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# CURRIES, TAJEENS, AND MOLES:

## *Exploring Culture and Conversion Through Food*

BY ANISA ABEYTIA

Exploring other cultures always implies a culinary exchange to me. When I meet someone from an unfamiliar culture the first thing I ask is, “So, what do you eat?” I ask this because food holds our history and can reveal a story with each bite. It can take the global and exotic and turn it into the local and the intimate. Also, we usually do not try new foods alone. Many times a friend introduces us to new foods along with an explanation of the way a food is prepared or how it holds a special significance in the culture, like couscous on Friday in Morocco or tamales for Christmas in Mexico. This turns something novel or strange into an intimate and nonconfrontational introduction. Food was one of the ways I was first introduced to Islam.

There is no such thing as “Islamic cuisine” or “Muslim food,” but Muslims do eat and each Muslim ethnic group has a culinary tradition that oftentimes predates Islam. What binds all of these culinary traditions together is Islam and the guidelines offered about food and food preparation in the Quran (*halal*) and by the prophet Mohamed (*Sunnah*).

I was introduced to Islam by Pakistanis and the first halal food I encountered was at a Pakistani restaurant. Actually, I was unable to enter the restaurant. The moment the door was opened, the pungent and hot spices hit my eyes and within minutes I could not see through my tears. We left and found something a little more “American.” Converting to Islam was a bit like this experience.

The changes I made were monumental, and they stung. They stung because I was entering uncharted territory and I did not know if I would make it out all right. On the surface there was nothing familiar to guide me or comfort me. The languages I was hearing, primarily Urdu and Arabic (the universal Muslim language), the dress, the ways of living, and of course, the food, were out of my experience. I tried to fit in, but even as I understood that Islam is not about conformity, I sensed that I made people as uncomfortable as they made me. My food was different and so was theirs, but over the years it was through sharing culinary wisdom and just sitting down to a good meal that made Islam and Muslims more welcoming.

I am a third-generation Mexican American who grew up eating the Standard American Diet (S.A.D.). After my conversion to Islam nine years ago, that way of eating was no longer acceptable to me. I was determined to find a new way to cook to match my new life. With my husband, I lived on the premise, “if it is halal, eat it.” Yet, despite my best efforts, the practicality of daily life intervened—what was my growing family going to eat? I was forced to look at what nourished us in the past, and Sally Fallon’s book *Nourishing Traditions* was a great help, as were Anissa Helou’s cookbooks.

My husband is from Morocco, so in preparation for my new life as a Muslim wife, I bought a Moroccan cookbook. I cloistered myself in my bedroom for hours studying it and would carefully reproduce what I found in those pages each day like a monk illuminating a text. I lovingly tended to each pot and sliced and diced for hours. I would start food preparation at noon to get dinner on the table by 6 p.m. After a month of marriage, my husband asked me, “Why do you make wedding food every day?” I was floored! So that is why it took me so long. I asked my husband what he



“typically” ate growing up in Tangier. He said they ate mostly seafood, since in that port city, fresh seafood came in from both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. I searched for cookbooks that fit his description of everyday foods, but I did not find anything satisfactory. Meal preparation became a chore and I did not feel well-nourished, and in fact I felt over-nourished.

After our first year of marriage, we moved to Petaluma and there was no halal market in the area. Eventually I learned about one in Berkeley, and with my husband, baby girl, and a pregnancy in progress, made the journey to Berkeley to discover Indus Village market. We continued making that trip every few months, but since Indus caters to a mostly Indo/Pakistani clientele, it did not have many of the spices and supplies I wanted.

I began to delve deeper into the meaning of halal. Was it simply a way of slaughtering an animal, turning it toward Mecca, saying *bismillah* (in the name of God) over it and ensuring it does not suffer? Or was it more than that? Does not suffering include the living conditions of the animal as well? The prophet Mohammed said that anything that is harmful to a human is by default not halal. Were industrially raised meat and non-organic foods halal in the truest spirit of the word? My questions about food and health led me to farmers’ markets and through the California School of Herbal Studies and into a program in Islamic medicine. I began to understand that halal is not something I could find at Costco or most supermarkets. I was learning that the whole point of halal, and Islam in general, was to be conscious of one’s actions and to consider what the personal and global repercussions of those actions might be. Maintaining the human organism via consciousness is the goal.

