

S

ragrant and flavourful

The culture of Pakistan is deeply embedded in its cuisine. Not only does it represent wonderful food but a deep connection to a warm, hospitable and colourful culture. *By Huma Siddiqui*

As diverse as its people, Pakistani cuisine is a heady blend of Afghan, Iranian, Arabic and Indian flavours which have evolved into their own unique and exotic fare. From the tandoor ovens and elaborate preparations of the Punjab Moghali, to the Sajji method of barbecuing whole lambs and baking bread in deep pits, a trip across the various regions of Pakistan is nothing short of a culinary adventure.

Take for instance Bunda Pala, a well known delicacy of Sindh: it consists of fish cleaned and stuffed with a paste made from a variety of spices and herbs, including red pepper, garlic, ginger, and dried pomegranate seeds, which is then wrapped in cloth and buried three feet deep in hot sand under the sun. There, it stays baking for four to five hours from late morning to early afternoon before being uncovered and enjoyed.

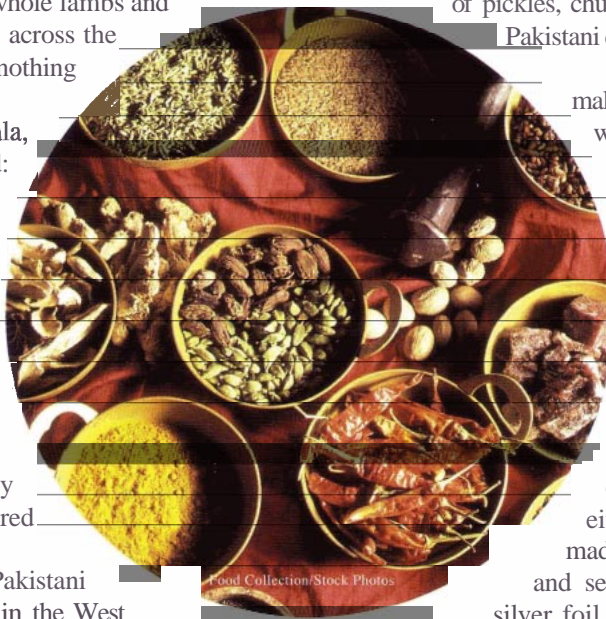
The terms **curry** and **masala** in Pakistani food are interchangeable. While in the West curries are usually based on a blend of spices in powdered, traditional Pakistani curry is made from a thick yoghurt or tomato-based sauce. The key for all curries is in the spices: cumin for vegetable dishes, and **garam masala** (a powder-based mix made from cardamoms, cumin, cloves, cinnamon and coriander) for meat dishes.

It would be hard to understate the importance of spices in Pakistani cooking, or their variety and abundance: garlic, ginger, chili powder, turmeric, paprika, black pepper, red pepper, bay leaves, saffron, mace, nutmeg, poppy seeds, aniseed, almonds, pistachios, and yoghurt. A wide range of pickles, chutneys, preserves, and sauces, give Pakistani cooking its distinctive character.

Wheat, a main staple, is used to make a variety of breads—from **naan**, which is cooked in clay oven, to deep fried **pooris**, while fragrant **basmati** rice is used in popular dishes such as **matar pulao** (see recipe in following page)—cooked with authentic whole spices and green peas—or plain with a hint of cumin.

Ceremonial occasions such as weddings offer an opportunity to prepare special dishes such as chicken curry with either pilau or biryani rice. **Firini**, made from cream of rice and milk and served in clay saucers topped by silver foil, is a favourite wedding dessert.

At Zoroastrian (**Parsi**) weddings, which are not frequent because so few followers of this ancient Iranian religion live in Pakistan, a special fish dish is served: **Patrani Machachi**, consisting of sole, plaice, or a local fish called **pomfret**, wrapped in banana leaves, steamed or fried, and then baked slowly for half an hour.



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A wonderful selection of desserts complete the menu. These are decorated with almonds, pistachios and silver paper before being offered to guests. **Barfi**, one of the country's most popular sweets, is prepared from dried milk solids mixed with dried nuts and comes in several different flavors. It is traditional to buy a few pounds of sweets when visiting friends and family on special occasions. These are sometimes gift packaged in small colourful baskets or boxes depending on the size of the gift. At weddings several baskets weighing forty to hundred pounds of sweets and dried nuts are exchanged between the bridal parties.

