

THE LONG WAY HOME; COOKING LESSONS

Lahiri, Jhumpa . The New Yorker ; New York Vol. 80, Iss. 25, (Sep 6, 2004): 83-84.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT

Lahiri did not cook until she finished her undergraduate studies. Then she immersed herself in cooking. She details how cooking enhanced her relationship with her mother.

FULL TEXT

Saturdays, when I was growing up, I would often be woken by the powerful, almost meaty stench of powdered asafetida hitting a pan, or the insistent drone of my mother's blender, pulverizing whole roots of ginger or a dozen heads of garlic. I would come downstairs and find her at the stove, all four burners going, the sink crammed with colanders, the spices she stored in large brown Cremora jars pulled down from the cupboards. She would have been up since four, preparing for a dinner party for a crowd of fifty or more. There was always, simultaneously, lamb and fish and shrimp, and a minimum of four vegetable dishes, and dal and chutney, and two or three selections for dessert, all of it preceded by an assortment of stuffed croquettes and breaded cutlets, which she served as appetizers. She had learned to cook by watching and helping her mother in Calcutta, and she insisted on undertaking the labor-intensive dishes that most of my parents' Bengali-immigrant friends no longer bothered to attempt. She got down on the floor to pound turmeric or chilies on a massive grinding stone. She boiled gallons of milk for fresh channa, made fritters out of shad roe, and prepared her own baris--lentil wafers that she would set out, like dozens of miniature cookies, to dry on our sundeck in Rhode Island.

If her hands were dirty, I might crack an egg for her, or pour some bread crumbs onto a plate. On rare occasions, she let me roll out a luchi and slip it into the bubbling oil in her karhai, but from the way she hovered, and monitored, anxious that the disk of dough would not puff up in my unpracticed hands, the message was clear: cooking was her jurisdiction. It was also her secret. My mother owned no cookbooks, just as she owned no measuring cups or spoons. To this day, if friends ask how she made a particular dish, she cryptically replies, "It's nothing, really, you simply take all the ingredients and put them in the pot." One Mother's Day, I gave her a pretty turquoise-blue blank book, asking her to write down some recipes for me. She filled in a page or two, with instructions on how to make samosas, then stopped. Some years later, my sister made the same request, with similarly evasive results.

When I was eighteen, I left for college in New York City, and for the next four years I subsisted on bagels, Granny Smith apples, and cold noodles with sesame sauce. It wasn't until after graduation that I started cooking. I had moved to Boston, where I took classes at Harvard and worked part time in a bookstore. Suddenly, there was time to do the sorts of adult things alien to undergraduate life. I was invited to my first dinner parties. Some featured casseroles of the Campbell's-soup persuasion; others introduced me to risotto, endives, mascarpone cheese. I shopped at the Italian markets in the North End, clipped recipes from the Times Magazine, and checked out cookbooks from the library, writing down, on the backs of postcards, recipes that seemed promising. The first time I threw a dinner party, in a triple-decker in Somerville for my two housemates and two other friends, I prepared farfalle with olives, lemon rind, and sun-dried tomatoes, something that seemed quite exotic at the time. I did not

make Indian food, not because I didn't like to eat it but because it remained my mother's territory. My new guides were Julia Child, Giuliano Bugialli, Marcella Hazan. My mother condescended toward Western cooking, which she believed was all either crudely boiled or baked. Some evenings, she'd call and ask what I was having for dinner. "Pasta," I'd tell her, in the process of making, say, a four-hour Bolognese. "Oh, pasta," she would reply, imagining me pouring Ragu from a jar over a plate of Ronzoni.

Eventually, in my graduate-student years, I began to cook Indian food. I did not ask my mother for instructions, nor did she offer any. Instead, it was "Madhur Jaffrey's Indian Cooking" that told me what to do. It wasn't exactly my mother's style of cooking. Jaffrey comes from Delhi, not Bengal, and I knew that my mother, loyal to the idiosyncrasies of her region, would find certain recipes in that book heretical, like one that calls for seasoning cauliflower with fennel and mustard seeds. Nevertheless, I began to understand the techniques and philosophy of what my mother did in the kitchen. When Jaffrey started one recipe by putting ginger and garlic into a blender, I thought of my mother, and of the supply that she always kept in large yogurt containers in the refrigerator, already one step ahead.

When I went home to visit my parents, I began to offer to make a korma for dinner, or eggplant with yogurt sauce. To my surprise, my mother conceded, even occasionally allowing me to prepare something when she entertained. At one Thanksgiving dinner, she proudly told her guests that I had made the murgh masallam, and she seemed pleased to serve the spice-coated whole chickens instead of roast turkey. Still, as I consulted my cookbook, or measured out exactly two teaspoons of ground coriander, I must have seemed a fledgling in her eyes. She discreetly observed everything I did, and slowly her secrets emerged. "I always put a bit of sugar in my curries," she would casually mention. "If you stir a little water into your dry spices before adding them, they taste less chalky." For my parents' thirtieth anniversary, she let my sister and me cook an entire Indian meal for them and a few of their friends. She fretted over the fact that we did not place foil in the broiler, to catch the drippings from the lamb kebabs. But when the meal that we had spent all day cooking was assembled, the eight dishes lined up on her table from end to end, she took a photograph.

Bengal by way of Julia Child.

DETAILS

Subject:	Cooking; Culture; Mothers; Daughters; Personal relationships
Publication title:	The New Yorker; New York
Volume:	80
Issue:	25
Pages:	83-84
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2004
Publication date:	Sep 6, 2004

Section:	Showcase
Publisher:	Condé Nast Publications, Inc.
Place of publication:	New York
Country of publication:	United States
Publication subject:	Literary And Political Reviews
ISSN:	0028792X
Source type:	Magazines
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Commentary
Document feature:	illustrations
ProQuest document ID:	233148803
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/233148803?accountid=8289
Copyright:	(Originally published in The New Yorker. Compilation copyright (c) 2004 The Conde Nast Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.)
Last updated:	2017-10-31
Database:	Military Database

LINKS

[Check for full text in other resources](#)

Bibliography

Citation style: MLA 8th Edition

Lahiri, Jhumpa. "THE LONG WAY HOME; COOKING LESSONS." *The New Yorker*, vol. 80, no. 25, Sep 06, 2004, pp. 083-84, Military Database, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/233148803?accountid=8289>.

Database copyright © 2017 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)