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Yearning for Afghanistan, in one meal

Naan and kebab mean big family gatherings, laughter and joy. But for Afghan families torn apart by conflict, they bring bittersweet memories.



The flavours of home keep our authors' connections to their identity and allow them to reflect on the tumult in their home country. Left: Chapli kebab and naan. Right: Du pyaza lamb kebab and naan [Courtesy of Parwana]

By **Durkhanai Ayubi and Mina Sharif**

16 Aug 2022



One of our, all of our, fondest childhood memories is the aroma of homemade naan baking, filling our sparsely furnished diaspora homes with comfort. What

we lacked in material possessions paled against the deeper nourishment of healing through food.

Naan-e-Afghani (Afghan bread) is a huge part of our cuisine and sustenance, as plentiful as wheat is in Afghanistan – from the flaky, irresistible naan-e-roghani for breakfast to the round and oblong lavash breads studded with nigella and sesame seeds that accompany most meals.

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In the many naanwayis (bread bakeries) of Afghanistan, the flatbreads bake on the walls of traditional vertical tandoors until they become golden. The naanwahs (bakers) sit on platforms around the top of the tandoor, kneading and shaping the dough and passing it along to be plastered onto the hot tandoor walls for baking. With intuitive ease born of long experience, the naanwahs use a pointed metal rod to effortlessly peel the naan from the tandoor wall just at the point when it is slightly crusty on the outside, and soft and pillowy inside.



On the left is a local naanwayi (bakery) in Kabul's Shahr-e-Naw; on the right is a Kabul street kebab and naan, wrapped in newspaper [Courtesy of Mina Sharif]

Afghan naans are nearly always flatbreads, a simple mix of flour, water, oil, salt and leaven – kneaded into an elastic dough and left to rise before shaping and baking. If you are making flatter naans, you use less leaven, like a paratha, to make a runny dough that can be poured on a heated iron skillet.

Naan was still an everyday thing to smell wafting through our refugee homes, baked in our mothers' electric ovens, not in the tandors of naanwayis. Kebab was not.

As children, helping our mothers marinate the pieces of chicken and lamb the night before an event carried with it a sense of excitement – knowing the next day meant a day trip or a back yard barbecue with family and friends.

Kebab is a familiar word to many, and in Afghan cuisine, it has many variations – from skewers of meat cooked over hot coals to fried chapli kebabs that are common street food, to elongated shami kebabs, to kebab-e-degee, which is cooked in a pot. But it is not an everyday food.

In a traditionally subsistence- and agriculture-based culture, meat was a rarity, to be eaten sparingly, on special occasions – without waste. Kebab is a treat to mark everything from birthdays to communal gatherings.



Grilling chicken kebab on a family camping trip in Canada [Courtesy of Mina Sharif]

For us, they meant gatherings, marked by uncles in the back yards and parks of Australia and Canada flipping skewers and fanning coals as they discussed the dismal politics of the homeland.

What was 'home'?

We are two Afghan-born women who have lived for decades – since we were toddlers – as diaspora on opposite sides of the world. We are also cousins, who, like so many generations of Afghan families separated through unrest, have spent our lives apart.



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Durkhanai, after spending time in a refugee camp in Pakistan, arrived in Melbourne, Australia with her nuclear family in 1987. From there, they moved to settle in the smaller town of Adelaide, where they connected with a small group of Afghan families arriving in Australia – that group has since grown.

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Mina arrived in Vancouver, Canada with her parents in 1984, a time before social media when the reality of displacement meant they had no way to know if they even had any family in Canada. Eventually, her grandparents, and many of her aunts, uncles, and cousins who left Afghanistan would move from various countries and settle near each other in Toronto.



Left: Mina, aged two, in Pakistan shortly after fleeing Afghanistan. Right: A naan and kebab picnic with friends in Pariyan, Parwan province, when Mina went back to Afghanistan as an adult [Courtesy of Mina Sharif]

Our families became refugees during Afghanistan's communist era when the Cold War struggle for global dominance between then-Soviet Russia and the United States unfolded as a great devastation – a spiritual and physical exile Afghanistan never completely recovered from with echoes that reverberate through to the present traumas in the country.

On a collective level, the unrest led to a fragmentation of Afghan identity and a dilution of our intellectual histories and cultural knowledge. On an individual level, our displacement as children often presented itself as a “clash” of cultural norms, a challenge until we were better aware and able to reconcile these disparities in a way that led to a fuller sense of identity.

