personal posts, about my family, which resonated with my readers,” she says. “On some level, my non-Pakistani readers felt that they too could relate to my stories about spending summers with cousins climbing trees and being reprimanded by our parents for eating ice cream from the corner shop right before suppertime.”

These stories go back in time and the tricky business of memory is accuracy. The same applies to the recipes. And so while Shayma is well travelled, having lived in Nigeria, Kenya, the USA and the UK, her food steers clear of fusion. “The interesting thing is that the more I moved around, the more I wanted to preserve the originality of our family’s dishes,” she explains. And so, her recipe titled Nani Ami’s *Sawayyan* is prepared in the authentic Punjabi manner and her mother’s *Chutney Surkh-e-Murch* (red pepper chutney) celebrates Afghan cuisine.

But as is true for the region, which has a shared history, the recipes tell a story of cross influences. “Being the product of an Afghan and Pakistani household, our family dishes have evolved over time; incorporating ingredients and methodologies from both kitchens,” says Shayma. “For example *aush*, my aunt Shahla’s culinary opus magnus, is a soup of Afghan origin, which is prepared with various vegetables and mint leaves in a tomato-based broth. [It] has a heady kick of Pakistani spices which have been added to the recipe over time.”



Ab Doogh Khair
(Cucumber Soup)

The beauty of the blog is it has also served the purpose of recording family recipes that were mostly passed down by word of mouth

Sawayyan
(Vermicelli Pudding)



The blog is also a reminder of how unique and different the food from this region is, Pakistanis tend to use more red chilli pepper which is not a common practice while preparing Afghan or Persian dishes, she explains. In a Persian kitchen, a lot of fresh herbs like tarragon, mint, parsley and coriander are used. They also like to prepare fruit-based meat stews — an element you normally won't find on a Pakistani table. In an Afghan kitchen, rice takes centre stage in a lot of dishes; spinach, potatoes, chickpeas or tomatoes form the base for elaborate rice pilafs. Also, frequently stocked in almost every Afghan and Persian kitchen is quroot (dried curd), which is used in several of their dishes.

"Now there is no looking back," she says. Equipped with a pantry full of food and a captivating persona which compliments her hereditary good looks, Shayma is a rising star in the fraternity of food bloggers. Recently, she spoke at TEDx as a Pakistani food writer and left an indelible mark on the hearts of food enthusiasts. She also has a contract with BBC's Good Food magazine for a few on-going features and many speaking engagements, magazine commissions, pop-up events on Afghan cuisine at restaurants and workshops.

Her interaction with people extends beyond the blog to 'food swaps' on a regular basis. She recently received a package of dried Sicilian chillies from a Twitter friend in Rome in exchange for a box of Quebec maple syrup cookies which she sent her.

And thus the journey continues as do the discoveries with family and friends, readers and fans, and her husband and her eight-month-old son, who she calls 'Tiny Spoon' on the blog. "I have come to learn that pears poached with cardamom and cassia (Chinese cinnamon) are utterly delectable — I steal a bit from my son's share to spoon over Greek yoghurt for my breakfast."