

A TASTE OF HISTORY



CARLA GROSSETTI joins chef Anjum Anand to uncover the culinary secrets of India's Hyderabad.

Photography **Aparna Jayakumar**



Squares of char koni naan for sale at Munshi Naan Opposite: brightly dressed women in Hyderabad

INDIA



FROM TOP Anjum Anand examines produce near Charminar monument; brightly hued spices for sale in Laad Bazaar; a little girl in the streets of Hyderabad

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP The area around Charminar monument is always busy with traffic and street hawkers; Anjum (at right) speaks with women at Laad Bazaar



The warren of streets around Laad Bazaar in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad are thronged with men and women hawking everything from copper pots to strings of pearls, dried figs and dates, glittering plastic bangles and large vials of pungent pickles. All around are mobile vendors and makeshift stalls piled high with pakoras, papaya, limes, red onions, ginger, coriander, turmeric and coils of golden vermicelli. The harsh discordant sound of beeping horns is the city's soundtrack and the stallholders must put an extra edge into their shouts in order to lift their voices above the whirrs and clunks of the traffic around the iconic 16th-century Charminar monument.

When British-born chef, TV personality and author Anjum Anand slices through the dusty streets of the old city in the golden light of the afternoon, she causes a commotion as she stops near a man barbecuing skewers of mutton. A crowd gathers around Anand as she selects a sampler, marvelling at the beguiling spice mix of pepper, salt and cumin, along with the meltingly tender meat.

"I've always remembered mutton from my childhood visits to India, but what strikes me about Hyderabad is how much attention they pay to tenderising the meat," says Anand. She was born in London, spent time in Geneva, Paris and Madrid growing up, and inherited a love of Indian food from her Punjabi-immigrant parents.

"It is only through actually being here that you realise how important meat is to the people of Hyderabad. The mutton is tenderised in green papaya, and it just falls apart so beautifully."

Historically known as a pearl- and diamond-trading centre, modern-day Hyderabad is on the map for being home to more than 1000 global conglomerates, including Google and Facebook.

Anand is visiting the capital of the southern Indian state of Telangana to gather inspiration for The Spice Tailor, her sauce and chutney range. With the help of a local guide, Anand says she aims "to get to the heart of Hyderabad through its cuisine".

While the city has plenty of attractions and artistic treasures, it's the Hyderabadi biryani that most intrigues Anand, and she's thrilled to have been invited into the home of local culinary expert Mehboob Alam Khan to learn all about it.

Khan has dedicated decades to perfecting the city's signature dish and adheres to a recipe that he says dates back hundreds of years, to the kitchens of the Hyderabadi royalty. Like the skyline shaped by minarets and dome-shaped tombs, the biryani is a legacy of the Nizams who ruled Hyderabad for two centuries until 1947.

"I was about 15 when I made my first biryani and I learned this recipe from my mother. It follows the traditional method of cooking in a deg [a large pot-bellied copper pot] over a charcoal fire and sealing the lid with a circle of dough to keep the steam inside," says Khan, who is in his late 60s. "Although my family migrated from the North West Frontier Province [modern-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, near Pakistan], I am the fourth generation to be in Hyderabad. I feel like this is where I belong."

As Khan talks Anand through the secret of making a good biryani – "a true Hyderabadi biryani is made the kacchi [raw] way of cooking rice with raw mutton" – his words ring out like incantations, his way of speaking both direct and precise. When the giant deg arrives, Khan breaks the dough seal and Anand's eyes light up.

The fluffy white rice is dotted with rich, tender hunks of mutton, which is





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then piled onto platters and served alongside raita and mirchi ka salan (chilli and peanut curry). It’s a banquet fit for a Nazim, and 50 or so guests gather around the table that is also laden with dhal fry, creamy chicken with spices, mung bean masala, eggplants in peanut sauce, stuffed roasted chickens, a whole barbecued goat, a meat and lentil stew and chicken curry. To follow, there’s stewed apricot dessert, bread pudding and tea.