I wanted hormone- and antibiotic-free halal meat, but no one carried it, so I went back to a mostly vegetarian diet. I eventually found Halal Market (on San Pablo in Berkeley). It is run by a Palestinian family and was one of the first, if not *the* first halal market in Northern California to carry organic and hormone-/antibiotic-free goat, lamb, beef, and chicken. The market also caters to a Middle Eastern/North African and Indo/Pakistani clientele. Here you will find the ingredients to fix a tajeen, curry, or *basbusab*. Faziiah, the wife of the husband-and-wife team, also runs a catering business and cooks wonderfully. She prepared a whole stuffed lamb, chickens, and all the fixings for the celebration of the birth of our fourth child (*aqueqah*), and again for Eid-al Fitr (the end of Ramadan) for an interfaith group of which my husband is a member.

Even though I was spending many hours in the kitchen, I still left time to learn about Islam. I became curious about the people and events through history that molded modern Muslims. I read history books and fiction by modern Muslim writers and looked for recipes from Islam’s past. What I found was that many of the culinary traditions had changed since the 10th century A.D., but so had people’s interpretations of Islam. During the time of the Crusades, Muslims focused on Mohammed as a warrior, in early



Andalus (Spain) he was the just seeker of knowledge (see Carl Ernest, *Following Mohammad I*). This is not to say that there were drastic revisions, not in the least, but things were recombined and reinterpreted to match the people. Just like food, Islam is meant to be eaten several times a day or more appropriately, lived.

Not all Muslims do the same thing; they are not homogenous, not now or in the past. They also do not eat the same food, so why was I giving myself a hard time preparing wedding food every day? Could I not make Islam “practical,” for lack of a better word? Did Islam have to be something foreign? Islam and all of its “practical” manifestations could be extremely foreign because they are expressions of cultures and not universal truths, but it was the universal truths found in Islam that gave rise to these cultures. I had to make Islam real to me. I had to make dinner.

At first dishes I prepared did not always turn out tasty, but I practiced and I looked to the foods that traditionally nourished Mexicans and Moroccans. Tajeens and moles were a few dishes that I discovered. They are similar to curries. Moles come from Mexico and tajeens from Morocco. They are slow-cooked pots of delicious meat and/or vegetables, with special spices that just melt away in the mouth. Each region and each family has its own way of integrating spices and other ingredients. These dishes are passed from generation to generation because they work for the ones preparing them, just like daily worship. We usually inherit these practices, but some times, as in my case, we must rediscover them. As I looked into my family's culinary heritage, I began to cook things my great-grandmother cooked. I learned that the mole from my Grandmother's region in Mexico is different from other moles in other regions of Mexico, and is regarded as a relic of her time 100 years ago.

Today I remain partial to the food served at Indus Village, especially their sizzling lamb chops with onions and fresh cilantro sprigs and their chicken tikka masala with fresh naan. Ten years ago I could not even walk into a Pakistani restaurant, but a lot has changed. I eventually made my own version of curry. Is it exactly like a traditional curry? No, but it is my version. It is true that to call something a curry does not make it a curry. It has to include all the basic ingredients of a curry. The same is true for a religion. If one removes one or more of the fundamentals or pillars of Islam, say, prayer, for instance, one cannot really call herself a Muslim. However as Muslims we all find ways to make Islam a living and breathing way of life and it is a day-to-day struggle that sometimes takes an unexpected turn and ends up on our plates.

I would like to share a few of my recipes with you. Enjoy and *bismillah* (in the name of God)! ☪

*Halal Market*  
1964 San Pablo Ave.  
Berkeley  
(510) 845-2000

*Indus Village*  
(market and restaurant)  
1920 San Pablo Ave.  
Berkeley  
(510) 549-5999



Sizzling lamb chops at Indus Village

## ANISA'S TAJEEN SPICES

- 3 tablespoons crushed, dried rosebuds
- 5 tablespoons crushed, dried lavender flowers
- 3 tablespoons ground cumin
- 3 tablespoons ground coriander
- 3 tablespoons ground cardamom
- 1 tablespoon mace
- 4 tablespoons dried ginger powder
- 4 tablespoons cayenne
- 2 tablespoons turmeric
- 2 tablespoons pepper
- 3 teaspoons ground cloves
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons ground fennel

This mix of tajeen spices is very "Fez-y." Meaning that it carries all the complex flavors associated with the imperial city of Fez, Morocco. The lavender and rosebuds balance the hot flavors of the cayenne, mace, and pepper and give it a unique taste that is hard to place. I add cumin and coriander because I just love these two spices. Toast the cumin seeds before grinding to give it a distinctive Mexican flavor. I like to grind as many of these spices fresh for a wonderfully rich aroma. Mix all the spices together and place in a tin or glass jar. Use this mix like garam masala. It can be used as a rub, a base for soup, curries, tajeens, and moles.

