



G a s t r o n o m y

SHAYMA

OWAISE

SAADAT

SHAYMA SAADAT, AN INTERNATIONALLY PUBLISHED FOOD WRITER, STYLIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER, FOCUSES ON DELECTABLE DISHES FROM HER HERITAGE COUNTRIES OF AFGHANISTAN, IRAN AND PAKISTAN, WHICH SHE REFERS TO AS SILK ROUTE CUISINE. BORN IN LAHORE, PAKISTAN, THIS WORLD BANK-BABY GREW UP IN THE USA, NIGERIA, KENYA, BANGLADESH AND THE UK. SIX YEARS AGO, TRUE TO HER NOMADIC STYLE, SHAYMA MOVED FROM ROME, WHERE SHE WORKED FOR THE UNITED NATIONS, TO TORONTO. SHAYMA IS THE AUTHOR OF THE FOOD-MEMOIR STYLE BLOG, *THE SPICE SPOON*. IN JULY 2011, *THE SPICE SPOON* WAS SELECTED BY *THE INDEPENDENT* NEWSPAPER AS ONE OF THE WORLD'S 50 BEST FOOD WEBSITES. HER WORK HAS APPEARED IN AND BEEN RECOGNISED BY *THE GLOBE AND MAIL*, *CBC*, *BBC GOOD FOOD MAGAZINE*, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, *HELLO! MAGAZINE*, *OK! MAGAZINE*, *EDIBLE TORONTO*, *THE KITCHN* AND *FOOD52*, AMONG OTHERS. SHAYMA SPOKE TO AFSHAN SHAFI IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW ABOUT ALL THE ASPECTS OF HER FOOD JOURNEY



WHY DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN FOOD?

Creativity and cooking is a part of my identity. It formally started in 2009, when I moved to Canada after living and working at the United Nations in Rome, Italy for several years. During my early days in Toronto, I felt a strong sense of social isolation. It was during this time that I found inspiration in the kitchen by recreating the smells and tastes, which reminded me of my childhood. The women in my family have always cooked intuitively; passing on their recipes through oral tradition. I had learnt to cook from them in the same way. Inspired by my mother and my father's side of the family – who is Afghan with a hint of Irani – I began photographing my food and writing vignettes from my childhood related to these dishes. Eventually, this turned into a food memoir-style blog.

WHAT OR WHO IS YOUR INSPIRATION?

I am a Lahori, and the deep traditions and history of food from our part of the world informs my writing and my cooking style. My inspiration also stems from my multi-ethnic heritage, (Pakistani, Afghan and Persian); my peripatetic life – having grown up as a World Bank expat-kid (the United States, Nigeria, Kenya, the United Kingdom, Bangladesh and Italy); and my life in Toronto, today. I want to respect the culinary traditions which are a part of my heritage; but I also want my food to be a reflection of my life, here, today, in

Toronto. A dessert I really enjoy making in the summer is kheer; rice pudding, served with ghee-roasted Ontario peaches and a scattering of wild blueberries.

WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY IN CONNECTION WITH FOOD?

Some of my earliest memories of food are tied to my paternal grandmother, whom we affectionately called Mader (mother, in Farsi). On a beautiful Spring afternoon in Lahore, Mader, my cousin Saadiya, and I would sneak



into the kitchen while the rest of the family was enjoying a siesta. The three of us loved making Victoria Sponge Cake – together, we would sift the flour, beat the egg whites till they were cloud-like, and then once the cake layers had cooled down, we would spread

Mader's thick, cinnamon-scented homemade apricot jam between the layers. We would enjoy having slices of the cake in the garden of our Gulberg home during tea time, with the rest of the family, in the late afternoon.

WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY ABOUT FOOD AND COOKING?

I am always interested in the narrative surrounding

food. To me, food is so much more than just the dish in front of you – it is about the customs associated with it and the stories and family ties that go with it. I love it when you eat something and a memory of a moment is embedded in that dish – and I want that to come through in my cooking; I want my guests, gathered around my table, to be able to taste this feeling.

WHO HAS INFLUENCED YOUR COOKING STYLE THE MOST?

When I first started documenting my family's recipes with the help of my mother, I did it with great exactitude, as an homage to the dishes I ate growing up. But as the years went by, I wanted more and more for the dishes to reflect my life as a former expat-child, from Lahore, who now calls Toronto home, too. I admire the oeuvre of chefs like Greg Malouf and Massimo Bottura – who respect the culinary traditions of the countries they hail from and concomitantly continue to push the boundaries and create modern dishes which are a throwback to the food they ate growing up. It is the influence of chefs like them, coupled with the culinary knowledge I have gained from my mother, which informs my cookery style every day.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR DREAM DESTINATION REGARDING FOOD?

I would love to go with my husband to Alba, Italy, in late-Autumn, during the White Truffle Festival.

WHERE DO YOU LIKE TO EAT WHEN YOU GO OUT?

This summer, my husband and I have really enjoyed going to this casual little place called The Slip, on the Harbourfront. It's a lovely open-air space on Lake Ontario where you can sit, chat and enjoy a cooling drink at the end of the day with a few small plates like tacos or fried chicken with kimchi. It's more about the atmosphere than the food. A few hours spent there, and time stands still for us, as we savour the Toronto summer.

