



Who CARRIED THE KITCHEN INTO THE PRESENT?

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For centuries, women cooked and carried recipes from one generation to the next; yet their work was rarely considered a "profession," nor their knowledge recognized as "expertise."

At Seraf, Asma Khan, who placed the culinary knowledge of immigrant women at the heart of London's Darjeeling Express, joined Sinem Özler, whose work with women producers and cooperatives across Anatolia is integral to her cooking. That evening, more than two chefs came together: From Kolkata to Anatolia, two great repositories of women's culinary memory met at the same table.

Who carries the memory of a cuisine? Those who write its recipes into books, those who make them visible in restaurants, or those who cook the same dishes for years without ever writing them down, learning by watching their mothers and teaching their daughters in turn? That was the question running through my mind the other evening at Seraf, as I sat down to a dinner prepared by Asma Khan and Sinem Özler. Because what I was witnessing was not simply a meeting of India and Anatolia, but the story of women who have sustained the cuisines of two different geographies for centuries, yet whose names have so often been absent from the written history of gastronomy.

Many of the skills we now define as technical knowledge in gastronomy were, for centuries, simply part of women's everyday lives. Perhaps that is precisely why they



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but it was not called "expertise." Asma Khan's story is one of the most compelling examples of how that invisible boundary can be crossed.

Raised in Kolkata, Khan was not a professional cook when she moved to England after getting married. Homesickness drew her back to India, to the kitchens of her mother and the women in her family; she learned the dishes of her childhood and returned to London. She began by hosting meals at home, followed by supper clubs and, in 2017, Darjeeling Express. Over the years, Netflix's "Chef's Table" brought her story to a global audience, while TIME named her among the 100 most influential people in the world. Today, she is one of the most recognizable figures in international gastronomy. Yet to me, the real power of her story lies in the women with whom she chose to build her kitchen.

A significant number of the women in the Darjeeling Express kitchen had migrated to Britain from South Asia and had no formal culinary training. They had not worked in celebrated restaurants, but they had spent years feeding their families; they could recognize spices by their aroma, understand dough through touch and judge the consistency of a dish by sight. What Asma did was simple, yet radical: She recognized knowledge acquired in the home kitchen as professional knowledge. And she did not

were not valued highly enough: It was labor, but it was not considered a "profession"; it was knowledge,



stop there.

This is precisely what made seeing Asma beside Sinem Özler at Seraf so meaningful to me. Because at the heart of Sinem's relationship with Anatolian cuisine are the similarly invisible heroines of another geography. She travels across Anatolia, works with women's cooperatives and small-scale producers and seeks to learn



dishes as close to their source as possible. She brings into the restaurant kitchen the knowledge carried by women who dry tarhana, prepare bulgur, simmer tomato paste, make cheese and know exactly when wild herbs should be gathered.

There is an important distinction here. Sourcing bulgur, noodles, tomato paste or cheese from a women's cooperative is not simply a matter of "using local produce." Behind that product is a person who understands the seed, the season, the methods of preservation, the right texture and the right moment — and, very often, the accumulated experience of several generations. What is being sourced, then, is not merely an ingredient, but an entire system of knowledge that has developed around it. That is why I believe Sinem's relationship with local producers is better understood not through the language of supply chains, but through that of cultural continuity.

In fact, a significant part of Anatolian cuisine was never written down. A mother did not tell her daughter to "add 200 grams of flour"; she showed her how the dough should feel. A grandmother did not say, "boil it for 18 minutes"; she taught her to know when it was ready by its color. Culinary knowledge often survived not through written recipes, but as a memory passed from hand to hand.

And this is where the stories of Asma and Sinem meet. One brings knowledge learned in the homes of immigrant women in London into the heart of a professional kitchen; the other makes vis-

ible in Istanbul the knowledge Anatolian women have safeguarded for generations. Thousands of kilometers separate them, yet the underlying truth is the same: the women who made the food were always there; the world of gastronomy simply took much longer to see them.

The evening's menu told that story beautifully. Asma's tomato raita, fish cakes and chutney; Sinem's imam bayıldı, Çeşme artichoke, chard rolls with lor cheese, Seraf's içli köfte and Zirva from the Ottoman culinary tradition... And then came the dish that seemed to encapsulate Asma's entire story in just three words: "My Mother's Chicken Biryani." To me, the secret of the evening lay right there. If, even after becoming a chef known around the world, you still name a dish after your mother, you are also telling us something fundamental about how culinary culture survives.

Perhaps one of the most contemporary acts in gastronomy today is precisely this: Rather than changing the past, making visible those who carried it into the present.

That evening at Seraf, it was not simply two women chefs who entered the same kitchen, but two great repositories of women's culinary memory. One carried the memory of South Asian women from Kolkata to London; the other, the knowledge of women from the villages of Anatolia to Istanbul.

Their geographies were different. Their spices, techniques and ingredients were different. But the hands that carried their cuisines into the present were the same.