

# A Spoon Full of Flavour

A POPULAR FOOD WRITER'S INSPIRATION AND JOURNEY INTO THE CULINARY WORLD...ALSO, HER FAVOURITE RAMADAN RECIPE!

WORDS: SONYA REHMAN; PICTURES: SHAYMA SAADAT AND SUPPLIED



**F**ood writer, stylist and photographer, Shayma Saadat is no stranger to the culinary world – especially in this neck of the woods.

Her popular website, the Spice Spoon – where Shayma presents (rather beautifully) scrumptious recipes woven together with a personal narrative, complemented by her gorgeous photography (of the dishes) – has garnered a loyal fan-following online.

This year, Shayma speaks with us about her work, and more importantly, her grandmother; an incredible woman who inspired Shayma's passion for cooking and story-telling.

**Please tell us a little about yourself...**

Born in Lahore, Pakistan, I am a Pakistani-Afghan with Persian lineage who grew up all over the world as an expat-child. I came to Toronto, Canada via Rome, Italy, where I used to work for the United Nations. I live in Toronto with my husband and son. In addition to my culinary-related profession, I am a Senior Policy Advisor to the government in Canada.

**What inspired you to become a food writer?**

I had just moved to Canada from Italy and on one snowy morning, in a fit of homesickness, I made my mother's cardamom-fragrant rice pudding, to remind me of home. It was then that I decided to chronicle both my recipes and the memories they evoked on my website, the Spice Spoon.

**You've become one of the most well-known food writers/bloggers in the region, what was it like initially, when you started out as a food blogger?**

We were a relatively small group of bloggers in the English-speaking world – and we came to know each other well by sharing our personal food stories. The world of food writing/blogging has grown immensely and has become so much more diversified and fascinating.

**What's the best part about being a food writer?**

I love how food allows us to tell stories which are related to traditions, cultures and people. It is the history which makes a dish so much more than what's on the table – that is when food becomes more about the stories and family ties that go with it.

**In your opinion, what's the future of food writing and blogging in the world today?**

Twitter and Instagram helped me immensely in terms of outreach for my brand and for forging relations with



like-minded creatives in my field. The acceptance of diverse culinary backgrounds today allows for the flexibility to create our own paths in the world of writing and blogging.

**What's the best suhoor (or iftar) you've ever had?**

When we lived in Nairobi, Kenya, our cook, Simon Mackenzie, would prepare parathas and omelettes the night before our suhoor. My maternal grandmother had taught him how to make them perfectly flaky and light. Parathas, omelettes and Kenyan tea – it was my favourite suhoor treat.

**Please tell us a little about the dish you present to us for Ramadan, is there a story to it?**

Whenever I prepare Persian food in my home for my family, it is in essence, a homage to my paternal grandmother, Shameem Saadat, whom we lovingly called 'Mader.' Mader means mother in Dari, the national language of Afghanistan. Born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1920, Mader's father had passed away when she was a mere nine years old, leaving her mother with the responsibility of bringing up four daughters. Each piece of heirloom jewellery was sold so that her daughters could be educated. Mader was one of the first women in Pakistan to obtain an M.A. in Economics. In addition to educating her daughters, she made sure they were also taught to cook. As a child, I always remember Mader preparing non-Pakistani dishes in the kitchen with our home cook. As a working woman, she had delegated the preparation of daily fare to the household staff. She would usually prepare some sort of a cake – her favourite was Victoria Sponge – or a quiche – dishes she had learnt to make in the 1960s at the French Cultural Institute in Lahore. It was



Valrhona chocolate - a must-have for those cheat days!

**“I love how food allows us to tell stories which are related to traditions, cultures and people...”**

there that she learnt to make a tarte tatin with the local, small and fragrant golden apples, which was my favourite – she even made a perfect crème anglaise to go with it.

I went to live with Mader in Lahore for a few years, when I was 13 years old. She was the one who taught me how to speak Dari and paraphrased Shakespeare’s Richard II for me. There were nights when I had to stay up late, studying for my exams, and Mader stayed up with me. After school we would have lunch together, and regardless of what had been made by the cook, Mader would prepare a fruit salad for me, which we enjoyed with dollops of clotted cream. Mader was one of the women in my life who inspired me to cook and to love the kitchen. I also learnt from her that there was no shame in following recipes – after all, she had learnt to make American-style pies from the Chef at the U.S. Consul General’s. She was a perfectionist and followed recipes to a tee.