When in Lahore, I love going to

Dynasty with my Uncle, Mamoon – I really miss Pakistani-style Chinese food here in Toronto, and the Szechuan soup at the Avari is to-die-for.

WHAT INGREDIENTS WOULD YOU BRING ON A DESERT ISLAND WITH YOU? YOU CAN ONLY PICK FIVE!

I'd bring ingredients to make the ultimate comfort food – dal chawal – a dish which reminds me of my home in Lahore. I would bring masoor dal, basmati rice, salt and red chilli pepper. And one always needs to round the meal off with something sweet, so I'd smuggle in a bar of Valrhona chocolate.

IF SOMEONE INVITES YOU TO THEIR HOME FOR DINNER WHAT SHOULD THEY COOK?

I'd be honoured to be invited for a home-cooked meal and would eat whatever the host/hostess prepares, with pleasure. Recently, my friend, here in Toronto, grilled chicken and red bell peppers on the barbeque in her garden – she served it with arugula, crumbled goat's cheese, avocado and her special lemon and Dijon mustard vinaigrette. We dined in the garden, al fresco, with the family, enjoying the meal with warm bread. It's real food, made with love – and that's the best meal one can have.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE SPICE SPOON?

Because of my life long association with food from my origins, I have been able to start another career, which allows me to show Pakistan in a positive light, despite the sad stories we read about in the media. I have a lot of interesting projects in the pipeline – there will be more speaking engagements, newspaper and magazine commissions, pop-up events at restaurants and a few workshops on Afghan cuisine. I'll also be teaching workshops in the United States and Europe within the year – I'll post the information on my website and via my Instagram account. Do follow me there. 🍴

RAPID FIRE

YOUR BEST SAVOURY DISH

Lobster Biryani

YOUR BEST DESSERT

A very simple Chocolate Fudge Ring Cake

FAVOURITE DISH (NOT COOKED BY YOU)

My late maternal grandmother's Mutton Yakhni Palao, eaten with dollops of her homemade yoghurt. It was soul food

FAVOURITE INGREDIENT TO COOK WITH

Persian saffron or Pakistani pink salt

ONE CUISINE YOU CAN LIVE ON

Chatpatay desi treats – Papri Chaat, Pakoray, Gol Guppay, Samosa Chaat – I'm a true Lahori at heart!

ONE RECIPE YOU WANT TO PASS ON

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 anymore, and remember that it is something his mother used to make for him to honour the memory of his great-grandmother.

Shayma lives in Toronto with her husband and son. You can follow Shayma's culinary journey on Instagram @SpiceSpoon or Twitter @SpiceSpoon



Risalamande with strawberry coulis — *a Danish Christmas treat*

This rice pudding (known as kheer), made with basmati rice, should not be a mushy dish; each rice grain should be visible and remain intact. If you feel the rice is undercooked and the milk is being absorbed too quickly, just use some of the warm milk being heated in a saucepan on the side and add in small quantities to loosen the pudding. I have added only ½ cup of sugar because the coulis adds sweetness; however, if you have a sweet tooth, feel free to add up to a whole cup of sugar.

Makes 4 to 6 servings

KHEER

6 whole green cardamom pods
4 1/2 cups whole milk
3/4 cup basmati rice
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1/2 cup slivered almonds
1/2 cup sliced almonds, for garnish
freshly ground black pepper

STRAWBERRY COULIS

2 tbsp water
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1 pound strawberries, hulled and chopped into ½-inch pieces

MAKE THE KHEER: Wrap the cardamom pods in a newspaper and crush with a rolling pin. The seeds should not be crushed to a dust. The result should look somewhat like freshly cracked pepper. Discard the green skin of the pods.

In a small saucepan, heat 1½ cups of the milk over medium-low heat; do not bring to a boil, but keep warm while you prepare the kheer. In a large heavy-bottomed pan, add the remaining 3 cups of milk, the rice, crushed cardamom seeds, sugar and slivered almonds. Turn the heat to high. As soon as the milk starts to steam, turn the heat to low and cover with a lid.

Every 7 to 10 minutes, remove the lid and stir gently, from the bottom up, to ensure that the rice



is not sticking to the base of the pan. After about 40 minutes, the milk should be thickened but not entirely absorbed. The pudding should have a soft, velvety consistency and not look congealed.

Taste the rice. If it seems undercooked, add some of the reserved warm milk, replace the lid and continue to cook for 7 to 10 minutes. When done, the basmati rice grains should be intact. Transfer the kheer to a container and allow it to come to room temperature before covering and refrigerating at least 5 hours, but preferably overnight, to set.

Make the coulis: In a medium saucepan over medium heat, add the rhubarb, cinnamon stick, water and sugar. Stir well. Allow the mixture to bubble away until the rhubarb looks soft and has melted down into a sauce, about 20 minutes. Add the strawberries. Continue to cook until the strawberries have softened and melted into the sauce, about 10 to 15 minutes. Turn off the heat, discard the cinnamon stick, and allow the coulis to come to room temperature. The coulis can be prepared in advance, kept refrigerated, and brought to room temperature or warmed up prior to serving with the kheer.

TO SERVE: Ladle chilled kheer into individual bowls and drizzle with coulis. Top with a sprinkling of sliced almonds and a dusting of fresh black pepper. 🍷

