

Shayma Saadat

By Sanam Lakhani

Beauty, brains and a brilliant borani... brought to you by Shayma Saadat, author of award-winning food blog “The Spice Spoon”. Part Pakistani, part Afghan with Persian descent, Shayma was born in Lahore and has lived in Nigeria, Kenya, Bangladesh, U.K, US and Italy. She currently resides in Toronto, with her husband and her one-year old son, affectionately referred to as “tiny spoon” in her memoirs.

Along with pursuing her passion for cooking, food writing and photography, the multitasking Shayma, has a full-time job as a senior policy advisor to the government in Canada. She brings time old family recipes to life immortalizing them in pictures and evoking childhood memories. Her inspiring talk at TEDxWaterloo this last March, has won the hearts of food aficionados and writers alike.



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Who or what was your inspiration to become a food writer?

Food writing came about slowly and naturally. While writing down my family's recipes, I felt each dish each dish had a story to tell –it evoked a memory related to the places I had lived in, as well as my childhood.

My paternal grandmother whom we affectionately called Mader (mother in Dari), would prepare creamy, fuffy mayonnaise or perfectly round Victoria sponge cakes with her homemade apricot jam slathered in between the layer. My Nani Ami (maternal grandmother), made aromatic pilafs alongside spicy, tomato-based braised stews. These ladies have always been my inspiration for all things food-related.

What is(are) your favourite cuisine(s) & why?

I like all sorts of cuisines, but what really appeals to me is when a dish is prepared with a few ingredients so it comes together almost as if by alchemy –a bowl of my mother's spiced lentils with basmati rice, a slab of thick foie gras with crusty bread and quince compote or a plate of spaghetti with nothing but fresh tomatoes, sea salt, a slick of olive oil and lots of grated parmesan on top.

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Name one of your favourite restaurants in the world and why?

A lot of my food memories are related to Rome –the longest I have ever lived in any country besides the United States is Italy. So rather than singling out one restaurant, I would say that my favourite restaurants are in Rome.

One very memorable meal is the one I had with my friend Patrizia at Roscioli –we were there till almost 2am, long after dinner service was over. After having a meal of tagliata di manzo (rare steak slices) which your knife could cut through like butter, the server kept bringing us butter biscuits with molten chocolate on the side. Also try Cul de Sac in Rome –their partridge pâté studded with juniper berries will make you want to eat your fingers.

Your favourite chef(s)/cook(s) and why?

I am a great admirer of Jacques Pepin - he prepares food with such effortless perfection. I love how his mother's cooking has always been a source of inspiration for him. I find it really adorable when he cooks with his daughter - I hope my son and I can share such moments together in the future.

Is there anything you've recently cooked that you are really proud of?

My husband's best friend was visiting us from Dubai and I wanted to spend time with them, rather than slaving away in the kitchen. So I chose to make a relatively quick meal.

I saw some gorgeous lobster tails when I was out shopping and scooped them up. I made a very simple-to-prepare pasta with fresh summer tomatoes, a little bit of red chillies in oil and a lobster tail to crown the dish. I also prepared a strawberry-rhubarb pudding with crême anglaise to round off the evening.



What advice would you give to an aspiring cook/food writer?

There are many wonderful food-related books, magazines and blogs out there, so one has many sources of inspiration - but find your own unique 'voice'. I find that readers want to know who the person is behind those dishes; behind those photos of roasted apricots resting on a milky tapioca pudding on your website. If you find your own specific style of writing you can share with your readers, they will find you and keep coming back to know more.

A lot of food writers and bloggers are commissioning photographers and stylists to work with them - however, if you can find time to write, do the food styling and photography - you are golden!

The culinary utensil that you just can't live without and why.

I love my silicone spatulas. They get that last bit of thick yoghurt or qaymak (Afghan-style clotted cream) off the bowl.

What's your favorite Pakistani dish that you like to eat and why?