Growing up, I had heard stories of Mader’s Persian ancestry, but before I could ask her about it, Mader was long gone. I was only 16 when she passed away. My father tells me that Mader’s grandfather, Syed Nadir Ali Shah, was a Sufi Saint from Iran. He came from a province in the northeast called Khorasan, the land of saffron and zereshk – barberries. As a young adult, Syed Nadir Ali Shah, migrated from his abode in Iran to present-day Pakistan to spread the Sufi word. Whilst there, he came across a beautiful girl with hazel eyes and married her soon thereafter. This woman was Mader’s grandmother. He made a home for himself in Lahore and was never to return to Sabzevar, the city of his birth.

It is this part of my ancestral history which has inspired me to bring the Persian culinary tradition into my home. I would love to have prepared a Tah-Chin for Mader – made with the golden, musky aromas of saffron and crowned with zereshk – two edible gems from Mader’s ancestral province, Khorasan. When I make Tah-Chin, I can imagine Mader standing next to



Persian saffron - Shayma's favourite ingredient

me – writing down the recipe in her leather-bound notebook, making notes along the way, and then placing the notebook under the lamp on her writing table before going to bed.

Enjoy the Tah-Chin with rosewater-fragranced cucumber yoghurt sauce, known as Mast-o-Khiar.

**What’s your favourite dessert (and why)?**

A dainty slice of toasted sourdough bread crowned with a block of melted dark chocolate, a drizzle of olive oil and a scattering of sea salt crystals. It reminds me of a lovely dinner I had with my friend, Gabi, in Barcelona.

**What’s your one, favourite ingredient that’s hard to do without?**

Persian saffron. I find all sorts of ways to sneak it into my dishes. I use it in my pound cake too.

**Any tips, tricks or advice for aspiring chefs, food writers and bloggers out there?**

Always have butter, olive oil and ghee on hand. Use a cast iron pan – you’ll come to love it. Use your own, unique voice in the large world of culinary writing. Keep a bar of Valrhona chocolate in your bedside drawer. One square every now and then never hurt anyone.



Complement your meal with fancy cutlery and an exquisite table setting

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A perfect feast for Ramadan

## Tah-Chin

Persian Rice Timbale with Savoury Saffron and Chicken

Tah-Chin is a perfect dish to serve for special occasions, as you can have all of the components ready well in advance.

### Ingredients

#### Chicken

1/2 cup Full-fat plain yogurt  
1/2 medium Onion, finely diced  
1/4 tsp Ground turmeric  
1 tsp Ground saffron mixed with 1 1/2 tsp hot water, or crumbled saffron threads steeped in 1 1/2 tsp hot water for 10 minutes (see note)  
1/2 tsp Kosher salt  
1/4 tsp Freshly ground black pepper  
1 pound Boneless chicken, cut into 1 1/2-inch pieces

#### Rice

2 cups Basmati rice  
2 tsp Kosher salt

#### Tah-dig

1 cup Full-fat plain yogurt  
2 Eggs  
1 Egg yolk  
1 tsp Ground saffron mixed with 1 1/2 tsp hot water, or crumbled saffron threads steeped in 1 1/2 tsp hot water for 10 minutes (see note)  
1 tsp Kosher salt  
1/4 tsp Freshly ground black pepper  
1/2 cup Dried zereshk (barberries)\* or dried cranberries  
1/4 cup Sliced unsalted pistachio nuts

**Note:** I prefer to grind my saffron threads in a mortar and pestle, or to use purchased ground saffron, available in Persian and Pakistani specialty stores.

\*Available in Persian specialty stores.

### Method

◆ Marinate the chicken (up to 24 hours in advance): in a medium bowl, add the yogurt, onion, turmeric, saffron tea, salt and pepper; stir well to combine. Stir in the chicken. Cover and refrigerate for at least two hours, but preferably overnight.

◆ Prepare the rice (up to two days in advance): wash and drain the rice four to six times in cold water until the water is no longer cloudy. Soak the rice in four cups of water for at least one hour or up to 12 hours.