How to make a kebab right

Naan and kebab meant conversations, laughter and compliments on the food, while breaking through the gender barriers of men cooking. It encapsulated the gregariousness that defines Afghan culture, in the communal rituals of preparation and eating together.

Marination is essential for a good kebab, and everyone has their own secret way. And different kebabs are made using different marinades, depending on how they will be cooked. But we can let you in on some of the basics for a simple skewered kebab.



Left to right: kebab dehee morgh (chicken kebab) on naan, kebab sikhi (skewered kebab) and morgh lawang (yoghurt-basted chicken kebab) [Courtesy of Parwana]

Blend a mix of onion, garlic and chillis in a food processor, then strain it and keep only the liquid for the marinade. Spice it up with ground coriander, black pepper, salt, and a little oil. Taste your marinade and when it tastes a bit stronger than you want the meat to taste, it is ready to be poured over top of

your pieces of meat or chicken. Mix well to make sure everything is coated, then let your kebabs-to-be rest overnight.

For our picnics and camping trips, large containers of these marinated meats were packed into coolers, ready to thread onto skewers to be cooked on portable grills. Naan prepared earlier in the day would be cut and bagged, ready to wrap around freshly made kebabs – one of the greatest unions in Afghan cuisine.

As the scent of roasting kebabs enveloped us, the preparations for eating would begin. Laughter and chatter were all around as we opened the bags of bread, releasing the scent of freshly baked naan-e-Afghani. Some of the mothers would start whipping together the accompaniments, mixing yoghurt, cucumber and mint for one dip; blending up a chutney of mint, coriander, chilli, garlic, vinegar and live juice. Platters came out to be loaded with sliced radishes, spring onions, sliced red onions, wedges of lemon and herbs like coriander and mint.



Durkhanai and some of her family about to enjoy a birthday celebration in the early days of arriving in Melbourne, Australia, in the 1980s. On the left is her father, she is sitting on her uncle's lap, and her three sisters are beside her [Courtesy of Durkhanai Ayubi]

Sitting around the dasterkhan – a tablecloth spread on the floor, often to accommodate more people than a table could – we eagerly awaited that first batch of hot kebab, which we would unthread from the skewer by wrapping a piece of naan around it and tumbling the meat onto our plates. Scooping up kebab with pieces of naan dipped into chutney or yoghurt dip, with fresh vegetables folded in, made a perfectly balanced morsel of heat, flavour, crunch and acidity.

We relished the final piece of naan that was shared among us – the piece that had been sitting under the kebab, soaking in all the juices and spices of the meat.

Our experiences of food and community since childhood laid the foundations of our connection to our homeland and to our own depths – serving as a bridge and a mirror, tethering us to our roots and to one another while reflecting to us images of ourselves that may otherwise be lost.

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Over time, as we continued to explore questions of self and cultural identity, cuisine came increasingly to the fore. In 2009, Durkhanai and her family set up their restaurant Parwana in Australia, to share the beauty of Afghan cuisine and the deeper – often neglected – elements of Afghanistan's story the cuisine carries.



Classic accompaniments to a kebab meal, red chilli chutney and a green herb chutney [Courtesy of Parwana]

Her mother Farida's cooking stars, using recipes passed down through the generations. They include recipes for fragrant spice mixes like *chaar masala* (four spices), used to flavour vegetable dishes, techniques for perfecting the pulao rice dishes that form the centrepiece of Afghan dining, how to make stuffed pan-fried flatbreads known as *bolanis*, and the array of naan and kebab dishes that stud the cuisine.

Here, the bliss of the marriage of naan and kebab is shared with diners, every service – hot, fresh naan wrapped around morsels of sizzling kebab, accompanied by the crunch of fresh garden salads and the zing of a herb chutney or yoghurt dip, is how the dish is best enjoyed. Many non-Afghan customers commit the culinary taboo of leaving behind that gem of Afghan cuisine, the piece of naan under the kebab, untouched on the plate.

The family went on to publish their cookbook, *Parwana: Recipes and Stories from an Afghan Kitchen*, in 2020. It frames Farida's recipes in historical and genealogical narratives that put Afghanistan at the centre of its people's stories, drawing on memory, oral history, and literature. In writing the book, Durkhanai saw how Afghanistan and its cuisine are emblematic of global cultural cross-pollination that shapes us in ways forgotten.



Mina with her mother standing behind her with her hands on her shoulders, along with her aunts and cousins over a birthday feast featuring kebab [Courtesy of Mina Sharif]

Ancient and evolving

Afghanistan is an ancient land, inhabited by multiethnic groups of people. Before its more contemporary borders that we recognise today, it was home to several tribes that were part of various empires, from the Persian Achaemenids to the Greeks of Alexander the Great, to the Mughals of Emperor Babur, to name just a few influences.

