

Emma Freud cooks for... **Asma Khan**

Our columnist chats with the pioneering women's champion about transforming the lives of immigrants and the power of good samosas

photographs DAVID COTSWORTH





A sma Khan has never formally trained, but a) runs one of the most remarkable Indian restaurants in London, Darjeeling Express (darjeeling-express.com), b) has just published an amazing cookbook, and c) is one of my all-time culinary heroes. I asked her to lunch and cooked her amazing saffron korma with beetroot raita. Her story is not what you would expect...

Emma So you're of royal Indian descent. Did you learn to cook in a palace kitchen?

Asma Khan No – my mother ran a food business, so I grew up with 25 people in my kitchen, and we had our family cook. There was no question of me even going into the kitchen.

EF But then you married and came to England, without the family cook!

AK My husband is very liberal. When we married, he said to my parents 'I believe in equality, I will cook and feed your daughter,' and I thought 'Oh, great.' He forgot to say he only knew how to cook one thing – a generic chicken curry, and rice that was so hideous I could glue myself to the ceiling with it. And at my first meal out, they served boiled cabbage. It was like someone had overcooked their clothes and given me the results. I thought, THIS is what hell is.

EF So how did you get out of hell?

AK I went back to India and I learned to cook. I lied a bit and told my family in India 'I'm not going back to England (and my husband) unless everyone teaches me how to cook'. If I'd left my husband, the disgrace would have been so terrible it would have meant none of my cousins could've got married. So all these aunts, who normally refuse to part with any of their recipes, taught me everything, things they'd never even told their own daughters.

EF So now you were custodian of all the family recipes, what did you do with them?

AK I started a supper club, turning my house into a restaurant once a week. I could only do it when my husband wasn't there – the idea of strangers walking around his house would have completely thrown him. I didn't lie, I just didn't tell him. And my children locked themselves in their bedrooms to avoid it all.

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At this point my teenage son Charlie declared that he'd done the same when I held a supper club for strangers in our house, and he was firmly on her children's side.

EF So who helped you do it?

AK All my kitchen team were nannies at my kids' school, or nurses at the local hospital. I saw them around and recognised that hollow look of an immigrant – their souls were empty. I could see the same look in their eyes that I had when I came to the UK. So I invited them to my house for chai and samosas. I helped them go through their immigrant journey, filling their application forms for the home office, and becoming free citizens. And when I began the supper clubs, they all came to help.

EF Did your husband ever find out?

AK Not then – but my kids snitched to my father and he told me to shut it down.

Charlie punches the air in solidarity.

EF So that resulted in you opening a restaurant, Darjeeling Express in Soho...

AK Yes. But I almost didn't get the lease – I had to compete with 55 people for it and I'm not a natural businesswoman, I'm no good at maths, and my friend had to write my business plan. I called the landlord and said 'I'm going to come to do the pitch but it's not going to be a PowerPoint presentation. Instead, I'm going to make you lunch, because THAT is my strength – why should I come and show you my weakness.' Then I said to my women 'Let's make some samosas.' Well, you should never say 'some' to Indian women. They made 100, so we fed not just the landlord's team, but the entire building. When we left, 40 people said to him 'I hope she gets the lease'.

EF And you got it?

AK Yes, of course I did. This is the magic of food.

EF And now you only have women in your kitchen.

AK Yes – the same women from the supper clubs – it's finally a home for us. Many of them still can't read or write. I'm giving all of them my cookbook, but one of them said 'Oh, I'll decorate it' and another said 'I'll frame it and put it above my bed'.



EF Is anyone who works there trained?

AK No.

EF Does it feel like a professional kitchen?

AK It tastes like a professional kitchen, but we do it all manually. We have no food processors or blenders – we use pestle and mortars and we mix everything by hand.

EF I made two batches of your beetroot raita – one where I grated the beetroot by hand, the other where I did it in the food processor. Which do you think is better?

