

By JULIE SAHNI

**I**N a small restaurant in Queens, Kaneez Fatima, a 31-year-old Pakistani woman, stands over a tandoor, lowering giant skewers of meat into the flaming pit and slapping hand-stretched breads along the scorchingly hot inner walls. It is an extraordinary sight because in becoming a tandoori chef she has rocked an age-old Muslim tradition.

Tandoori cooking in a public Muslim setting has been an exclusively male field. One reason is that working at the tandoor — the ancient clay oven shaped like a lidless barrel with glowing charcoal at the bottom, heated to more than 800 degrees — requires a certain daredevilry once considered a male purview.

Second, many Muslim women practice the custom of purdah, which bars any public activity. Finally, only men in Muslim societies have been considered responsible enough to be entrusted with cooking meat, a meal's most costly ingredient.

Ms. Fatima, born in Pakistan into the Machi caste of tandoori cooks, seems to have this cooking in her blood. It is a style that features marinated lean meats and breads. As a child Ms. Fatima, whose parents operate a tandoori bakery in Pakistan, remembers being surrounded by the fragrance of fermenting doughs, smoky breads and the earthy scent of the tandoor lingering in the air.

"Tandoor, to us, is like a plow is to a farmer," she said. "It's our life and soul. We know its every little idiosyncrasy."

The training of boys and girls as tandoori cooks begins as early as age 3, though it is understood that girls will discontinue it later. "The first thing we learn is to handle the dough," Ms. Fatima said. "Then, for the next few years, we learn to stretch and shape it into a bread, but we are not yet allowed to bake it. We have to be old enough — at least 10 years of age — to work at the tandoor." Ms. Fatima has been baking since age 11.

She was married at 14 and remained in purdah while raising her four children. Like other married Muslim women, she did not do tan-

doori cooking in public but later decided she wanted to return to it.

What Ms. Fatima wanted most was to come to the United States and work in a big tandoori restaurant. A Pakistani family living in California sponsored her as a personal cook five years ago, and she came to this country. But the real turning point was in 1985 when she visited Shahjahan, a Pakistani restaurant in Redondo Beach, Calif., with friends. She remembers criticizing the tandoori nan, or bread, on her plate as a "piece of leather." The owner challenged her into the kitchen. While her friends were still thinking it was some kind of joke, she was at the tandoor baking nan, crusty yet pliable. The next day the restaurant had a new tandoori chef: Kaneez Fatima.

For the past year and a half, Ms. Fatima has been at Shaheen, 73-10 37th Avenue, in Jackson Heights, Queens, a moderately priced Indian restaurant, where she shares the responsibilities with Narain Singh Katwai, the senior tandoori chef. She is up front at the tandoor, baking and roasting, while he is in the back kitchen mixing spices and marinating chickens. She credits the support and help of her many male colleagues for much of her success. "Men in the kitchen have been good to me," she said. "Instead of hating my guts, they admire my courage."

"Being the only woman in tandoori cooking has some advantages, too," Ms. Fatima said with a smile. "Mr. Katwai has taught me marinating secrets a tandoori chef seldom divulges."

Ms. Fatima seems content until one raises the subject of home. She is torn between two ambitions, one to return to Pakistan to her children and open the restaurant of her dreams and one to bring them to this country. But she hopes always to be "but a stone's throw from a tandoor."

She advises novice tandoori cooks to prepare themselves psychologically for the task. "Most people are afraid of the tandoor because they fear the heat and fire," she said. "It is like standing next to a tiger. The one in control wins, like a master of the tiger act in the circus. Then the tandoori cooking will seem fun, almost child's play."

# A Woman Blazes Trails At Tandoor

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Kaneez Fatima has broken with tradition by becoming a tandoori chef.

The New York Times/Dith Pran

## Tandoori Chicken

Preparation time:  
6 minutes, plus 8 hours  
for marinating  
Cooking time:  
10 to 25 minutes

1 chicken, 2½ pounds, quartered  
1 teaspoon salt, or to taste  
1 cup plain yogurt  
1 tablespoon lemon juice  
1 tablespoon white vinegar  
2 teaspoons garlic paste  
2 teaspoons fresh ginger paste  
1½ teaspoons garam masala (see note)

### 3 tablespoons vegetable oil.

1. Remove skin from chicken and trim fat. Make diagonal slashes, ½ inch deep, along the grain (6 on each leg and 4 on each half breast). Rub salt in slashes and put the chicken in a bowl.

2. Mix in all other ingredients, except oil, and pour over chicken. Mix well, cover and marinate chicken for 8 hours or overnight in refrigerator. Take chicken from the refrigerator at least 1 hour before cooking.

3. Light a tandoor or prepare a covered charcoal grill or preheat an oven to 550 degrees. Remove chicken from marinade; coat lightly with oil.

4. For tandoori cooking, thread chicken pieces on long tandoor skew-

ers and roast in a tandoor for 10 minutes or until cooked. For charcoal grilling, place chicken pieces on the rack and barbecue, covered, with the vents open, turning 3 to 4 times, without basting, for 25 minutes, or until juices run clear when a knife is pierced at the joint. For oven roasting, set chicken pieces over racks in a baking dish and roast for 20 to 25 minutes, until done.

Yield: 2 to 4 servings.

NOTE: Garam masala, a blend of spices, is widely available in Indian grocery stores. To make your own, combine 1½ teaspoons ground cumin, 1 teaspoon each ground coriander, ground cardamom and ground black pepper, ¼ teaspoon each ground cloves and ground bay leaf.

## The Right Way

**W**ITH increased awareness of harmful effects of high cholesterol levels, more Americans are opting for grilled meats and light marinades. Tandoori food, made with lean meats, marinated in spicy yogurt, is low in fat and cholesterol yet delightfully flavorful.

A tandoor, shaped like a lidless barrel, is a wood-charcoal-burning clay oven. While the space within the tandoor holds a grill used to cook meats, the inner surface of the tandoor is used for baking breads.

"The right density of the clay is important," said Ron Levy, the leading manufacturer of tandoor ovens in America. The ovens cost from \$500 to \$600, with installation costs ranging from \$800 to \$2,000. They can be installed by any mason.

To make nan, or tandoori bread, most chefs use a cushion technique that insures uniformly shaped loaves.

The tandoori cushion, made of cotton, is an eight-inch round pillow, four inches thick. Its size is governed by the size of the loaves desired, so it is usually custom sewn by tandoori chefs.

The cushion, with the stretched dough on top, is placed in the tandoor and the dough side is pressed against the inner surface.

The moist dough sticks instantly to the hot tandoor wall, releasing itself from the cushion. The cushion is then taken out. Since all this happens in a few seconds, there is no danger of burning either hand or cushion. Special skewers are used to get the nan out.

For more information on tandoor installation for your restaurant or home, contact Ron Levy Ltd., 238 Mulberry Street, New York, N.Y. 10012, 212-226-8805.