

Around the Table

By Terese Allen

Huma Siddiqui: Steeped in Tradition

By day, Huma Siddiqui is director of finance and administration for a nonprofit organization in Madison. By night — and by weekend — she is a culinary instructor with a passion for all things Pakistani.

Siddiqui's recently published cookbook, "Jasmine in Her Hair," contains traditional Pakistani recipes, cultural tales and food photographs. Her cooking classes, as well as her web-based business, White Jasmine, feature gourmet spices and teas from her homeland. She even has developed Wisconsin's first Pakistani cooking series, a program called "Curry and Coriander" which is airing through August on WYOU's cable channel.

This graceful, energetic woman, who has lived on four continents, believes that tradition is vitally important in life. "It helps people recognize who they are ... no matter where in the world you live." So she has created a life that preserves — and shares — her culture's most delicious traditions.

TERESE ALLEN: You grew up in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. Tell us about your early years.

HUMA SIDDIQUI: I was the only girl, the youngest child in a big family. There was something happening all the time — weddings, new babies, graduations ... My father raised me with a lot of pride and encouraged me to speak my mind. My mother was more traditional and was always worried about teaching me to be a good cook and graceful hostess. I feel fortunate that both of my parents cared enough to look out for me in their own ways. My first school was an English convent — it was fun! I finished high school and had just started college when my family arranged my marriage.

TA: When and why were you first drawn to cooking?

HS: Once I was married and left Pakistan, I started cooking traditional foods because it was like creating a home away from home. I have lived on four different continents and it has been a great adventure. Food was the only thing that I could really count on to be the same, no matter where we decided to



Karahi Chicken with Spiced Tomatoes, Green Peppers and Onions

From "Jasmine in Her Hair" by Huma Siddiqui.

2 tablespoons cooking oil, divided
2 whole cloves
1 large (black) cardamom pod
1 small (green) cardamom pod
1 inch-long piece of cinnamon stick
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken, cubed
1 tablespoon each minced garlic and ginger
1 large onion, chopped
1 large green pepper, chopped
3-4 medium tomatoes, chopped
1/2 teaspoon each chili powder, garam masala and salt
1/4 teaspoon turmeric
1/2 cup chopped cilantro
Hot, cooked basmati rice

- Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large, deep skillet over medium-high flame. Add cloves, cardamom pods and cinnamon stick and let them sizzle in the hot oil a moment or two.
- Add chicken, garlic and ginger; cook, stirring often, until chicken is no longer pink, about five minutes. Transfer chicken to a bowl.
- Heat another tablespoon of oil in the skillet; add onions and fry them until barely tender. Add green peppers and tomatoes. Fry the mixture for about five minutes, then stir in chili powder, garam masala, salt and turmeric.
- Return chicken mixture to the pan and gently mix everything. Sprinkle cilantro and cover the pan to simmer for about 10 minutes. The sauce will thicken. Serve with basmati rice. Makes four to six servings.

live. I think food became the anchor for all of us.

TA: Who's the best cooking teacher you've ever had?

HS: The best teacher was papa, who was the cook with our family. My mother trusted him to teach me the traditional dishes. He was very patient and affectionate to me and even though I messed up at times he encouraged me to take a stab at new things. I miss him a lot because I think he will just be so tickled to see me write the book and teach cooking classes.

TA: Tell us something about Pakistani cuisine; some aspect of it that's particularly important.

HS: Hospitality and generosity are a big part of Pakistani culture. Guests are considered to bring good luck and joy to the home. Sharing and entertaining at home is a big factor of day-to-day life. For example, tea is always served with snacks like samosas, pakoras and sweets. It is considered very bad manners to serve just tea on its own. Meal times are for the family to gather and share stories. Food is a big part of the culture.

TA: Was writing “Jasmine in Her Hair” your way of sharing that culture?

HS: I always wanted to write a book to share the beautiful and warm culture of Pakistan. The book is a tribute to my mother. She was a remarkable woman and I learned not only cooking and how to play hostess but also many other things like perseverance, patience, duty toward the family and the spirit of keeping family traditions alive.

TA: What are some special traditions or dishes from the book?

HS: My daughter Sabah’s favorite dessert, sooji halwa, and my son Samir’s favorite dish, shami kebab, which is a spicy beef patty, are included. I can ask for anything from my children if I cook these dishes! Also, there are samosas — very traditional appetizers served at almost every celebration. My friends call me the “Samosa Queen.” I enjoy the title very much.

TA: How do the “Samosa Queen’s” best friends describe her?

HS: Stubborn, strong headed, black-and-white — which means there is not much

gray area in my life. Things are what they are. Passionate, caring, hardworking, “energizer bunny,” fun. Someone who dreams but also turns dreams into reality.

TA: What has been a particularly tough challenge in your life?

HS: Moving to U.S. with two young kids, a few hundred dollars, no job or degree was quite tough. I had to start from scratch but such is life! We had to leave everything behind in England — I lived in London for about 11 years before moving to Wisconsin. Things worked out and almost nine years later so much is happening. My kids are doing well. I am happy!

TA: Is there anything about you that surprises people?

HS: I like to mention that I am a CPA because there are many stereotypes about the boring accountants. Sometimes it is hard for people to believe that I am an accountant and deal with numbers all day, then can go and teach the cooking classes or write a book.

TA: What do you love most about your life?

HS: I like being a mother; that has been the most fun job — very challenging at times, too. I like living in America, the freedom and the opportunities. Following and living my dreams has given me an incredible sense of empowerment and joy.

TA: It’s empowering for others, too. Do you see your culinary work as making the world a better place, food-wise or otherwise?

HS: I think offering a glimpse of Pakistani culture, traditions and food helps. Knowledge of other cultures and ways of life certainly breaks down barriers and makes it easier for people to relate to each other. What better way to relate than with food? ☀

Siddiqui will be sharing samples of Pakistani dishes at the Food for Thought Festival in Madison on September 18. For information about her appearances, classes, cookbook, cooking show or business, visit www.whitejasmine.com.