

WAITROSE & PARTNERS
LIFE ON A PLATE
SEASON 1, EPISODE 5: ASMA KHAN

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SPEAKERS

Asma Khan, Jimi Famurewa, Alison Oakervee,

Jimi 00:00

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Welcome to Life on a Plate, the brand-new podcast from Waitrose, in which we talk to some very special guests about what food really means to them. We ask about their comfort foods and favourite dishes, their food memories and even their kitchen disasters. And by the end of each episode, you'll know a lot more about them. With me, as ever, is my co-host Alison Oakervee, Waitrose food editor and all-round kitchen ninja. I always change it to something more ridiculous each time. How are you Alison? What are you cooking? What are you craving? That's what I always want to know from you.

Alison 01:56

Do you know what, I'm really craving lots of like spicy food? And I've really just been digging out my cookery books and using the time to just go through and cook some really good Indian food – different dishes that are a little bit unusual, a little bit more time consuming and just really craving kind of spicy warming food.

Jimi 02:15

I feel like I'm always up for that food. And I mean, obviously, the thing that we should reveal – is that I don't doubt that that's linked to our guest today – who is Asma Khan, who was incredible. A complete force of nature when we had our conversation with her. And yeah, she's the queen of that sort of cooking and that sort of authentic South Asian food.

Alison 02:42

She certainly is. I mean, ever since we've talked to her I've not stopped being able to think of – you know, I've done a lot of holidays in India – and so, of just wanting to recreate some of the food that she spoke about, and I had over there, though, it's just been really inspiring – her foods and her take on cooking.

Jimi 02:59

Yeah, completely. I mean, just to zoom out a bit, Asma is of course the chef and founder of Darjeeling Express – an acclaimed, critically adored restaurant in London. She is also the only, the first and only, British chef to be featured on Netflix's *Chef's Table*. She's an advocate for greater diversity both in terms of greater representation of female chefs in the kitchen, and also Asian representation. And she's always moving – never stops, never, never – not got enough time for a really long and profound conversation about seemingly small things. We've both met Asma a little bit prior to this, but for me, I was still blown away by her insight, and her passion, and the way that she is so honest about, not just food, but life, her own journey. She was born into this royal family and grew up in Calcutta where she was being fed in the palace, but also exploring street food. As you say, she just she blew me away. It was kind of like meeting her all over again. What was it like for you?

Alison 04:17

I was going to say every time you meet her she just reveals just more and more of herself. But she is a real powerhouse. She wants to... she just wants to change the world and nothing seems too small, or you know, she's got a voice, and she wants to be heard, and to bring people along with her and at the same time being really kind.

Jimi 04:36

Yeah. And one of the really great things about Asma is how she celebrates domestic cooks. And she does that in a really fascinating way and a really important way.

Alison 04:47

Yeah, I mean, it's brilliant. She's got an all-woman team, and you know, just to have women and cooking in the kitchen is really unusual for... to have a whole team that isn't male dominated, which is often the case in restaurants. And most of them have been with her since the start, they are a real close knit family that have been cooking in her pop ups, and gone through the restaurants with her – and it's brilliant.

Jimi 05:13

It has the real feel of... she's like a kind of figurehead of this movement that goes much beyond food. But I can completely confirm having been there since we recorded this, that it is also, is unbelievably delicious. Her keema mutton toastie, which I think was inspired, as she says, by a childhood snack is honestly one of the best things I had last year. Right then, let's get down to it. Here is our Life on a Plate conversation. Asma Khan. Welcome Asma Khan.

Asma Khan 06:02

Thank you very much, this is very exciting.

Alison 06:04

Asma, it's fantastic to meet you. You're a real inspiration, not just your food and your cooking, which I know – I've eaten, and I know it's delicious – but the way you always give something back, and it really feels like compassion and kindness is really at the heart of what you do. What's the kindest thing that anyone's ever done for you?

