

THOUGHT CRAFT

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Small child eating cake at my home: "Mummy I can't eat this, it is hard as rock!" Well, from the mouths of babes....

We had arrived in Cairo on our first posting, and the Ambassador and family had come to tea. I had baked strawberry cake from what was supposed to be a full proof cake mix.

My mother would have laughed and reminded me of the times she took me to the kitchen to train me up for homemaking. Unfortunately, the kitchen had two doors, so as she entered through one door, I would slip out of the other.

Culinary disasters became a part of my life. After one dinner at our home, the Ambassador and his wife were sick all night, as there was too much chilly in the food.

The Embassy ladies finally decided that I needed help. The Press Attaché's wife replaced my maid with a cleverer one, whom she then coached in roti making, lentils, curry, and other essential recipes. The Ambassador's wife sent me her cook to give me lessons, and another lady called regularly to see how my housekeeping was progressing.

The clever maid mastered the art of fine cooking, and even stayed on to take care



of the officer who succeeded us in Cairo; and I was free to enjoy all the sights and pleasures of life in a beautiful country.

When we got to Paris, I had to confront the pots and pans again. I realised I was still in trouble when an Afghan dinner guest said, "What interesting pulao you all eat, some grains hard and some grains soft..."

Luckily, my mother-in-law came to visit, and I became the chef's assistant. I chopped onions, peeled potatoes, scrubbed the pots, and did the grocery shopping.

I learned how to make "panee bhaji," meat curry without ginger, baghara aloo bharta, ghee dal, and the varied assort-

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ment of comfort dishes that were so useful for daily meals. An aunt-in-law sent me a marvellous recipe for the perfect Shahi Tukra, the like of which I have never eaten to this day...

When the time came for my mother-in-law to leave Paris, I felt like holding on to her sleeve and saying "Don't leave me! Don't go!"

I should have embraced each and every lady of the Cairo Embassy, and even some in the Paris mission, for all the warmth and



help they provided when I was young and inexperienced in the arts of cooking.

Anyway, nothing in life comes easily. I used to make visits into the kitchen in

Dhaka to practise new recipes, but with uneven results. My young son of three, who had to eat my cooking, saw me go in to the kitchen one day, and he went running to his Aya, exclaiming, "Hai hai, aaj key Amma aabar raandhbey!"

Those years are behind me now, but I still depend on the good offices of dear friends. One friend gave me the cook lady I have had for twenty years. Another dear friend gave me family recipes that I wrote down in an exercise book, which is now tattered but historical. And I have passed it on to my daughter, who seems to have inherited her Dadee's gift for cooking.

I did become a decent cook in the end, though.

My son, then living in London off restaurant cooking, would send me messages saying, "Ma, bring your chef's cap and apron, the pots and pans are calling your name, and I need aloo keema!" My daughter would call to ask what to put in Family Bhuna Gosht, and my brother-in-law loved my soups, casseroles, and pasta.

Tahira Kabir, an important Aunt in her time, said I made a good Murgh Pulao. Coming from her, that was high praise; indeed, the ultimate accolade!

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