

The Recipe of Life

My mother is a phenomenal home cook. She is infamous for her self-taught culinary skills in our friends, family, and extended circles. A few of her recipes have been published in several local magazines. When I was about ten, she made an appearance as a guest chef on a renowned Pakistani national television show called ‘Zauq.’ On the show, she taught her recipe for making *biryani*. My mother is one of those chefs who love to share their recipes and food. Whenever I visit her, I will often find her on the phone telling someone how to cook something with special tips and tricks that make just the world’s difference in any recipe.

I did not develop a love for cooking until I was well into my twenties. I would slink away from the kitchen every time my mother called me in to help her. Riding the high horse of the misconstrued definition of liberalism and feminism, I argued that cooking was men’s cleverly executed plan to domesticate women. And I was not one to be domesticated, and so I vowed cooking was not for me. As I have advanced in years and in knowledge, I am still a feminist, but now I know being a feminist has nothing to do with cooking. It is simply a call for equal rights for women. My husband and I both cook at home, just like we share all other responsibilities. In the early days of our marriage, however, we both had no idea how to cook anything. In those days, my mother and Skype were my saviors.

On my first Valentine’s Day with my husband, I had the unrealistically ambitious urge to cook a grand meal at home and surprise him. My husband is fond of traditional South-Asian cuisine, so I decided to roast a chicken tikka. I called my mother, as usual, and she guided me on how to prep, marinate and cook the chicken on the stovetop using just yogurt, oil, and basic spices. Over two hours and a disaster of a kitchen later, the tikka chicken in its amber glory was ready for the oven; the oven I had to that day never used. As fate would have it, the oven was

broken. “Ami, there is no oven to bake the chicken in,” I wailed, over-dramatizing my failing Valentine. My mother is not someone who falls for my theatrics, and with her usual grace and composure, she said something that is my first rule of cooking now, “make use of what you have and don’t let conventions stop you. You don’t need an oven to roast the chicken. You can do it on the stove in the biggest pot you have.” In the meantime, she also advised me to make rice with tomatoes to complement the chicken. I followed her directions, and two hours later, I had a much fancier meal ready than I ever could have envisioned. That is just one example of how my mother can transform any situation and prevent disaster.

Not too long after, my husband and I experienced our first real challenge as a married couple. We suffered a miscarriage and lost the baby in the early stages of pregnancy. We were caught off-guard by the sheer intensity of emotions that cascaded upon us within eight weeks. We were young and unprepared to deal with the grief we didn’t expect to experience early in our marriage. As my hormones and mental health took a sharp dip, my husband also receded in the shadows of unrealistic guilt of failing to protect his family. I decided to go back to my mother’s house for some time. I arrived at a messy array of depressive tears and a newfound pessimistic outlook on life. At Ami’s home, I finally found comfort. Of course, Ami’s way of comfort is through food. One day as I stood in the kitchen watching my mother chop tomatoes for her famous tomato chutney and simultaneously cleaning the kitchen, I wondered how Ami was always so calm in the face of any crises. I have never ever seen my Ami cry. Not even when cutting onions! And Ami has lived through her share of life’s challenges. She had nursed her sick parents, watched them in pain, and stood over their graves with a resilient face. She had stood with my father when he was struggling to earn even a hundred rupees to buy us food. I saw Ami when she was informed that our youngest brother was autistic, and without missing a beat, she

said, “SubhanAllah” (Praise be to God). However, she always smiled in front of us. In a sea of calamities, she has always been a force of peaceful solitude. Like a magnet, her peace automatically pulls us to her, and we cling to her absorbing her energy until her light has recharged us. That day as I looked at her, her gold hoop earrings that she had worn since I was baby glinted in the white kitchen light. Her hair always tied in a braid at home hung past her waist, and the two red glass bangles in her left hand clinked as she chopped the tomatoes. “Ami,” I asked her, “Ami, what is *your* recipe of life?”

She looked at me a little longer than she usually does, and then she proceeded to transfer the chopped tomatoes into a bowl. From her spice rack, she sprinkled some powdered red chilis, powdered turmeric, salt, cumin, and freshly grounded ginger and garlic paste on the tomatoes. “Well?” I prompted again.

Again, she said nothing and instead went on to light the gas stove, put a wok on top of and add some oil to it. By now, I felt Ami was ignoring me on purpose. I felt myself starting to get irritated, and I whined, “Amiiiiii will you tell me? I asked you something!”

She smiled slightly and then added the tomatoes to the hot oil. The oil sizzled, and the kitchen was filled with the aroma of spices and tomatoes frying in the oil. She mixed it with a spoon, and when the sizzling had subsided, she wiped her hands and looked at me again, and then she said, “My recipe for living a content life is *patience*. It was hard for you to wait for my answer just now, wasn’t it? Irritating? Frustrating? Why? Because you wanted it right away. We have become used to things being handed to us right away. You want a burger. Order from McDonald’s. Want to make a cake? Use an instant cake mix. Do you know why I *really* love cooking so much?” she asked me.

I shook my head. I had always assumed she did it for us and the memories. I had never questioned *why* my mother likes cooking so much. She explained it to me gently, “I love it because it teaches me how to be patient. It is not an instant meal that I cook. Take this chutney, for example. I have done what I had to, chopped the tomatoes and added the spices. Now I must wait patiently for the tomatoes to cook. It will, at minimum, take fifteen to twenty minutes. But you always ask me how mine taste so different? I let them cook *slowly* for a good half an hour. If I increase the flame to cook them, I will have the chutney at the end, but it will not taste the same as the one cooked for half an hour. The flavor of patience will be the missing ingredient.” She wiped the kitchen counters and put the dirty utensils in the sink. I moved forward to help her and started washing the dirty dishes in the sink. As I cleaned, the enormity of her wisdom and the simplicity of her secret ingredient surprised me and yet made perfect sense.

It has been eight years since my conversation with my mother in the kitchen that day. In these eight years, life has, it does, taken me on for a tidal ride. Through the ebb and flow of waves, I gave birth to two beautiful children. Every day I learn to handle the challenges of motherhood and appreciate its beauty. Together my husband and I learned to embrace and endure the complexity of marriage and the changes in relationships. As my little family has grown so, have my culinary skills. Following my mother’s advice, I learned how to cook a delicious meal with ingredients I have on hand and not rely on conventions. I can cook an equally delicious tikka in an oven or without an oven. Perhaps, one of my best dishes now is my tomato chutney. When I cook the chutney now, no one can distinguish between my chutney and my mother’s. It is the greatest compliment for me when someone tells me ‘it tastes exactly like my mother’s.’ I smile, and I tell them it’s because of the secret ingredient. I finally have my mother’s secret ingredient, and I plan on adding it to every single dish in life.