Despite not growing up in India, Anand is reverential about her Indian heritage and it’s a pride she shares with Khan, who is deeply committed to preserving the country’s ancient culinary traditions.

“If you’re interested in Indian food, the cuisine of Hyderabad is well worth understanding. It’s a cuisine that stands out above a lot of the others because it’s so refined, so pure. It is food that is not going to evolve because the people don’t want it to evolve – this is food that was fit for royalty and they are justifiably proud of that,” says Anand. “The flavour profiles present in Hyderabadi cuisine are so different. The Mughals didn’t like heat and spices and it’s because the food has such a strong Mughal history that it

FROM TOP A chai wallah; mutton skewers are a favourite Hyderabadi dish; young boys relax on a park bench

is so glaringly different from all other Indian cuisine. It gives me so much joy to learn about it.”

The next day, the air is humid and heavy as Anand again ventures into the city, where she pinballs from chai wallahs to stalls selling hand-churned ice cream. She stops to talk with a sari-clad streetside vendor barbecuing corn, and calls into a kebab shop serving pathar ka gosht (meat cooked on a hot stone). Anand’s tastebud-led tour also takes us to the cupboard-sized Munshi Naan, which has queues snaking around the block.

It’s here that Anand is invited to crouch alongside the roti wallah on a bare cement floor that is quivering in a film of heat. Anand watches as the young man expertly slaps the roti against the wall of a cement oven, which is black from years of cooking smoke. As Bollywood music blares in the background, the roti wallah cackles and sings, before leaning forward and plucking out a square of bread for Anand to try. “It’s soft on the inside and crisp on the outside but it’s not too dense or doughy. It’s unlike any naan I’ve eaten,” she says.

When Anand arrived in Hyderabad, she had no firsthand knowledge of the city. But the intimate experiences of sharing street food with locals and a feast with the city’s culinary king have left a lasting impression.

“Food is so much more interesting when you imagine its history. When Hyderabadi people talk about their favourite food, it is as if they are talking about a family member. The level of care and attention is enchanting. It’s like stepping through the centuries,” she says.

*** Carla Grossetti travelled as a guest of The Spice Tailor.**

HYDERABAD BIRYANI

SERVES 4-6

Preparation 45 minutes (plus 2-24 hours marinating time)
Cooking 1 hour 30 minutes

The Hyderabad biryani differs from others I’ve tried. It is delicate and fragrant; subtle but flavourful. The art is in achieving a harmonious flavour and cooking the meat and rice together to perfection. The green papaya tenderises the meat, but if you can’t find it you can leave it out.

vegetable oil for frying
2 onions, thinly sliced
500g lamb pieces (lean pieces of leg are ideal, with the bone in if possible)
4 large cloves garlic, crushed to a paste
10g ginger, peeled, crushed to a paste
½ tablespoon green papaya paste (optional, made by peeling a green papaya then grating the flesh)
1½ teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 heaped teaspoon garam masala
½ teaspoon red chilli powder or to taste
¾ teaspoon black cumin seeds, lightly pounded
2½ tablespoons lemon juice, plus 2 teaspoons extra
110g plain yoghurt
6 cloves
2 x 2-inch cinnamon quills
12 green cardamom pods
handful of chopped coriander leaves and stems, plus extra to serve
handful of chopped mint leaves, plus extra to serve
200g chapati flour or strong bread flour
500g good-quality basmati rice
large pinch saffron strands
4 tablespoons milk
green chillies to serve

Heat 5cm of oil in a saucepan, then gently fry the onions for 10-15 minutes or until just brown and crisp. Remove with a slotted spoon and set aside to drain and cool on paper towels. Reserve the oil.