Afghan scholar Louis Dupree writes of the probability of human activity from further back in history, the Palaeolithic era in northern Afghanistan, through to close relationships in south-central Afghanistan with the Indus Valley civilisation. It is part of a region that is home to the spiritual evolutions of Zoroastrianism (with Bactria, modern-day Balkh, Afghanistan, a site where it is likely that the faith was first proclaimed), Buddhism, and Sufism. Its position at the nexus of the ancient Silk Road has led to what is today known as Afghanistan being defined by millennia of the exchange of ideas, philosophies, knowledge, and goods.

Afghan cuisine – its ingredients and rituals – is emblematic of creativity fuelled by exchange and adaptation. The daals (pulses) and spices of India and the influences of China and Tibet seen in hand-rolled noodles and dumplings mix with the region's native ingredients: spinaches, leeks, varieties of indigenous rice, and an array of fruits and nuts like citrus, mulberries, pomegranates, cherries, melons, almonds, pistachios and pine nuts. They have melded over millennia to form a cuisine at once familiar to many while also distinct.



Durkhanai and her family enjoy an Afghan meal at their restaurant Parwana in Adelaide, Australia [Courtesy of Durkhanai Ayubi]

An example of this is the cuisine rituals of Nowruz (Persian New Year), which arises from the millennia-long influence of Zoroastrianism, and is celebrated on the spring equinox in Afghanistan, Iran and throughout Central Asia.

On Nowruz, we make dishes like haft mewa, a compote of seven fruits and nuts, and samanak, which is made from new shoots of wheatgrass. They symbolise the cycles of life and embody sweetness for the year ahead.

Going 'home'?

Mina returned to Afghanistan in 2005. Armed with her degrees in communications, she took on a volunteer position as a media trainer for women-managed radio stations there. What was originally a six-month position, eventually led to her spending a large part of her adulthood in her homeland, staying for nearly 15 years before returning to Canada.

In 2016, she began travelling throughout the country, directing a children's TV and radio series called Voice of Afghan Youth, a programme highlighting customs in the country through the eyes of marginalised children. This lived experience deepened her understanding of the role cuisine plays in the everyday reality of being Afghan.

As she met farmers, labourers and families living below the poverty line – which was still how most of Afghans lived, even through the decades of international presence – the opulence of naan and kebab became apparent. Most Afghans living in those conditions were more likely to be farmers growing meat to sell rather than eating it regularly.



A kebab seller in Shahr-e-Naw, Kabul, in 2018 [Courtesy of Mina Sharif]

While not accessible to all, and a luxury to most, kebab was prevalent in Afghanistan's urban restaurants, as well as street food stalls throughout the country. For Mina, it was still as special and celebratory as it was back in Canada.

Picked up from street vendors to relish for lunch or for long road trips, it was served differently according to where she was – with thick round bread in northern areas like Balkh province or rolled in long oval bread wrapped in newspaper in Kabul.

About once a week, Mina would find herself being whisked through traffic to find the perfect kebab in Kabul. Doing the whisking was a man named Abdul*, who started as Mina's driver and became like a family member before long.

Whenever Mina suggested that they stop on the way home to buy a few khurak (servings) of naan and kebab from Shahr-e-naw, the centre of Kabul city, Abdul would nod and drive calmly past sidewalks lined with men fanning their coal grills with meat sizzling on top.

He refused to settle for what these men were selling, maintaining that the meat was subpar because he, like many Afghans, had his favourite spot. He would drive until they reached a tucked-away corner where a smiling elderly man fanned his kebab with a practised flick of the wrist. Abdul's favourite kebabee (kebab chef) was famous for his secret methods and recipes passed down through generations, as many kebabees were.



Durkhanai, in the blue top, with her parents and sisters, celebrating her birthday with cake, candles and a meal of kebab and naan [Courtesy Durkhanai Ayubi]

Mina would wait in the car as Abdul stood over the food order, supervising portions and making small talk with the kebabee. She would hope Abdul remem-

bered to ask for fewer fatty pieces in the order, which she was not a fan of even though they were a delicacy beloved by most. The kebabee would always put a few extra in the order anyway, as a gesture of kindness.

