

OF HEARTY MEALS AND POIGNANT STORIES

We at *JetWings* were introduced to a unique culinary experience by Traveling Spoon, one which connects travellers from all over the world with local hosts in the country they're visiting, to share the joy of a homemade meal and learn about their cultural and culinary traditions passed down the generations. Eager to try this, we zoned in on popular Parsi food blogger and chef Perzen Patel who runs 'Bawi Bride'.

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The food experience started with Perzen, whose smile is contagious by the way, giving me a tour of Malcom Baug, ('baug' being a popular term used to refer to the gated colonies of the Parsi community) in Mumbai where she runs her kitchen. We walked along the pleasant tree-lined lanes of the colony dotted with short two-storey buildings and quaint bungalows, some even dating back 100 years! She shared anecdotes and talked passionately about Parsi heritage and culture and how she would, in her childhood days, travel to this baug in Jogeshwari, all the way from Tardeo when she was little, and how it felt like a long, long trip back then. Today this baug is bang-centre in the bustling city and this is where she cooks and shares food experiences and tales.

The pretty-as-a-picture Jer Villa, built in 1928, was where we were going to spend

the afternoon cooking and chatting over Parsi cuisine. She indulged me with stories about her childhood Sunday meals, and how it was such a set menu—kebabs for breakfast, dhansak for lunch and cutlets for dinner — that till she was eight or nine, this is what she thought all Sunday meals were like everywhere!

She's a foodie, you can tell, because her eyes light up and she beams ear-to-ear, "but," she adds, "for me, it's not just about the food, it's about the stories behind the food." She shares how on a trip to Delhi she met a senior Parsi lady, Dhun aunty who manages the Delhi Dharamsala, who told her about how her husband had wooed her with Chutney Eeda Pattices, till she finally fell in love with him and they were married!

She also shares how her own grandfather would make his famous kheema kebabs, a



Perzen Patel



▲ Left and right:
Salli Par Eedu;
Kheema Kebabs

dish we were going to try during the food experience, that she loved so much and how he gave it his own twist with a rava coating, rather than the standard egg coat.

But chatting aside, we had to get down to business. Being my first food experience, I assumed I would watch the chef cook, while I chatted with her, only to enjoy all the food later. But Perzen handed me the apron and asked me to get to work, saying she would need my help to cook the meal for the day; I was excited! I would be trying my hand at Parsi food for the first time ever. Starting off with what is probably the most well-known Parsi dish, dhansak, she listed the ingredients that would go into the 'dal-meets-meat' dish. She even shared trade secrets! Apparently it is from the popular store, M. Motilal Masalawala at Grant Road that most Parsis in the city prefer buy their masalas from. There's even a special dhansak masala especially for this dish. Other unique masalas are the sambhar masala (not to be confused with the south Indian version) and the dhana-jeera powder, which is not your average dhania-jeera powder, but an aromatic concoction of these two, plus mustard oil and a few other powders. Following her lead and her instructions, the dhansak began to take shape. What followed next was the prep for the next dish, salli par eedu, or egg on potato straws. We made this with a mixture of finely chopped tomato and spices laid in a pan, topped off with whisked eggs, or *eedu*, that is left to cook and then garnished with golden potato straws, or *salli*. *Salli* is a favourite in Parsi cuisine but only after *eedu*. Somewhere in the middle of putting together this meal, we even plucked fresh *kadipata* (curry leaves) for one of the dishes from a tall tree in the backyard!

With our dishes ready, we sat down to wonderful, warm hearty meal of dhansak, salli par eedu, kheema kebabs and brown rice (basmati rice that is caramelised with jaggery and masalas), which we devoured over more conversation about her food. I spotted Perzen's menu and she told me how it is dotted with dishes that are named after the people who inspired it or who the recipe came from, such as the Bawi Sasu ni Kaju Chicken from her mother-in-law, Mamaiji's Prawn Red Curry inspired by her grandma, and those delicious Grandpa's Cocktail Kheema Kebabs that we'd just relished.

She also reveals, "I call myself the 'Bawi Bride' as I only learnt how to cook Parsi food once I got married." She was studying in Canada and met her future husband, whom she calls "a pukka Bawa" in Miami when her mother told her he was a friend's son and she should reach out to him if need be. As luck would have it, the two met and fell in love and married a few years later. Post-marriage, late-night calls to her mother for traditional Parsi recipes that she

could impress the family with led to her tryst with the cuisine. As if delectable food and heartwarming stories weren't enough, Perzen warned, "Save space for dessert." And what better way to end the meal with than Lagan nu Custard, a traditional Parsi baked custard treat that gets its name from the fact that it is often served at weddings.

With a full stomach and a smile, I thanked her and was ready to leave, after procuring a couple of extra Lagan nu Custards for later. Her parting message came in the form of a sweet printed note that she put into my takeaway bag that read, 'When in doubt, break an *eeda* on it!' Duly noted.

If this is what it was like meeting a foodie in my own city, thanks to Traveling Spoon, I can't wait to travel and try more food experiences and share stories with another local or two.

For more information, log on to www.travelingspoon.com



▲ Dhansak
with brown rice