

Preface

I became interested in Afghanistan at school after reading a book about the country and its culture and traditions. It sounded such a fascinating and interesting place that I became determined to visit it one day.

I had always been interested in foreign lands and had already travelled quite a bit. So after finishing school and secretarial college I applied for a job with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I worked first in London and then was posted to Warsaw. Soon after, I was posted from there to Kabul, Afghanistan. I was absolutely delighted and thrilled to be sent to one of the places where I had always wanted to go.

I arrived in Afghanistan in March 1971. I flew in a very small aeroplane from Peshawar to Kabul over the mountains and the famous Khyber Pass. It looked so barren, mountainous and dusty that I must admit I wondered if I had made a mistake in going there. However, after this somewhat daunting first impression I grew to love Afghanistan – its stark and stunning scenery, its barren and dusty deserts, the brilliant blue skies, snow clad mountains, lush green valleys, and the colourful and bustling bazaars; but most of all I loved it for the wonderful, hospitable people. During my first year I travelled around the country as much as possible and met many Afghans including my future husband. After a short engagement, we were married in England in 1972. When we returned to live in Afghanistan, I was offered a locally-engaged post at the British Embassy. I had the best of both worlds—I kept my links with Britain, while at the same time I became an Afghan. I quickly learned the language of Dari, and during the next eight years travelled around most parts of the country. I became very interested in the culture and traditions of the people and in their food and customs.

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We entertained a lot at home and even for our non-Afghan friends we nearly always cooked Afghan food. I have lots of happy and fond memories of hours spent in the kitchen with my maid, and also my friend, Gulbadan, and my mother-in-law, preparing ashak, boulanee, pilau, and many other specialities and delicacies. I extended my knowledge of Afghan food and traditions in the best way possible, by being the guest of many families from different tribes and backgrounds and tasting all kinds of regional specialities on my travels.

I lived in Afghanistan until March 1980, when due to the Soviet invasion and occupation, the escalating fighting and civil disturbances, we decided reluctantly that it was time

to leave. However, although we left most of our material belongings behind and some of our family and dear friends, I am fortunate still to have my memories, together with a tremendous love for Afghans and Afghanistan.

I often prepare Afghan food at home in London. My husband especially enjoys ashak, pilau dishes and kebabs. My nine-year-old son, Alexander, has a particular liking for nan and kebabs. When he smells nan baking, his eyes light up and he cannot wait for the bread to come out of the oven and to eat it while it is still warm and very fresh.

I decided to write this cookery book, not only because I think Afghan food will appeal to many people in the West, but, also because I felt that it would be a contribution, however small, to the Afghan cause. Afghanistan and the Afghans will not easily be forgotten. I also believe that it will be a valuable record of Afghan cookery and its rich, varied traditions, which if the political situation does not change, may well be lost in a short time. The war is having terrible effects on the Afghan people, resulting in a massive exodus of refugees to countries all over the world and a consequent dispersal and destruction of their culture.

Many men, women and children are without food, medicines or shelter. An Afghan cookery book is perhaps especially poignant at the present time because there is a real threat of famine inside Afghanistan. Royalties from the sale of this book will go direct to charitable organizations working inside Afghanistan, to provide the food and medicines which are so desperately needed.

Preface to the Second Edition

One of the main reasons for writing the first edition of this book was to record Afghan culinary traditions and recipes, which I felt might be lost due to the war in Afghanistan. I also wanted to contribute, in a small way, to the Afghan cause and to help prevent Afghanistan from being forgotten. Many men, women and children were without food, medicines or shelter and the war had resulted in a massive exodus of refugees to countries all over the world and a consequent dispersal and erosion of their culture.

Sadly, more than a dozen years later, the situation in Afghanistan is even worse. Civil war continues; ethnic group is fighting ethnic group; many men, women and children have been killed; thousands of children have become orphans; millions may be starving; women's rights are non-existent; and a whole generation has known nothing but war and deprivation. The refugees who fled to the West are still refugees and many more have fled because of the continued fighting. (North America, by the way, is where most of the refugees are, and where, in consequence, there has been a considerable growth of interest in Afghan food.)

So, it is just as important now as it was in the mid-1980s

to record the foods and traditions and recipes. Certainly, Afghans think so. I have been greatly heartened by the response my book has had from many of them now living in different corners of the world. They have sent me much constructive, helpful advice and information about Afghan food and cookery in all the variety which the presence of so many ethnic groups in one country has brought about. I was particularly delighted when many told me that they had bought my book to give to their children, many of whom left Afghanistan at a very early age and do not remember much about the traditions and customs. It has been an honour and pleasure for me to help them to know more about their own food culture and how to cook Afghan-style.

My husband has delved into his memory and produced many new delights for me, such as the jams, qormas and pilaus which his mother and grandmother used to make. He has also translated some of Mr Abdullah Afghanzada's wonderful book, *Local Dishes of Afghanistan*, which is an almost definitive collection of Afghan foods and recipes in the Farsi language. My husband and I have adapted some of his excellent recipes to suit present-day requirements, while still retaining their authenticity. So, there are quite a few new recipes, seventy altogether. Also, I have replaced some recipes where I have found better ones. And I have taken account of the ingenuity with which Afghan refugees in the West have devised shortcuts, for example using wonton wrappers in place of the special pastry for mantu and ashak.

This is not a scholarly work, but I have tried where possible to include interesting new information about Afghan life, foods and traditions, which I have read or learned about over the years.

I am sure that my readers will join me in hoping that one day there will be stability and peace in Afghanistan and that all the diverse ethnic groups of Afghanistan will once again come together with understanding and tolerance and rebuild their beautiful country.

Introduction

Afghanistan is situated at the meeting place of four major cultural areas: the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Far East. It is because of this geographical position that Afghanistan became the crossroads for many invading armies from different places each with their own culture. These marauding armies, often passing through Afghanistan, journeying further afield, realized the advantages of maintaining strongholds here and paused for a while.

In the fourth century BC, Alexander the Great conquered Afghanistan on his way to India; in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries AD, Afghanistan was plundered by Genghis Khan and the Mongols en route to the Middle and Near East. Babur, founder of the Moghul Empire in India and a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, began his rise to power in Kabul and is buried in his favourite garden on a hill in Kabul, the Bagh-e-Babur Shah. The conqueror Nader Shah Afshar invaded and conquered Afghanistan in the eighteenth century on his way to India recruiting Afghan fighters to serve with his troops. The British in India were twice invaders in the nineteenth century.

Afghan dynasties, in their turn, have flourished and at various times extended their influence to parts of Central Asia, India, Iran and even China. From the Kushans, to the Ghaznavid sultans, to the Durrani rulers, such spheres of influence have contributed much to the rich patterns of civilization.

Because of its special position in Central Asia, Afghanistan was also a crossroads on the ancient Silk Routes connecting Europe with the Far East. Traders and merchants from many countries travelled there, including the famous Venetian traveller Marco Polo. This traffic brought many imported items such as Chinese tea and Indian spices, all of which have had a great influence on Afghan cuisine.