Wash the lamb well, then pat dry with paper towels and prick all over with the point of a knife. Place the lamb in a bowl. Add the garlic, ginger, papaya paste, salt, pepper, garam masala, chilli, black cumin, 2 ½ tablespoons lemon juice and the yoghurt. Then add 3 tablespoons of the onion oil and two-thirds of the onions, crushed in your hands. Finally, add 3 cloves, 1 cinnamon quill, 6 cardamom pods and half the coriander and mint. Mix well with your hands to coat the lamb in the yoghurt and flavourings. Cover and marinate in the fridge for at least a few hours, or overnight if you have time.

When you are ready to cook, put the meat in a heavy-bottomed casserole dish or saucepan with a lid and allow the meat to come to room temperature.

Put the flour in a bowl and add around 150ml water, mixing to form a firm dough. Roll into a sausage as long as the diameter of the casserole or saucepan. Set aside.



Wash the rice well in several changes of water, then put in a bowl, cover with water and soak for 18-20 minutes.

Meanwhile, fill a large saucepan with water. Add the remaining 3 cloves, cinnamon, 6 cardamom pods, mint, coriander and 2 teaspoons lemon juice. Season with salt.

Fry the saffron in a dry saucepan over medium heat until crisp, then pour in the milk. Bring to a simmer and cook for 1-2 minutes, then remove from the heat.

Drain the rice, then add to the saucepan of water and spices. Bring to the boil, then boil for exactly 3 minutes. Drain, reserving the cooking water. Spoon the par-cooked rice over the lamb.

Add 100ml of the reserved hot rice cooking water to the milk and saffron, along with 4 tablespoons of the reserved onion oil. Pour this mixture evenly over the lamb and rice, then scatter with the remaining onions. Cover the dish with the lid, then use the dough to create an extra seal around the lid, pressing it onto the dish.

Place the dish on the stovetop over medium-high heat for 7 minutes, then reduce the heat to the lowest setting and cook for 50 minutes. Remove from the heat and stand for 10 minutes. Pull the dough off the dish and tear into pieces, then mix through the biryani. Serve topped with mint, coriander and chillies. **ANJUM ANAND**

Where to Eat

NIMRAH CAFE & BAKERY This is the place to try traditional sweet-salty osmania biscuits with a cup of chai. Opposite Charminar, Khilwat, Hyderabad

HYDERABAD HOUSE A popular choice for traditional dishes such as korma, mutton lukhmi and haleem. facebook.com/hydhouse

PARADISE FOOD COURT

A great spot to try haleem (a meat and lentil stew laced with herbs). paradisefoodcourt.com

BADE MIYAN KABABS This is the go-to place for pathar ka gosht – mutton cooked on a pre-heated stone.

Behind the Rama Dasu statue, Upper Tank Bund Rd, Hyderabad

MUNSHI NAAN Where to find arguably the city's best naan – the most popular is the char koni naan. Dabeer Pura Cross Rd, Purani Haveli, Old City, Hyderabad

THE JADE ROOM, TAJ

FALAKNUMA PALACE HOTEL This beautiful historic hotel serves fabulous high teas. tajhotels.com

RAYALASEEMA RUCHULU

A chain that serves up southern Indian dishes such as idli (savoury cakes) and dosa (crepes).

rayalaseemaruchulu.com

CHUTNEYS MENU An array of southern Indian, northern Indian and tandoor menus are available here. Follow the locals and order a thali (a selection of dishes).

Shilpa Arcade, Road 3,

Banjara Hills, Hyderabad

FAMOUS ICE CREAM

Appropriately named, this place's hand-churned ice

creams are indeed famous. Don't miss the mango.

Mozamjahi Market, Nizam Shahi Rd (opposite the Traffic Police Station), Old City, Hyderabad

Where to Stay

PARK HYATT A stylish, sleek modern hotel that also offers bespoke tours for visitors. hyderabad.park.hyatt.com

TAJ FALAKNUMA PALACE HOTEL

Built in 1894, this hotel was once home to royalty and still retains plenty of luxurious opulence, plus all the mod cons. tajhotels.com



Taj Falaknuma
Palace Hotel