
TASTES OF PAKISTAN SERVED WITH HOSPITALITY AND LOVE

BY STEVE FIELDS

As a child of the '50s and '60s in Southern California, my exposure to the true cuisines of the world was extremely limited. There were Americanized Italian restaurants. For high-end dining there was something called Continental cuisine (I am still uncertain what that means). We even thought Taco Bell was “exotic.”

Since that time we have learned that real Italian food is not the spaghetti and meatballs we ate as children. Italian cuisine actually consists of many regional subcuisines that focus on native, seasonal ingredients and time-honored preserving and cooking techniques. If you travel from north to south in Italy and focus on traditional food, you will find more diversity than similarity in the food being served.

Most countries around the world enjoy the depth and variety of regional cuisines—France, Mexico, Spain and many others.

One vast area with rich and varied (and often confusing to Americans) eating traditions is South Asia, including the modern countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As in most areas around the world, the cuisine of South Asia features a complex mixture of ingredients that have developed over thousands of years. The resulting food culture in each subregion reflects the availability of native ingredients, the religious and cultural beliefs of the region's inhabitants and the effects of numerous invasions through the centuries.

Luckily for us in Ojai, we have Dodo and Tariq Mufti. They are dedicated to preserving the food culture of Pakistan. Anyone who has the pleasure and honor of sampling any of Dodo's creations will not only have a culinary treat but a history lesson as well.

The tale of how Dodo came to be the keeper of her husband's family's rich culinary history is in many ways a reflection of the huge challenge facing people all over the world with respect to preserving their traditional cuisines.

Tariq's family, which was Muslim, is originally from Northwestern India. Prior to 1947, this area was inhabited by both Muslims and Hindus. With the creation of the independent countries of India and Pakistan, the Mufti family was forced to relocate from their ancestral hometown in India to a metropolis in predominantly Muslim Pakistan. Like so many other displaced families throughout the world following World War II, they had little time left to preserve the elaborate techniques of the kitchen that had been passed down from previous generations.

Tariq's wife, Dodo (a nickname for Naheed), stepped into the breach. Dodo would have seemed like an unlikely candidate to carry on her husband's family's traditions. She admits that when they were married, she didn't even know how



to boil water. But, fortunately for the whole family, she became obsessed with learning her mother-in-law's recipes and techniques.

“Once I started cooking, I developed a great passion for it,” Dodo recalls. “I was also obsessed with getting it right.”

“I spent each weekend watching and learning from my mother-in-law and then I would work the whole week trying to recreate the meals. If it didn't come out just right, I would throw it away. By the end of the week, I would get it to be just passable.”

In three years, she finally had the confidence to invite her mother-in-law for dinner. After five years, she felt her culinary skills were complete.

Even today in Ojai, she uses the barometer of her mother-in-law to determine whether to serve any dish she makes. “I think if it would have been good enough for my mother-in-law, then it is good enough to serve to family and friends.”

When the Muftis moved to Ojai seven years ago, Dodo had amassed a repertoire of well over a hundred recipes including those from Tariq's family as well as variations of more common dishes and street food. In addition, Tariq is constantly testing out new dishes inspired by Turkish, Persian or Central Asian traditions.

Pakistani and Indian cuisine are often lumped together because they have several things in common. Both generally utilize an array of spices, such as cardamom, cloves, turmeric, cumin and coriander. In addition, most meals have dishes based on rice or lentils (called *dal*) and frequently there are flat breads that accompany the meals.

But there are probably as many differences as there are similarities. Most Indians, including Hindus and Sikhs, are vegetarians. As Muslims, Pakistanis are decidedly carnivorous. As a result, most meals have either lamb, goat, beef, chicken or fish as a focal point. (Pork is prohibited by Muslim tradition and as a result is basically not available in Pakistan.) In addition, there are significant differences in both techniques and ingredients in many dishes, even those that may share common or similar names.

In many ways, Pakistani food is one of the world's oldest fusion cuisines. Being at a crossroads for traders and invaders for thousands of years, the food culture has developed with influences from the Indian peninsula, from Persia and the Arab world, from Central Asia, and even from Portugal. Many of the dishes have names derived from or similar to Arabic, Turkish or Persian words.

Like other culinary traditions that have developed over long periods of time, you can almost view the cuisine as a giant stew to which ingredients have been added over time. There were some basic ingredients such as wheat and barley in the plains, short-grained rice grown in the river deltas, lentils, vegetables including gourds, squashes and greens, unleavened breads, and spices. Each wave of influence added new wrinkles such as leavened breads, long-grained rice and new cooking techniques from the mountainous regions of Iran and Central Asia, and New World products like chili peppers and tomatoes.

There are many traditions of what food to eat when. Some of these are based on seasonal availability and some are modern. For example, certain dishes are always served at the

first rains of the monsoon season. Another array of dishes have become traditional for lunch while watching daylong cricket matches. There are other dishes for afternoon tea with lady friends. And other meals are eaten for breaking the fast each night during the month of Ramadan.

Spices are sometimes used whole as seeds or pods or are ground into powder and mixed into combinations, the most common being *garam masala*. (The yellow powder sold in American grocery stores as curry powder is unknown.)

After having the pleasure of sampling scores of dishes from the Mufti household tradition, I am amazed at the breadth of flavors and textures Dodo generates in her cooking. For a person whose culinary background was primarily European based, each meal has brought about fascinating taste discoveries that truly have broadened my palette.

But while the flavors, ingredients and techniques may be different, there is an amazing universality that always strikes me when I have the distinct pleasure of dining at the Muftis. That universality is the depth of culinary traditions, the pride that people have all over the world in their food culture and their pleasure in sharing that with others.

And there is one other thing that warms my heart. For centuries, mothers all over the world have dedicated themselves to nourishing their family and friends. Dodo carries on that tradition in such a loving and caring way, all the way down to checking out my plate and refilling it at the slightest hint that I may be running out of something. That is truly nourishment for the palate and the soul.

Enjoy Pakistani Cooking

- Dodo Mufti will teach a class in Pakistani cooking at the Ojai Culinary Studio on April 22 at 11 a.m. The Ojai Culinary Studio is located at: 315 North Montgomery St., Ojai; (805) 646-1124; www.ojaiculinary.com.

- Slow Food Ojai/Ventura is planning a special dinner later this year that will feature an array of the Mufti family dishes. For details, e-mail slowfoodojai@earthlink.net.

Here's a sampling of typical Pakistani dishes:

The *Qormas*, *Salans* and *Shorbas*—braised or stewed combinations of meat and/or vegetables, in gravies of varying richness
The *Pulaos*—the Pakistani version of the family of rice dishes common throughout most of the Middle East and Central Asia (where it is often called pilaf). The rice is cooked in a meat or vegetable broth, and the vegetables or meats are often added back.

Biryani—a rich, colorful rice dish where parboiled rice is layered with cooked and seasoned meats and vegetables.

Chicken Tikka—seasoned and grilled chicken that is a relatively modern invention and now a popular street food

Kebabs—a general term for ground meat patties or grilled meats

Roti—flat breads that include chapatis, which are thin, unleavened and made of whole wheat, and naan, which are thicker, leavened and made of white flour.