With the warm newspaper bundle in her lap, Mina would try to not unwrap her kebab until she got home, so she and Abdul could eat at the same time. But she often could not resist nibbling on that treasured piece of naan under the kebab. The street kebab came with a little plastic baggie tied with a knot at the top of a green or red chutney and another baggie of yoghurt dipping sauce to dunk each bite into.

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Those longer drives to get just the right kebab, the waiting to get to the kebabee's stall and to eat the kebab at home, are treasured in Mina's memories. And though she often thought it, she never said out loud that maybe Abdul should just stop at any kebab vendor instead of driving so far.



The beautiful hills of Pariyan, Parwan province, are pictured on the left and on the right, Abdul and friends set up a grill for a picnic in the hills [Courtesy of Mina Sharif]

Naan and kebab underpin many memories of Mina's time back in her homeland, often combined with the ancient heritage and epic natural landscapes of Afghanistan. Whether driving past rolling green fields and pristine rivers in remote areas like Pariyan for day trips with friends, where they packed only watermelon and skewers of marinated meat with a small grill and carpet to lay on the lush grass; or picnicking closer to Kabul on Fridays with colleagues in the ancient city of Kapisa – naan, kebab and nature felt like an Afghan rite of passage.

For small gatherings at home, Mina and her family and friends would hire a locally renowned kebabee to cook their speciality, often with a young son or nephew apprentice in tow. When served at home to guests, kebab is arrayed on serving trays and garnished with tomato, green chillies and slivered onion.

Wave upon wave of exile

Afghanistan has endured a turbulent and devastating year. The instability and repression triggered by the abrupt and chaotic withdrawal of US and foreign forces followed by the Taliban's forcible takeover, a year ago to the day, opened a chapter of grief, loss and yet another wave of exile for Afghans – tearing apart the lives, hopes and futures of so many.



The Parwana for Afghanistan fundraiser team hard at work with morgh lawang kebab, naan, and salads laid out ready to serve, in September 2021 [Courtesy of Durkhanai Ayubi]

Yet, so often, the lens through which the collapse of Afghanistan is seen renders Afghan people inconsequential to, and removed from, the centre of their own stories, privileging the implications for the Western nations that occupied Afghanistan, imparted through the sanitising lens of foreign politics, and superimposed by outsiders.

As the world marks one year since, we look at food and our relationship to it as the lens through which to understand the deeper lifelines critical to Afghan sur-

vival at home and in the diaspora. Simple bread and meat take on a particular symbolism through which we can approach the trials and hopes of the Afghan people.

Naan is such a pervasive part of Afghan cuisine that the word naan means bread and is the word for “food”. It accompanies every meal, but its pairing with kebab is a revered union, albeit one that is out of reach for many today.

Today in Afghanistan, as people suffer a collapsed economy and swaths of the population are driven into poverty, many are unable to afford bare necessities and have not eaten meat or anything with nutritional value for months. Entire families now try to survive on a single piece of bread. The hardened and stale bread scraps, once fed only to animals, are being sold to desperate people.



Mina with her aunts and cousins in Toronto, Canada, in the late 1980s as the family began to reunite. The celebratory meal was kebab and naan [Courtesy of Mina Sharif]

The Afghan relationship to naan and kebab is also the story of a widening gap in experiences between those in the country and those overseas – a narrative of great inequality that raises paradoxical and challenging questions around our diaspora relationship with Afghan identity from afar.

Leaving Afghanistan as children meant that our understanding of our birthplace was misty, informed mainly by the second-hand experiences our families offered against a backdrop of gruesome media headlines. We were strangers to the vivid,

nostalgic memories of Afghanistan of our parents, who had come of age in an era full of possibilities – before destructive forces gripped the country.

For many Afghans abroad, cuisine was how we came together to celebrate our culture in a tangible way. Food was a joyful bonding. But as poverty overtakes the motherland faster, the relationship to food for millions living there has shifted from celebration to survival.

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For the diaspora, our relationship with Afghan cuisine has also shifted.

In our lifetime alone, we can trace a dish like naan and kebab from something that was an uninterrupted joy for our parents in Afghanistan to a North Star orienting us to our identity despite the schism of exile. And today, we are aware of its scarcity and how it captures the scale of injustice in Afghanistan.



A reunion with Abdul and his family in Toronto in July 2022 [Courtesy of Mina Sharif]

For Durkhanai, the paradox was acute. As so many within Afghanistan endured poverty and hunger, it seemed surreal and, in some ways, disconnected to share Afghan food so readily in Australia.

So she and her family used Afghan cuisine as a means of action through which to honour those who now needed the spirit of Afghan hospitality and generosity the most – Afghanistan's own people.

