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'As the novelist Nadeem Aslam said, "I was made in Pakistan, but assembled abroad"'

Route cuisine'.

How would you describe your journey as a food blogger?

Initially, I didn't think people would be interested in my personal stories. But as I began to write vignettes about my summers in Pakistan – sneaking out in the afternoon with my cousins to pick a raw mango from a tree – I felt that I got a positive response from my non-Pakistani readers, too. Very soon, my blog took off, leading to press attention, festival and workshop invitations, commissions from magazines, the most recent being BBC's *Good Food Magazine* and even a local TED talk in Canada.

Amongst other accolades, *The Independent* named *The Spice Spoon* one of the 50 best food websites in the world, and it now receives tens of thousands of readers every month. What I really love about my food career is that unlike my childhood experience in Washington, D.C., where I was bullied for being 'foreign' and my *kebab* sandwiches were shunned by mean children in school, my adult life has allowed me to proudly share my food heritage.

Besides food, you write with nostalgia about Pakistan. How does food help you in talking about and portraying your heritage?

The novelist Nadeem Aslam said, "I was made in Pakistan, but assembled abroad." I was born in Lahore, but as the daughter of a World Bank-expatriate, I led a nomadic life, periodically moving from one country to another – Pakistan, the US, Nigeria, Kenya, Bangladesh, the U.K and later Rome, Italy. After marriage, my husband and I made Toronto our new home, where we currently live with our son. Canada is now home, but Pakistan is where my roots are and has always served as a reference point. We all have stories to tell about our childhood. Through food writing, I tell mine.

Tell us something about your grandmothers, who inspired you to chronicle their recipes

My paternal grandmother was a wife, mother and civil servant. My father tells me that as a cookery enthusiast living in Lahore, she would often request the chef of the U.S. Consul General to teach her how to make American-style pies and casseroles. My maternal grandmother was also a fascinating cook and homemaker. Despite the fact that she had domestic staff, she would make every dish whenever I was in Lahore for holidays. Both ladies left some everlasting legacies and I happened to pick on cooking.

You've lived in several different countries over the years. Where did you find yourself in gourmet heaven?

Hands down, Italy. I would rather enjoy a simple plate of pasta with fresh tomatoes, torn basil leaves, and a glug of olive oil any day, over going to a posh Michelin-starred restaurant. There, cookery is centered on fresh produce, a few ingredients and simple, real cooking. You won't find many sous-vide machines in Italy, I can assure you.

What are some of the most exciting aspects of running a blog? What have you learned in the past four years that has made you wiser?

Running a blog is much like programme management. My blog, which eventually grew, recently became embedded into my larger, eponymous website. Creating and maintaining

Food aficionada and owner of the award-winning food blog *The Spice Spoon*, Shayma Owaise Saadat is one talented woman. Her blog has a wide and growing readership in the West and is now incorporated in her new eponymous website. She juggles her time between her day job as a senior policy advisor to the provincial government in Canada with her passion to cook and write. Originally from Pakistan, she now calls Toronto, Canada, home.

When did you conceive of your award-winning food blog *The Spice Spoon*?

I remember it was on a bleak midwinter's day in Toronto. I had just moved to Canada after working at the United Nations in Rome, Italy, for several years, and though I had led a nomadic life and was used to upheaval, all I wanted that day was the comfort of home. So I opened a bag of rice, stirred it together with warm milk, cardamom seeds and

sugar...and soon my cold new house was filled with the scents of a Lahore childhood spent watching my mother at work in her kitchen. It was then that I began to chronicle both my recipes and the memories they evoked in my blog, *The Spice Spoon*.

Tell us more about your family recipes that you refer to as 'Silk Route cuisine'?

Born in Lahore, I am Pakistani, with Afghan and Persian roots. My father's family hails from Afghanistan, but moved to Lahore, in present-day Pakistan. If you are ever invited to an Eid feast at our family home, you will taste beautiful cross-influences in the Pakistani and Afghan dishes prepared that day. My father's mother, whom we called *Mader*, had Persian roots. My own mother is purely Pakistani. So, in my writing, I refer to the cuisine of the countries of my heritage – Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran – which have been made by the women in my family for generations, as 'Silk

FROM TORONTO, CANADA

SHAYMA OWAISE SAADAT

ON SILK ROUTE CUISINE & HER
BEAUTIFUL BLOG

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ABOVE & OPPOSITE: Shayma at one of her favourite farmers' markets in Toronto: Evergreen Brick Works, a community environmental centre in the heart of Toronto's Don Valley. This is where she shops every weekend for fresh produce for her home



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LEFT: The charming Shayma in her Toronto neighbourhood ABOVE: Filming the Spice Spoon film: Shayma making her grandmother's saffron orange-scented bread pudding. (Photo credit: Brent Martin, Canova Media) BELOW: Shayma's signature recipes include Tahchin – a Persian chicken and rice timbale, Ab Dough Khair – cucumber soup with walnuts and crunchy shallots in the Persian manner, and saffron and rosewater semifreddo



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'The Independent named The Spice Spoon one of the 50 best food websites in the world, and it now receives tens of thousands of readers every month'

a website is a lot of work: working with a graphic designer, website developer, and constantly adding content – I take my own photos, too. I enjoy the challenge and the entrepreneurial aspect of it. I am a real peoples' person, I love asking questions and talking to others who love food the way I do. One of my favourite parts is being able to interact with my readers.

