

*"I cooked all night, i cooked all day,
driving the cold hungry blues away
mmmm-mm, i got em on the run
-Po' Girl, "Cold Hungry Blues"*

"Mummy, how do you make *halvah*?"

"*Halvah*? Ok... Start by soaking the raisins, then melt some butter in a pan. You'll want equal amounts of butter, *sooji*, and sugar...*Kyoon?*," came my Mother's response, muffled by her signal-starved cell phone. She had to know exactly why I did anything. Even in college, I talked to my mother on the phone almost daily. I had watched her create the sweet, tasty *halvah* numerous times. Raisins became plump as water diffused into them, and the butter melted easily at my Mother's skilled fingertips, releasing an enticingly rich aroma.

"Then start frying the *sooji* slowly," Mom continued. I imagined how the soft, sandy-looking grain fell from her hands into the butter, spreading tiny particles into the air as it fell. With a few quick strokes and just the right amount of time, she transformed the ordinary *sooji*, like many other things, into something amazing. I remember watching it change from fine white sand to an appetizing culinary delight.

"When it turns brown, add the sugar water," she finished, and I noted this final direction in a blue notebook in which I had recently started to collect recipes.

"One cup water and one cup sugar, right?" I too had made *halvah* numerous times. The one time I tried to teach it, however, my *halvah* resembled a well-garnished version of southern style grits caking into an iceberg in a small lake of butter.

"How brown does it have to be?" I asked, remembering my embarrassing past

mishap. Serving something like runny sweet grits to girls raised on steaks and leafy salads would not bode well for their undecided opinions of Indian cuisine – the food had to be just right. I was determined to move away from my amateur dark, pungent, over-spiced creations to my mother’s lighter, more seasoned cooking with its delicately balanced spices and distinct flavors.

“Ok, then I just let it boil down and it’s done?”

“Right.”

“How about *baingan ka bhartha? Usme kounse masale dalte hain?*” I needed a reminder of which spices to add to my mother’s favorite eggplant dish. Without either of us noticing, our conversation switched to Hindi. Somehow, neither my mother nor I can easily recall the esoteric names of spices in English.

“*Mirchi, dhania, aur namak.* Nothing else,” she answered, switching between languages effortlessly. “Why do you want to make all this?” she asked.

“Just for fun.”

“No, really, why are you asking?”

The truth was that I planned to cook a full Indian dinner for fifty, a dinner party debut of sorts. I avoided telling her because she would object to me struggling through the labor of a fifty-person meal. Or perhaps it was guilt: many of my Indian peers, even in college, would eat primarily their mothers’ cooking either by receiving dry ice lined shipments of home-cooked food in the mail, or bringing back a large full cooler each visit home.

“Do you ever wish that I had done that for you?” she would ask, at which I would always reply with pride, “no, of course not; you *taught* me how to cook. Now I can have fresh home-style food whenever I want. Getting food from home is for spoiled Indian

boys anyway,” I half-joked, hoping to make her laugh. My mother and I frequently joked about Indian mothers’ tendency to spoil their sons; we accuse both my grandmothers of doing this.



Using my Mother’s advice and notes from my recipe notebook, I plan my cooking. I envision fifty people eating and enjoying food from a buffet table full of spicy, colorful, authentic Indian dishes that I will create. I eagerly descend the carpeted flights of stairs from my room to the kitchen. The ten gargantuan gas burners greet me, along with a rather intimidating set of giant-sized pots and pans that I can barely lift when full. The kitchen has a lingering warmth from frequent, careful use, and remnants of conversation floating in and out. The almost sterilely clean restaurant-sized kitchen seems industrial but feels simultaneously cozy.

Knowing I have only three hours to cook, I put on music and quickly set to work. I soak raisins, rice, lentils, onions, tomatoes and cucumbers, put water on the stove to boil, and warm olive oil in the bottom of a large cauldron for *daal*. To cook the six different dishes in time, I stagger them as my mother would.

As I peacefully settle into the rhythm of chopping, first onions and ginger, then tomatoes, my mind wanders back to my mother’s kitchen, which she designed herself. It has an island stove and a granite counter with wooden barstools across from it so my sister and I could keep her company while she cooked. I remember spending many hours on those stools studying, listening, talking, and watching while she enchanted simple vegetables, beans, and grains to become delicious *sabzis*, *daals* and *rotis*, perfect every

time. I would ask, “how can you come home from running a company and still cook every night?” And she simply replied, “it’s relaxing,” as a *roti* seemed to step off the *tava*, inflating at her slightest touch. Such a dramatically bloated *roti* happens only with precise combination of the right pressure, temperature and time. I would call them “balloons” as a child. At that point, I did not understand how a task requiring so much precision and skill could be “relaxing”.

By now, the water is boiling vigorously and I can smell the warm olive oil. After submerging a bushel of potatoes in the boiling water, now calmer, I add one tiny *jeera* seed to test the warmth of the oil the way my mother taught me. I stand on my toes to peer over the side of the tall pot and see the oil bubble and *jeera* seed dance, indicating that the oil is hot enough. I add two more tablespoons *jeera*, ten times more than what my Mother uses to make daal for my family. When I was just learning to cook *bhindi*, she would instruct me, “now add *garam masala*.” I would take a heaping spoonful of the pungent brown powder using a small metal spoon from inside her matching tin spice box. I would hold it up for her approval. “Add about half of that more,” she would assess by merely looking at it. She never measured. She always knew *exactly* what to add, and this ability still eludes me.

The *daal* simmers, bubbling gently as I finish peeling the potatoes. I broiled five large eggplant in the oven (my mother’s own shortcut) the previous day. They are an unappetizing thick, seedy, brownish-green mush. I add the eggplant mush to already frying onions, garlic, ginger, tomatoes and coriander to make the exquisite *bhartha*. With the lentil *daal* and *bhartha* noisily gurgling and sloshing about in their army-sized pots,

the kitchen fills with a thick, comforting aroma of Indian spices, completing my nostalgia. My college recreation of my mother's kitchen is immensely satisfying, and even comforting. I am reminded of home by Po' Girl's song *Cold Hungry Blues* ("I cooked all night, and I cooked all day") and marvel at the balance Mom was able to create. She ran a successful company by day, and was a loving, doting mother by night.

Finishing my cooking, I bring out the thick, brown lentil *daal*, still simmering *bhartha*, and the lightly fried yellow potato *sabzi* along with accompaniments: fragrant yellow rice adorned with cashews, and tangy cucumber *raita*. Finally, I present the *halva*. Rather than a curdled mass of wheat, it turned out thick, rich, and full of almonds and raisins. Standing back, I see the buffet table from my imagination come to life: large, steaming quantities of flavorful food recreate the culinary delight of home, only that the amounts are multiplied many times.

My housemates and a couple of Indian friends I've invited over (to judge the authenticity) eagerly enter, curious from the aromas that have drifted from the kitchen. They gingerly nibble the unfamiliar food at first, but their second and third helpings get larger and larger. They comment, "wow, I'm not afraid of Indian food anymore," or, more encouragingly "I'm really full and it's all your fault!" Perhaps the best was "I'd consider being vegetarian if the food was always like this," from an otherwise carnivorous housemate. Joining them, I arranged rice, daal, and raita in my plate and sat down at the table. I took a spoonful of rice, covered it in *daal* and added a hint of *raita* in just the right proportions like my mother does. Although it tastes like home, familiar and comforting, I know I have a lot to learn.

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