◆ In a medium saucepan, bring six cups of water to a boil. Stir in the rice and salt and cook, uncovered, for 13 to 15 minutes. To test for doneness, remove a grain of rice. If it breaks easily between your forefinger and thumb, it is done (be sure not to overcook). Drain the rice into a sieve, shaking out excess water (do not rinse).

◆ Place the rice back into the saucepan. Place a folded tea towel or paper towel on top of the pan (to prevent steam from escaping) and cover the pan with the lid. Place the pan over low heat. Turn off the heat after 5 minutes (the rice will continue to cook in its own steam). Allow the rice to rest for 15 minutes. Using a serving

spoon or teacup saucer, gently transfer the rice to a container. Set the rice aside (covered, in the refrigerator, if not using immediately).

◆ Poach the chicken: in a medium pot, add 1/2-cup of water. Bring the water to a boil and add the chicken pieces and marinade. Bring the liquid up to a low boil. Reduce the heat, cover the pot, and simmer the chicken until it is tender and no longer pink inside; about 10 minutes (almost all of the water will have evaporated). Set the chicken aside.

◆ Prepare the Tah-Dig (Tah-Dig is the delicious crispy crust that forms at the bottom of this dish): in a medium bowl, whisk together the yogurt, eggs, egg yolk, saffron tea, salt and pepper. Gently stir in 1 1/2 cups of the cooked rice.

◆ Assemble the Tah-Chin: Preheat the oven to 350° F. Butter a round 2-quart ovenproof dish (preferably see-through) with a lid. Transfer the rice and yogurt mixture into the baking dish. Using your hands, gently form a layer along the bottom and as far up the sides of the baking dish as possible. Layer one-half of the cooked chicken in the dish. Layer one-half of the remaining cooked rice on top of the chicken. Repeat with the remaining chicken and rice. Press down the top layer of rice with your hands.

◆ Butter a sheet of aluminum foil. Tightly wrap the foil, buttered side down, around the top of the baking dish. Place the lid on top. Bake for 2 hours. You will see the Tah-Dig forming and turning a dark golden colour.

◆ Prepare the zereshk: if using barberries, clean them by removing any visible stems and place them (or dried cranberries, if using) in a bowl of cold water for 15 minutes. During this time, any sand that may have been present will sink to the bottom. Gently remove the zereshk with your hands and drain well on paper towels.

◆ In a small saucepan over medium-high heat, add 1 tablespoon of butter. When it begins to foam, add zereshk and stir for one minute. Transfer the zereshk to a small bowl; set aside.

◆ Assemble the Tah-Chin: after the baking dish is removed from the oven, allow it to rest, covered, for 5 minutes. Then place it in a large roasting pan and add enough cold water in the roasting pan to come about 1 inch up the outer sides of the baking dish. (This will help loosen the Tah-Dig from the bottom of the dish.)

◆ After 5 minutes, wearing your oven mitts, invert the Tah-Chin onto the centre of a serving dish. (If you find that it sticks when you try to invert it, don't worry; just put it back in the roasting pan and let it rest in the water a bit longer.) Garnish with the zereshk and slivered pistachios. Serve with Mast-o-Khiar (recipe follows on the opposite page).

Delicious Mast-o-Khiar to complement the Tah-Chin



## Mast-o-Khiar

Irani-style yogurt and cucumber dip

### Ingredients

3 cups Full-fat yogurt (Greek-style or Balkan-style)  
2 Pickling cucumbers or 1 English cucumber, peeled, halved, seeded, and grated  
1/2 cup Chopped walnuts  
1 tbsp Dried mint, plus extra for garnish  
1 tsp Rosewater  
1/4 tsp Kosher salt, plus more if needed  
Dried rose petals\*, optional  
Extra virgin olive oil

\*Available in Persian and Middle Eastern grocery stores

### Method

◆ In a medium bowl, add yogurt, cucumber, walnuts, mint, rosewater and salt. Stir well to combine.

◆ Transfer the mixture to a serving dish. Lightly sprinkle with dried mint and dried rose petals (if using).

◆ Drizzle with your best extra virgin olive oil.

**Note:** When preparing this recipe in advance, do not add the cucumber to the yogurt. Keep the grated cucumber and the yogurt mixture in separate containers, covered, in the refrigerator. Drain the cucumber in a sieve prior to stirring the solids into the yogurt mixture.