## SAUTÉED ZUCCHINI WITH CARAMELIZED FENNEL AND ONIONS

- 3 pounds zucchini, sliced
- 1 whole onion, sliced
- 2 large fennel bulbs, sliced
- 2–3 tablespoons unrefined coconut oil
- Salt

Heat a deep pan with a lid on medium heat. When it is hot add in the coconut oil. Add in the onion, fennel, and pinch of salt. Simmer uncovered for the first 15 minutes. For the last 15 minutes cover and add salt to taste. Once they are done remove to a dish and keep warm. Sauté the zucchini in the onion and fennel juice and cover for 5–8 minutes. Place the sautéed zucchini on the bed of caramelized onions and fennel. Serves 4–6



## JICAMA IN A MINTED SALAD DRESSING

- 1 small jicama, peeled
- ¼ cup diced fresh mint leaves
- Juice of 1 lemon
- ¼ cup organic, cold-pressed olive oil
- Salt to taste

Slice the jicama into small thin strips. Arrange on a plate. In a small mixing bowl add other ingredients and mix well. Drizzle the mixture over the jicama, cover with a piece of parchment and let stand for 1–2 hours.  
Serves 6–8

## TAJEEN OF ARTICHOKEs

*This makes a nice weekend lunch.*

- 6 artichokes, spiky tops and stem trimmed and rougher leaves peeled away
- 2–3 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 1–2 teaspoons salt
- 1 whole onion, sliced

Place all ingredients (except onions) into a ceramic tajeen or stew pot, tossing until the artichokes are well coated. Pile the onions on top and add enough water to the pot to reach halfway up the artichokes. Cover and simmer for 1–2 hours in a tajeen or 45 minutes to 1½ hours in a stew pot.  
Serves 2–3

## CHICKEN MARINATED IN CHARMULA WITH MANGO/PAPAYA SALSA

- 8–10 skinless chicken parts
- Charmula
- ¾ cup olive oil
- Juice of 3 lemons and 1 lime
- 1 bunch cilantro, chopped with stems
- 1 bunch parsley, chopped with stems
- 3 tablespoons ground cumin
- 3 tablespoons ground coriander
- ¼ teaspoon red chili flakes
- Salt and pepper to taste

Add the olive oil and lemon juice to a large bowl. Chop up the cilantro and parsley and mix. Add in the spices and mix well. Let stand for at least 15 minutes for the flavors to mix. Add in the chicken and coat well with the charmula. Cover with unbleached parchment (available at natural food stores or at [www.gaiam.com](http://www.gaiam.com)) and place in the refrigerator overnight.

The next day, you can bake the chicken in the oven, covered with unbleached parchment, or grill it. Serve with the mango and papaya salsa and fresh sprigs of herbs such as mint, thyme, and oregano. This looks very pretty on a Mexican or Moroccan platter.

Serves 6–8

*Note:* Charmula is extremely versatile. Use it to marinate fish or lamb. Add it to water to make an instant stock for fish soup.

## MANGO AND PAPAYA SALSA

- 1 mango, diced
- 1 Hawaiian papaya or ½ Mexican papaya, seeded and diced
- ½ white onion diced fine
- 1 bunch cilantro, diced and stems removed
- Juice of one lime
- A pinch of ancho chili
- Salt and pepper to taste

Combine all ingredients and allow flavors to mingle before serving.



## FLAN WITH CARDAMOM, HONEY, AND PISTACHIOS

- 6 eggs, beaten well
- 3 cups milk
- 1 cup honey, divided
- 2 teaspoons cardamom
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ cup diced pistachios

Beat the eggs and add the milk, then add half the spices and ½ cup honey. Pour the remaining honey and spices into 8 custard dishes. I have used one large baking dish, but it never comes out quite right. Then add the egg mixture to each dish. Place the dishes in a larger baking dish and pour in boiling water to 1-inch depth. Bake at 325 degrees for 30–40 minutes or until a knife comes out clean when inserted in the middle of the flan. Once done, turn each dish upside down onto a plate and garnish with pistachios.

