Why I... study gastronomy

MasterChef winner Saliha Mahmood Ahmed, a specialist registrar in gastroenterology, talks to Kathy Oxtoby about her passion for gastronomy and why “to be human is to be cooking”

Kathy Oxtoby

Saliha Mahmood Ahmed makes delicate, final touches to her three course menu. It starts with a venison shami kebab—in memory of her grandmother’s home in Pakistan. The main course is a Kashmiri style sous vide duck breast. The final dish is a saffron, rosewater, and cardamom pannacotta, served with a deconstructed baklava—inspired by her love of the dessert as a child.

Mahmood Ahmed was the thirteenth amateur cook to win the competitive cooking TV show MasterChef. “I looked up at the judges—John Torode with tears in his eyes and Gregg Wallace beaming,” Mahmood Ahmed says. “By the end of the competition they know you well—how hard you’ve worked and what winning means to you.”

Just hours after her win she was back to work as a specialist registrar in gastroenterology at Watford General Hospital. As the programme hadn’t aired yet she couldn’t share her good news. “It was a great shift, even though in all the excitement I forgot my lunchbox and went hungry that day,” she says.

After her win in 2017, Mahmood Ahmed could have focused on a career in food and opened a restaurant. “A lot of people were pleasantly surprised that I kept going—I chose to go down the medical route, but my desire to learn about cookery never faded.”

Combining her specialty knowledge with her love of gastronomy, she has published three books: The Kitchen Prescription, Foodology, and Khazana. She has won multiple awards, made numerous TV appearances, and become established as a cookery author. Many of her recipes have a South Asian influence and pay homage to the cooking theory.

“Working as a doctor in gastroenterology means I’m in a position to deal with not only digestive ailments through medicine, but also through the lens of what people are eating—which is a powerful thing to do.”

While considering a career in medicine, she was awarded an apprenticeship to a London restaurant. “I chose to go down the medical route, but my desire to learn about cookery never faded.”

That desire was reignited when, without her knowledge, her husband applied for MasterChef on her behalf. “I was suddenly thrust into an environment of Michelin star chefs,” she says. “By the end of the process I had soaked up all the food knowledge that was given to me.” Mahmood Ahmed found that the skills she’d learnt as a doctor—thinking on the spot, multitasking, pushing herself, and not giving up—were transferable to the professional kitchen.

Equally, cooking takes her mind away from the stresses of her clinical work. “It’s a deeply mindful act, and a very relaxing activity—the kitchen is a space where I find a lot of peace.”

Now based at St Mary’s Hospital, London, Mahmood Ahmed finds that striking up a conversation about food helps to create an immediate rapport with patients. She believes the medical profession could benefit from understanding more about what specific dietary advice to offer patients to make “a tangible difference to their quality of life.”

In the future she hopes to be able to help encourage people to eat—and cook—healthier meals. And to work on national campaigns to tackle obesity, particularly in children.

She will continue to live by the “cooking theory.” “This theory says that as humans we are ‘coctivores’—the only species to inhabit this earth that can cook. This separates us from all other living creatures. So, when people say they can’t cook I find this impossible. Because to be human is to be cooking.”

And her favourite meal when cooking for her family? “Something simple. Pan fried salmon, couscous, loads of vegetables, and a dollop of homemade hummus on the side.”

How to make the change

• Plan which recipes you are going to cook in the week and shop accordingly
• Upskill your cooking by watching online tutorials or recipe reels on social media
• Batch cook your favourite dishes and freeze a few portions—these will be useful on a busy day
• Invest in good quality food storage boxes so that you can transport lunches to work without leaks
• Cook with others where possible—it is a wonderful opportunity to destress

Saliha Mahmood Ahmed’s latest cookbook is The Kitchen Prescription: 101 Delicious Everyday Recipes to Revolutionise Your Gut Health