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# Aspen

CULTURE/CHARACTERS/COMMENTARY

## TIMES WEEKLY

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THE DOLLARS  
& SENSE OF...





## FOREIGN EXCHANGE

### COOKING FROM THE HEART OF AFGHANISTAN

AS SOON AS I STEP into the home, the rich aromas of caramelizing garlic, onion, and spices wrap me in a cozy hug. I follow the sound of excited chatter



AMANDA  
RAE

to a spacious kitchen, where four women are bustling around an island piled high with shiny eggplant, tomatoes, herbs, and a giant bowl of raw, cubed chicken. Knives thwack, oil sizzles, and laughter fills the moments in between. Commanding the crowded stovetop

is a diminutive woman in a vivid turquoise sheath, her heart-shaped face and dark features framed by a matching headscarf. She smiles and invites me over for a closer look.

Sparkling marble countertops and cutting-edge American appliances notwithstanding, the scene is one that could be found in this woman's homeland on any given morning. It is energetic and full of joy — which is exactly what Maryam (not her real name), a young Afghan native on scholarship in the US, hopes to share with the 45 guests who will feast on her cuisine tomorrow evening. In her country, food is the tie that binds all people — especially women, for whom cooking is the rare activity they claim as their own in a brutally oppressive, patriarchal society.

Maryam stirs a saucepan of aromatics that have melted down into a deep tawny paste — the base for *qorma*, a traditional chicken stew fragrant with coriander, turmeric, and curry powder. She's also preparing a dish of chickpeas with onions, peppers, and tomatoes (*nakhod*), and will fold dozens of *bollani*, hand pies stuffed with boiled potato, sautéed leek, and cilantro and fried until crispy. Slowly sautéed spinach (*sabzi*), chutney, and lemon-cucumber yogurt sauce will round out the spread.

Maryam explains that these traditional Afghan dishes are

prepared simply, with plenty of time, allowing the ingredients to shine. "We make a curry, but we don't put so much spices," she says, noting the difference between her native cuisine and Indian cookery. Still, Afghan rice (*wareje*) is unavailable here, so she'll use basmati rice from India instead. Maryam and her three helpers have been at it for hours already, and they'll continue all day tomorrow, too.

Though these ladies are pouring plenty of love and care into the impressive spread, one can't help but acknowledge a dark truth simmering away alongside it. For the six-plus years that she's been coming to the United States, Maryam hasn't been able to tell her family, friends, or neighbors back home in war-torn Helmand Province, one of the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan. It's too risky. If anyone were to learn that Maryam is here, two years into medical school after completing an undergraduate degree (making dean's list and serving as a resident assistant while learning English simultaneously), and not working in Pakistan as her father would have them believe, her family might be tortured—or worse.

"My father could be killed!" she says. Her soft-brown, doe-like eyes soften the candidness of her comment. "[The Taliban] will not even take a second to think about it."

But it's a risk that Maryam, 29, is willing to take, so that she can finish her studies in the US and return to Helmand to become the area's first female doctor. (It took her father two years before he agreed to send her through the undergraduate program organized by Action For Afghan Women (AFAW), an Aspen-based nonprofit that helps foreign women pursue educational opportunities in the US.) Her dream is to open a clinic, where she aspires to treat 20,000 women per year, train midwives with basic skills, and offer human rights counseling to those in need.



"When I met [Maryam] about eight years ago, out of a million-plus people, there were three women who were allowed out to work in the whole province, and she was one of them," says AFAW founder Paula Nirschel. (Maryam was lucky: Her grandfather, rather open-minded for a man of his era, helped her snag a job with the U.S. Agency for International Development when she was 16, leading to a series of jobs in information and training.)

"Women who live in that area (about 500,000) have never seen doctors — they're not allowed," continues Nirschel, who carefully curated the medical school program three years ago, after Maryam shared her goals. "The only way they can get healthcare is if there is a women's-specific facility they will be able to visit together."

So far, Maryam is the only student pursuing medicine. "It's near impossible to find another qualified candidate in the Helmand area," Nirschel says. "And someone qualified who would commit to going back."

The Afghan dinner comprises a tradition that Nirschel has shared for 15 years as she's worked to

better the lives of dozens of Afghan women through various educational programs she's created from scratch, first based in Washington, D.C., and now in Aspen for four years. It's a fundraiser to help Maryam and others finish their studies, of course, but benefits extend outward as well.

"It is a chance for people to share in the Afghanistan we know — which is quite different than the way the country is portrayed on the news," explains Nirschel, who developed the scholarship program, quite literally, from her living room couch, while watching CNN. "And show them Afghanistan through food."

Nirschel recalls her first visit to Afghanistan, in 2003. Apart from the shock of seeing a violence-ravaged landscape with her own eyes, "I remember not wanting to leave the table," she says of mealtimes. "You're honored if you're a guest in their home. Lunch and dinner were the same: a full spread, stopping in the middle of the day to relax and visit. It's leisurely, it's heart-centered, and it's pretty food. It's nourishing and nurturing. I remember the appreciation in people's faces. The irony of it has





gotten me all these years: Why is it that people who have so little and a country that is so torn apart by war has such richness to it?"

Like other AFAW events before it, the recent meal in Aspen would be a jubilant success. "We ate on the floor, on pillows, and for an hour and a half people just milled around eating more," Nirschel says when I meet with her the following week. "There was an abundance of good feeling."

After dessert of rice pudding spiced with cardamom and pistachios, Maryam gathered guests — many of whom donned Nirschel's colorful Afghan frocks and tried on burkas, ultra-conservative head coverings that reveal only a woman's eyes — into a circle for a traditional Afghan dance. Upon learning that Maryam had never enjoyed an opportunity to play a musical instrument, a cellist in Aspen's summer orchestra volunteered to perform and offered her a quick lesson.

The evening raised \$2,500, about half of which will pay Maryam's medical insurance; an anonymous donor has pledged a \$5,000 matching donation if AFAW is

able to raise another \$2,500. This funding, Nirschel stresses, is crucial for January tuition.

"Sending [Maryam] back with a medical degree is even more than I thought could happen," Nirschel says. "Her life has been very difficult, but she's a woman on a mission. She's focused. She knows what she's doing. Let's help her get the job done."

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## NEED TO KNOW

For more information about Action For Afghan Women (AFAW) and the next Afghan dinner, contact AFAW founder Paula Nirschel: 970-401-1505, [paula@afaw.org](mailto:paula@afaw.org). Donations may be made at [afaw.org](http://afaw.org).

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Guests at the AFAW Afghan Dinner fundraiser wore traditional garb and ate while seated on floor pillows.

Maryam prepares Afghan food for the meal.

Janet Guthrie with Maryam and AFAW founder Paula Nirschel.