They brought their community together for two nights of fundraising for Afghanistan. The community responded strongly, and significant funds were raised, helping thousands of Afghan people internally displaced in the chaos that ensued during the early days of the Taliban takeover.

Efforts are ongoing, as she, and so many in the Afghan diasporic community pivot towards supporting new arrivals as they begin their journeys of displacement

in new countries, and helping those still in Afghanistan to survive with at least some hope and dignity.

A sweet (and savoury) reunion

A few weeks ago, Mina reunited with Abdul and his family. He had worked with various international organisations and his safety was greatly jeopardised. After months of agonising limbo, he had managed to resettle in Toronto with his family.



In September 2021, the Parwana for Afghanistan fundraiser brought together hundreds of people to raise significant funds for Afghanistan by harnessing the power of Afghan cuisine and hospitality [Courtesy of Durkhanai Ayubi]

Mina prepared to reunite with him with mixed emotions, realising he was no longer part of the Kabul life she longed to return to. She packed some welcome gifts for them – toys for their two-year-old boy, and books, crayons and English flashcards for the three daughters who were elementary school-aged.

With daily customs in mind, she bought Abdul and his wife a thermos, glass mugs, green loose-leaf tea, and sweets from the Afghan store to give them a taste of the home they had been away from for nearly a year. And when it came to picking where to meet, there was no question of what a suitable venue would be.

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She and her mother picked up the family from their hotel near the airport where refugees were being housed and took them to a local Afghan restaurant for naan and kebab. Now she was host and guide, relying on the power of the familiarity of Afghan cuisine to make them feel at home.

Talking to the non-Afghan cashier, she ordered what she thought would most resemble the Kabul naan and kebab ritual they shared – knowing it might not come close to the honed-to-perfection offerings of Abdul’s favourite kebabee. The food was eaten quietly, but with a depth of gratitude for their chance to meet again.



During the reunion, the group enjoyed a quiet naan and kebab lunch at an Afghan restaurant in Toronto [Courtesy of Mina Sharif]

They talked about their new home and what that life might look like – navigating the disorienting reconciliation of simultaneous grief and relief. Abdul and his wife said they were relieved to have someone they knew in Canada, Mina and her mother assuring them they were not simply people they “knew”. For all the care Abdul had taken to support Mina in Afghanistan, it was a pleasure to offer that hospitality to them and their children now. Over the familiar aroma and taste of naan and kebab, they pondered what the future might hold.

A final gift Afghan cuisine leaves us with is this very ability to imagine ourselves beyond survival.

It is through recognising the ancient, interconnected depth and breadth that pulsates through Afghanistan’s aura, and that is safeguarded in Afghan cuisine,

that we may find the means to collectively persist – to pursue everything that we may yet be.

**Name changed to protect the individual's privacy*

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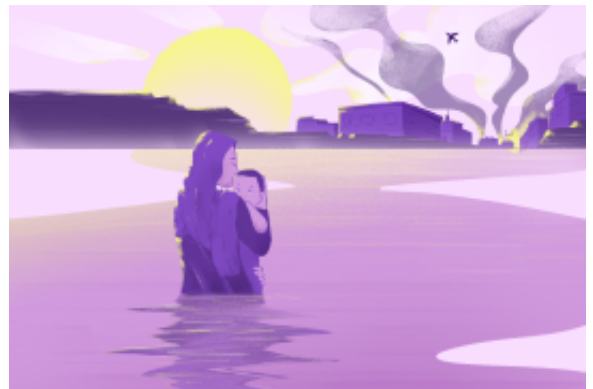
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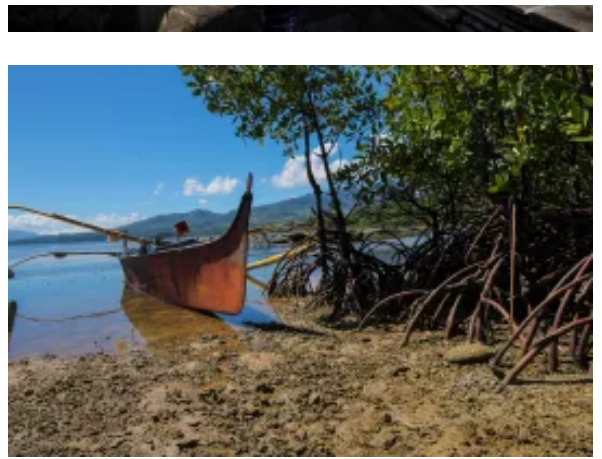
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