I love my mum's spicy chicken karahi with pillowy naan. But I also have a weakness for anything 'chatpata', so give me a plate of that lovely street food-style dish, papri chaat - slivers of crackly, fried dough, crowned with potatoes and chickpeas, slathered with yoghurt, mint, chili and tamarind chutney and I am in food heaven.

“Cardamom is the taste and smell of home”**What's your most favourite aroma in your personal kitchen and why?**

That would have to be the fragrance of cardamom. My mother always had a few cardamom pods in her purse to have as a breath freshener. Cardamom reminds me of Eid puddings - the shir khorma which is prepared in my father's family, which my mother has perfected. Cardamom is the taste and smell of home; whether popped into my tea or added to a chicken curry.

Give me an example of a summertime menu (Or an Eid menu) you would prepare for me?

Eid luncheons are famous in my father's Afghan side of the family - and every year, the menu is the same. I would love to prepare an Eid-style meal for you - I would make an aubergine borani - velvety aubergine, slathered with a jammy tomato sauce and thick, garlicky yoghurt, then some stir-fried ginger and tomato chicken and the piece de resistance - our family's Kabuli pilaf. This pilaf is unlike any other Kabuli pilaf you may have had - it is an heirloom recipe made with orange peel, sultanas, almonds, braised mutton (or chicken) and fragrant spices. I would then serve you a platter of fruit - (lychees and slices of mango) and shir khorma - a milky vermicelli pudding full of slivered almonds and plump golden raisins.

What are some of the best Pakistani restaurants that you've visited? It could be anywhere in the world. Name one dish that was really done well there and describe it.

I love Pakistani food in the United Kingdom. I have eaten one of the best chicken karahis at Lahore Restaurant in Hendon - a suburb of London (I believe they have a new location in St. John's Wood now, too). Again, this was a memorable meal because one of my best friends drove a bunch of us there and we took silly photos whilst tucking into our meal.

Ab-Doogh-Khیار

Cold Cucumber Soup in the Persian Manner

By Shayma Saadat



Ingredients:

1 shallot, sliced thin

1 tbsp olive oil

6 English (mini) cucumbers (approximately 300g)

handful mint leaves (no stalks)

1 garlic clove

salt to taste

1½ cup or approximately 350 g Greek or whole milk yoghurt

1 cup or approximately 60 g walnuts, plus some more for garnishing, crushed and chopped by hand

Dried rose petals for garnish (optional)

Preparation:

Slice shallot thinly.

Place a small frying pan on medium-high heat and add one tablespoon of olive oil; add shallots and fry till a dark golden colour.

Transfer to a newspaper or paper towel and allow to dry. Set aside;

Peel cucumbers; Slice each cucumber lengthwise and with a teaspoon, gently scoop out the seeds. Divide cucumbers into two separate batches;

Take the first batch of cucumbers and slice into very thin strips lengthwise. Then dice into very small pieces, approximately less than 1 centimetre and 1/8th of an inch. Set first batch of cucumbers aside.

Take the second batch of cucumbers and garlic clove and place in a blender or food processor. Blend till completely smooth.

Add mint leaves to the blender or food processor and pulse just so the mint leaves are shredded but not completely blended in. You want to be able to see small specks of the mint leaves.

Transfer the puréed cucumber and mint to a mixing bowl. Add Greek yoghurt, walnuts, the first batch of diced cucumbers and gently mix to combine. Add salt to taste.

The consistency should be like that of a thick soup. If it is too watery for your liking, you can add more Greek yoghurt, if it is too thick, add some ice cold water, tablespoon by tablespoon till you get the desired consistency.

Place in the fridge and allow to chill for 2-3 hours.

Serve in a soup bowl or in tiny glasses and just prior to serving, garnish with crunchy shallots, crushed walnuts and (optional) dried rose petals.

Serves 4-6 as a first course or 10-12 in smaller portions for a cocktail party

Follow Shayma on Instagram, twitter and pinterest @SpiceSpoon and immerse yourself into her sensational world of heritage cooking