AK Don't be ridiculous, there's no competition! The hand-grated one is totally superior.

She's right of course. We sit down to eat. Her korma is the best I've ever had.

EF What's your favourite Indian dish.

AK Biryani. It sums me up.

EF Sounds like you're talking about something more than food here...

AK I strongly believe in equality, in the idea of tribes and keeping women together. The biryani dish for me symbolises that – it has three elements; rice, meat and vegetables. Your role can be just one of the rice grains, but every part matters. Everybody is equal. That grain of rice is as powerful as the saffron, or the meat. But it's only when it comes together that it works. If you ask me who I am, I will tell you 'I am this dish'.



• Recipe adapted from *Asma's Indian Kitchen* by Asma Khan (£20, Pavilion Books). Photographs © Kim Lightbody.



Budget food blogger, author and campaigner Jack Monroe.



Make it yourself

Zafran murgh korma (saffron chicken korma)

There are many ways to cook a korma. If you ever get the chance to try a safed korma from Hyderabad, grab it. The pale, almost bland, appearance is deceptive. The name safed korma, which means white, hides a fragrant and delicately spiced dish. For a dish to be called a korma it usually has to be meat, although it can sometimes be vegetable-based, and braised in a yogurt base. Used sparingly in Indian kitchens due to it being an expensive spice, the addition of saffron gives this dish a lovely colour and also makes it very special.

SERVES 4 as a main or 8 part of a multi-course meal **PREP** 10 mins plus marinating **COOK** 1 hr **EASY**

500g Turkish or Greek yogurt (10% fat)	whole garam masala (2 Indian bay leaves, 1-inch long piece cassia bark, 3 green cardamom pods and 1 clove)
1 tbsp garlic paste	1 tbsp ground coriander
2 tbsp fresh ginger paste	¼ tsp chilli powder
8 medium skinless chicken thighs on the bone	2 tbsp ground almonds
2 tbsp whole milk	1 tbsp sugar
large pinch good-quality saffron	small handful of almond flakes, to garnish
6 tbsp vegetable oil	
3 medium white onions, evenly and thinly sliced into rings	

1 Combine the yogurt with the garlic and ginger pastes in a large bowl or casserole dish. Add the chicken thighs, then spoon over the marinade, making sure that the chicken is totally covered. Cover and chill for 30 mins. Gently warm the milk in a pan. Don't let it boil; it should only be tepid as you do not want to scald the saffron. Touch the surface of the milk to check the temperature, then when the milk is tepid, take off the heat, add the saffron strands and leave to infuse.

2 In a deep pan or wok that has a lid, heat the vegetable oil over a medium-high heat. Add the onions to the pan and fry gently, stirring occasionally, until golden brown and caramelised, about 10-15 mins. Using a slotted spoon, remove the onions from the pan, leaving as much of the oil in the pan as possible, and place on a plate to drain. Spread the onion rings across the plate so they crisp as they cool.

3 Add the whole garam masala to the pan with the oil in. After a few seconds, add the ground coriander and continue to cook, stirring. After 1 min, add the marinated chicken to the pan along with the marinade from the container. Keeping the heat on medium-high, continue stirring gently. After 5 mins, or when the oil separates from the yogurt and comes to the surface, add the chilli powder and 1 tsp salt. Lower the heat, cover the pan with the lid and simmer gently for 35 mins. The chicken is ready when the edges have softened and are slightly curled.

4 Remove the pan from the heat. Add the saffron-infused milk, ground almonds and sugar. Stir the chicken gently to avoid breaking it up.

5 Before serving, taste to check the seasoning and adjust as necessary. Garnish with the flaked almonds and the fried onions.

GOOD TO KNOW calcium • 1 of 5-a-day • gluten free

PER SERVING (4) 602 kcal • fat 42g • saturates 12g • carbs 21g • sugars 17g • fibre 2g • protein 34g • salt 1.6g