For a sample of local staples head for the food markets, where **samosas** and **pakorras** and meat **tikkas**—spicy marinated meat grilled on skewers—will introduce you to the heady world of exotic and spicy Pakistani dining.

Karahi Chicken (Boneless chicken cooked with spices, onions, green peppers and tomatoes)

1 pound boneless/skinless chicken cubed - 1 green pepper, chopped - 1 large onion, chopped - 3 medium size tomatoes, chopped - 2 tablespoon cooking oil - 1 tablespoon garlic paste - 1 tablespoon ginger paste - 2 cloves - 1 large cardamom - 1 small cardamom - 1 inch long cinnamon stick - teaspoon chill powder - teaspoon **garam** masala - teaspoon turmeric - teaspoon salt - Coriander.

Heat one tablespoon of oil in a deep pan, add cloves, cardamoms and cinnamon stick, let them sizzle. Add chicken, garlic and ginger paste, **fry** for about five minutes until the chicken is no longer pink. Empty **all** the

ingredients into a plate/bowl.

Add another tablespoon of oil and add chopped onions, chopped green peppers and tomatoes. Fry the mixture for about five minutes or so, then add the chili powder, **garam** masala, turmeric, and salt. Mix all the spices in the onion mixture. Add the chicken to the pan and gently **mix** everything together with a slotted spoon. Sprinkle fresh coriander and cover the pan to simmer for about ten minutes. The sauce will thicken and then it is ready to serve with **Matar Pulao**.

Matar Pulao (Rice with Peas)

2 cups uncooked **Basmati** rice - 1 cup frozen peas - 1 tablespoon cooking oil - 2 cloves - 1 large cardamom - 1 small cardamom - 1 bay leaf - salt

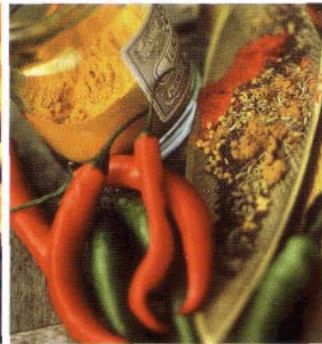
Wash rice thoroughly and leave to soak for 15 minutes. Heat oil in a pan, add the cloves, cardamom, and bay leaf. Let it sizzle for a minute. Add green peas and salt. Add rice and three cups of water. Let it come to a boil and then reduce heat and leave to simmer for 15-20 minutes. Can add a pinch of turmeric for colour. Serve with **Karahi Chicken**.

Cholay (Spicy Chick Peas)

1 pound dried chick peas - 5 cups water - 4 medium fresh tomatoes - 2 tablespoons oil - 1 large onion, sliced - 1 teaspoon whole cumin -



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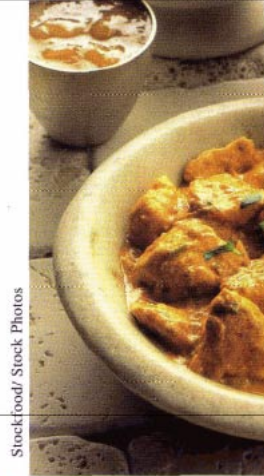
112 teaspoon chilli powder - 114 teaspoon ground cumin - 2 teaspoon chili blend - finely chopped coriander

Soak dried chick peas in a bowl overnight. Next morning, drain the water and wash thoroughly under running water. Then add five cups of water and leave the chickpeas to cook on medium heat for about three hours or the chickpeas are tender but not mushy.

Heat oil in separate saucepan, add cumin seeds. When they start to sizzle, add onions and fry them until they are pink. Add chopped tomatoes and all the spices. Stir the spice mixture for a couple of minutes and then add the chickpeas to it. Mix everything together. Add finely chopped coriander and leave it to simmer for about ten minutes. Empty the chickpeas in a dish and sprinkle some cilantro on top before serving. You can use sliced tomatoes and onions to decorate the dish as well.

Cholay can be served as a snack with tea or part of dinner as a vegetarian dish. Some people like to add plain yoghurt on the side to balance the spices. ■

Huma Siddiqui is author of Jasmine in Her Hair: Culture and Cuisine from Pakistan, and founder and owner of White Jasmine, a web-based mail order company. She is also a cooking school instructor. All the recipes on this page are Huma's and can be found at www.curryandcoriander.com.



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