Serves 8

## MOROCCAN GHREYBA (SHORTBREAD) WITH LAVENDER OR ANISE

*I adapted this recipe from Anissa Helou's book Café Morocco*

- 2 sticks butter, softened
- ½ to 1 cup Rapadura sugar (½ cup if using anise. The sweetness of the seed lets you get away with less sugar.)
- 3 cups whole-wheat pastry flour
- 2 large eggs
- 2 teaspoons lavender (not too much or the flavor will be over-powering) or
- 1–2 tablespoons anise

Cream the sugar and butter. Add in the eggs one at a time. Slowly add in the flour. Add in the lavender or anise. You want the dough to be soft, but not sticky. Refrigerate the dough for ½ hour so it will be easier to work with. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees and line a baking sheet with parchment. Roll out little balls the size of a quarter. Place the balls on the sheet 1 inch apart. Gently flatten the balls and cook for 6–8 minutes.

Makes 3–4 dozen

## THE "SHEHABI" BURRITO

*One day we invited a Palestinian family over and I made Moroccan food. They did not know what to make of it. The children of the family told me, somewhat disappointedly, that they thought we would have Mexican food. I laughed since they assumed I was from Mexico. They wanted burritos. So I invited them back and made them "Mexican" food. Later that week I ran into them and they told me with beaming faces that they made burritos for their after-school snack, but they used fava beans. Fava beans are popular in the Middle East and Morocco and I loved their addition. I added a few things myself to this quick and very portable food.*

- 1 can fava beans (available at Halal Market)
- ½ cup shredded Monterey Jack and Cheddar cheeses
- ½ cup salad mix or shredded cabbage
- 6 sprouted corn or wheat tortillas

Condiments to taste:

- Harissa (a Moroccan hot sauce available at Halal Market)
- Guacamole with a hint of mint (an idea from Rebecca Katz)
- Yogurt instead of sour cream
- Merguez (This spicy Moroccan sausage, available at Halal Market, is an excellent substitute for chorizo.)

Serves 4–6

## HORCHATA (RICE MILK) OR HALEEB MIN LAWZ (ALMOND MILK) WITH ROSEWATER

*This is the easiest way to make these drinks. It is quick and a little messy at the end, but the yield is worth it, especially on a hot summer day.*

- 2 cups almonds or brown rice
- ½ cup Rapadura sugar
- 1–2 teaspoons rosewater

Grind the almonds or brown rice in a food processor until coarse, but not a powder. Place in a pitcher and cover with 3–4 cups water. Use the smaller amount if you want a thicker drink. Let stand overnight with sugar, stirring occasionally. Strain out the pulp through a sieve or with cheesecloth. Add rosewater.

Serves 4–6



## FRESH PITA

- 2–3 cups whole wheat, spelt, or other wholegrain flour
- 1 cup warm water
- 1 tablespoon yeast or one packet
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons salt

Place the yeast and the sugar into a bowl. The sugar can be substituted with honey or molasses. Do not use a sugar substitute. The water needs to be warm to touch, but not uncomfortable. Remember yeast is a living organism and likes things warm and sweet, not hot. Add the water and leave the yeast stand until it bubbles, about 15 minutes. Once it bubbles, add one cup flour. Stir with a wooden spoon, then add salt.

At this point stirring this soupy mixture establishes the spongy matrix of the bread. Add olive oil and stir. Gradually add in enough flour to make a dough. When the dough begins to pull away from the sides of the bowl, turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface. Knead and add flour until you have a round ball that is not too stiff or moist and springs back when pushed. Make 1-inch balls and place them on a clean board and dust with flour. Cover with a clean cloth and allow to rise until they double in size. You can place them on the stovetop. At this point turn on the oven to 400–500 degrees. The oven needs to be this hot to simulate the traditional ovens used to make pita. Once the balls rise, roll them out to about ¼-inch thickness. (The thickness is important if you want to be sure that the pocket forms.) Place a piece of parchment in the oven and place the pita on it. They are done when they puff up. Remove immediately.

*Note:* The same dough can be used to make pizza crust. Let the whole ball of dough rise and then roll it out like you would a pizza. I like to add oregano to the dough.

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