

Amuse Bouche

From Kraft Mac and Cheese to Yasmeen's Biryani

By: Farha Ternikar

I didn't learn how to cook until graduate school; I had successfully resisted being a good Indian daughter. Growing up, I had no interest in cooking or chores, until it was a necessity when I was in Chicago on a very modest stipend in 1999. A typical student, I survived on Kraft Mac and Cheese and a lot of frozen and fast food.

Like many Desi (South Asian American) immigrants who have the pleasure of living in Chicago, I soon discovered Devon Avenue in North Chicago or "little India," home to more than a few dozen Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi restaurants, cafes and grocery stores. My first few trips to what we simple dubbed "Devon" were with my sister who was living in Naperville, and we feasted on nihari (a north Indian/Pakistani beef stew), paratha (a flaky and layered bread usually made on a tawa, an iron skillet), chicken biryani (a layered rice dish), and chana masala (a chickpea curry). It was during these trips to Devon that I started to miss my mother's cooking. Eating at Sabri Nihari (which was our favorite restaurant at Devon) was great, but it wasn't like eating at home

And what was most surprising to me as an American-raised immigrant was not how my love of food and cooking grew in Chicago, but how my love of biryani and Indian cooking grew.

Eventually I got married in Chicago, and then we'd get takeout on weeknights when neither of us had time to cook. This is also when the long phone calls to my mother began because the longer I lived in Chicago, the more I missed homemade food. I asked her what Shaan Masala packets to use to make basic chicken curries or what spices I should have in my cabinet.

My mother Yasmeen's biryani was famous amongst my childhood friends in Florida but also my other Desi Muslim friends from college and graduate school. Hena was my closest friends when I lived in Maryland right before I started graduate school. Both our parents were Muslim, but unlike my parents who are from India, Hena's family is originally from Pakistan. These distinctions amongst South Asian immigrants are important because of how food often brings American Indians and Pakistanis together, but also because of how "halal" food or meat eating is a distinct shared practice among Muslim immigrants. Meat biryani, chicken or beef or lamb, is something that I thought every Desi mother cooked.

I also assumed everyone's mother's biryani was as good as mine. Though Yasmeen would often vary the recipe, it was always a time-consuming endeavor that required at least two ingredients—aged basmati rice and halal chicken. But Hena was raving about my mother's biryani because, although my mother is Muslim Indian, and her own family is Pakistani, she said, "your mother's biryani is much better than mine or my mother in law's." At that time, I was certain that my mother's biryani was based on a secret family recipe and that she had

tracked down all the “authentic” spices in the 1980s in Florida that her own mother-in-law had taught her to use in cooking biryani from scratch.

It was only years later that I realized that my mother’s biryani is not always from scratch. She often uses whatever spices she has around, sometimes she switches up the recipe, and sometimes she too uses Shaan Masala. Like Meredith Abarca’s term “*chiste*,” my mother created her own twist on all of her traditional recipes¹. Maybe my mother’s recipes were never authentic in the way food scholars or “foodies” trace Indian recipes back to the regions of Gujarat, Hyderabad or Punjab in India, but it tasted authentic and original to my sisters and immigrant friends. Yasmeen’s story of learning how to cook was in many ways less straightforward than my own. When she left India in 1969 to marry my father and move to London, she would learn how to practice cooking among other new Indian British couples with very few resources or access to Indian grocers. They often used parsley instead of cilantro, or made vegetarian biryani if they couldn’t afford chicken.

Growing up in Tampa, we couldn’t get biryani in restaurants or find recipes easily in cookbooks. Our mothers were the keepers of these Indian immigrant recipes. My mother’s recipes in particular were taught to her from her mother-in-law who was South Indian, her sisters who were North Indian, and also from her own experimentation because she was orphaned at a young age.

As an adult in the 1990s, I began to appreciate my mother’s cooking because I realized it was “good” Indian food. I couldn’t necessarily describe what that meant but it tasted better than my Indian or Pakistani friend’s mom’s food. And I didn’t care if it was made from scratch, organic or local. What I did come to realize is that my mother’s food was not only good food, but when I finally moved away from home, biryani became my comfort food. As much as I might still crave Kraft mac and cheese, I now crave Yasmeen’s biryani. And during the pandemic in particular, this is a recipe I came back to repeatedly.

Yasmeen’s biryani

3 cups of basmati rice
2 lbs. of *halal* chicken
3 tablespoons of garlic paste
2 tablespoons of ginger paste
1 tablespoon of garam masala
2 cinnamon sticks or 2 teaspoons of cinnamon powder
2 teaspoons of ground cardamom
6 black cloves
5 tablespoons of olive oil
2 large yellow or white onions
2 teaspoons of salt
Cilantro and lemon wedges for garnish

Cooking biryani is a 3-step process. The chicken is marinated the night before in the spices. There are two different methods of cooking rice. Half cooking the rice then layer the

chicken and bake it in the oven or cook the rice and chicken fully then layering the two dishes. Biryani is known as a special dish because it is known for the layering of chicken with the rice which makes it distinct from pulao rice dishes. My family always serves biryani with raita, a yogurt-based dish with cucumbers, onions, tomatoes and cilantro.

My mother Yasmeen uses halal chicken. Before the 1990s when halal chicken was easily available, she cooked with kosher chicken. I often make this recipe with whatever local or natural chicken is available. She also switched from cooking with ghee to vegetable oil to olive oil over the past 3 decades. Lastly, she and my sister both garnish their biryanis with lemon wedges in the final step of preparation.

Afterward December 2024

I wasn't sure when I would return to working on this project. My mother survived a stroke this past March 2024 at the age of 73. When I got the call from my sister, I was in Pittsburgh on sabbatical, so I had to abruptly pack up in 24 hours, and I chose to spend the rest of Spring 2024 semester in Tampa caring for my mother.

My mother was released from the hospital after two weeks, I slept in the hospital at her side for those weeks. When she did come home, she was originally on a special diet. After a few weeks, she craved her own food, but she couldn't cook because she had permanent eye damage, and her recovery was slow. So, I was the one who slowly became the home cook.

During Ammi's recovery, her friends were dropping off trays of keema, kebobs, biryanis, haleem, nihari, dal and much more. But what I was starting to seriously crave were vegetables in any form. So that's where my cooking for Ammi started. I began to cook with whatever vegetables that were in the house, sometimes frozen or canned, seldom fresh or local or organic. I started by making a really basic aloo matter (potato pea curry). She seemed to approve, then I made green beans, aloo gobbi (potato with cauliflower), and eventually cumin carrots which is something she would never usually eat, and she loved it.

And then I finally overheard the conversation on the phone with her and my sister, Saba, when she said, "Don't worry Farha is really taking care of me she doesn't leave my side, and she cooks as good me too. I'm even eating sabzi....". Maybe I was never the ideal Desi marriageable girl, but through feeding Ammi, I become the ideal Desi daughter.

*This Amuse Bouche is part of a larger book manuscript, *Food and Faith Networks: Muslim American Women and Culinary Placemaking* (under contract).



Image 1: Biryani, photo by the author

¹ Abarca, M.E. (2023) *Charlas Culinarias (Culinary Chats): A Methodology and Pedagogy Expanding a Food Consciousness*. Food Culture & Society. 1-13.