You are a civil servant in Canada, have a young son and also run your blog. How do you manage?

I am lucky to be married to someone who supports both my careers and is also the most organised person in the world. We share tasks and the responsibility of raising our son together, especially since we don't have any family or domestic staff to help out on a daily basis. I am constantly sleep-deprived because I wake up early in the morning, to work on my blog projects before I head off to my day job. But as the saying goes – find what you love and let it kill you.

You are active in the Toronto cooking circuit. What's the most exciting workshop or pop-up Supperclub you have participated in so far?

Last year, I was a guest chef at a Toronto Supperclub where I hosted a *Nowruz* (Persian New Year) dinner with a business partner. We entertained 23 guests and served a six-course meal, among others; we made Persian eggplant caviar and served bejeweled rice adorned with almonds and pistachios. One of my favourite parts about being in the food world is seeing the reactions on your patrons' faces when they really enjoy what you made for them and soaking up the compliments. In today's world, you cannot afford to be self-effacing, the way the women in my family were!

What is the hardest part of dismantling stereotypes, or explaining the truth when you talk of Pakistan at speaking engagements in North America?

Last year, I was invited to speak at TEDxYouthWaterloo. I mentioned Chimananda Adichie, one of my favourite novelists, who said, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." I write personal stories about my homeland – stories that may be different than the horrific but true events people read and hear about in the media. The narrative about Pakistan being a country where there is violence, poverty and terrorist attacks may be true – but it is only one part of the story of a country of 180 million people – each of whom have their own story to tell.

What I respect about Canada is that people are curious and willing to listen to you with an open mind. I try not to be an apologist. We just need to keep showing the world that there are many different facets to Pakistan.

You are a food stylist. What is on trend and what is passé in the food blogosphere?

I typically do not follow or adopt trends – you'll rarely see me wearing the latest 'it' bag and shoes. The same philosophy extends to my cookery style and blog. I try to bring my own approach to the table when styling food. Having said that, if a certain project with a client demands working with what's 'trendy' and aligns well with my culinary vision, I would give it serious consideration. I also try to stay on top of things and subscribe to magazines like *Australian Gourmet Traveller* and *Jamie Magazine* on a regular basis.

How do you like to entertain?

I don't do multi-course dinners because one never knows what one's guests prefer. At a typical dinner at my home, I prepare several dishes, at least four or five, which my guests enjoy family-style. For a recent dinner, among other dishes, I made saffron-butter prawn crostini, slow-roasted leg of lamb with pomegranate molasses, roasted halibut with preserved lemon and a cardamom cake with rhubarb and strawberry coulis.



Shayma with her husband, Zain Ahmed and son Evren in Yorkville, her downtown Toronto neighbourhood

Tell us about a memorable meal you had

My husband and I were in Istanbul a few summers ago and dined on the Bosphorus at a seafood restaurant called Iskele – plates of grilled calamari, fresh anchovies, smelling of the sea around us, jumbo prawns, sizzling and spicy, eaten alongside candy-sweet tomatoes and crunchy cucumbers cushioned on a tumble of angel hair-like onions. The *pièce de résistance* was the Turkish bread pudding served alongside *kaymak* – who doesn't love clotted cream?

What would be your last meal?

I think that would depend on my mood – if I wanted Pakistani food, then hands down it would be my mother's five-spice *pilau* with caramelised onions and a spicy chicken curry. Dessert, in true Afghan tradition, would be more rice – a creamy cardamom-scented rice pudding with slices of *langra* mango on the side. I would also be equally happy with a slab of *foie gras*, crusty sour dough bread and quince jam. A slice of dark chocolate ganache tart to round off the meal and I would die a happy woman.

Which food personalities do you admire?

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I am a huge fan of Jacques Pepin, because his mother had a very big influence on his cookery style – which I can relate to as my mother is my idol – inside and outside of the kitchen. I am also in awe of some of my fellow food bloggers, namely Prerna of *Indian Simmer*, Kulsum of *Journey Kitchen*, Katie of *Parla Food*, Rachel of *Rachel Eats* and Kamran of *The Sophisticated Gourmet*.

Was it just an attempt to chronicle heritage cuisine or does food mean something more to you?

Altering the perception of my homeland gives my cookery and writing a greater purpose. Food allows us to tell stories related to traditions, cultures and people. I make a Danish rice pudding for my family, called risalamande, which is a recipe handed down to me by my half-Danish mother-in-law. I hope that one day my son will make this dish, even when I am not around, to honour the memory of his great-grandmother, like I did. This is the way stories are spun, over and over again to make a dish so much more than what's on the table – when food becomes more about the stories and family ties that go with it.

Care to share your future plans – a cookbook, a cooking show – what's in the pipeline?

I am very heartened at the growth that *Spice Spoon* has witnessed over the last few years. To see a personal endeavour grow in this manner has been very humbling indeed. Constant evolution is part and parcel of the creative process and *The Spice Spoon* brand is now ready to develop into new media avenues, with new areas to explore. While there is no specific announcement today, I can assure you that *Spice Spoon* has just gotten started!



INTERVIEW: AMNA R. ALI
PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY SHAYMA OWAISE SAADAT