Asma Khan 06:26

I think it was when I was very young. And it was my sister. Because, you know, it's incredible how people internalise the shame that people put on you for being dark skinned, overweight, not pretty in the kind of conventional sense. And I was being humiliated by a relative, about the way that I looked. And my sister held my hand, behind, so that it couldn't be seen by others, and she kept whispering to me that: 'You are Jhansi Ki Rani' – who was a brave warrior princess. And she said: 'One day you will rule the world'. And I remember at that time feeling – because my sister was the beautiful one, the fair, the slim, the glamorous, long haired, graceful person that everybody looked up to in the family. And that moment when my sister held my hand, I realised at that point: Now it makes sense to me, how important it is for women to stand by women.

Jimi 07:27

It's a fantastic answer and a fantastic memory. And it does, as you were saying, it does seem to chime with what you've done throughout your career and what you've tried to do with Darjeeling Express and the way you've uplifted women in particular. Just to say, first of all, that you are in situ, in your recently relocated, much roomier – and as we may be able to hear slightly echo-ier – new restaurant. You've moved Darjeeling Express this year to a far bigger location, just to explain the sound that we're getting from there. But also, it seems a fitting place to speak to you.

Asma Khan 08:08

Yes, I mean, the thing is that, no one really saw the pandemic coming, of course, or the devastation that the hospitality world, would face. And I have been trying to move out since last year. Because I was in a very small place for those who have come to my restaurant will know – it was very small, the kitchen was very small. And we struggled a lot, to try and, you know, it was not a kind of badge of honour that I carried, that people couldn't get a table for six months. It really upset me. I wanted to fit people, I wanted to have the space to be able to fit people. And it was really difficult for me, I wanted to move out. But it is really ironic, that not a single landlord had any property to show me, and this is to do with bias. Absolutely. Some asked me: 'Did I have venture capitalists now funding me?', 'Did I have a business partner? And I was thinking, you know, how have I not grown out of this Eastern value of not having a suitable boy with me? This is a time when I can occupy the spaces that may open up for women, for women who are like me, and, you know, it is really a huge step for me to go into this space. Because when I went to see the landlord, incredibly, you know, open minded, they were of course, really suffering from the pandemic. The first thing I told them is please rise above your own prejudice, and your bias, you don't understand, you self-select and I don't fit into anything, any category. You don't know that you can trust me, you don't think I will deliver because I haven't played golf with you, haven't gone to school with you. I'm not part of a boys club.

Jimi 09:50

You put it so forcefully, and yet, I kind of pity the landlord that was across the table from you trying to tell you no, to be honest. I don't... you know, I'm not surprised that they crumpled and gave you whatever you wanted really. Take us on a journey through your life in food, you came to food relatively late in... you know in relative terms, and you had a career, as we said, or you had a... you were on the way to a career before, before this incredible calling presented itself as it were. What's your philosophy with food? What's your journey been? And how has it changed over the years in terms of how you think of food and its place in your life, and in all of our lives?

Asma Khan 10:31

I think the reason why I began to cook when I moved to this country, where I felt isolated, I was drifting, I felt a disconnect from everything. And I realised that food was my way home. That when I cooked in the aromas of my very spartan Cambridge kitchen, married to a stranger – I had an arranged marriage – I felt the presence of my mother, next to me. It took me back. And it's hard for us, you know, look at the technology, we're all speaking in this kind of high tech world. Thirty years ago, if you wanted to talk to someone in India, it was very expensive. There were no mobile phones, there was no internet, I had to write letters. So that isolation, you know, we had a word called kala pani, which is the black waters, which you crossed and you were doomed forever. When you cross the black waters that left your land, you were doomed. I took from my house, a fistful of soil. This is what people did when they left home. And that is why it's so difficult, you know, I talk to my kids, I realise they don't understand. Because it's so easy to travel, you travel through the internet, you travel through being able to go on cheap flights. I took the soil of my house, because I didn't know when I'd come back. And this was why I had to cook. And this is also why I'm still cooking 30 years later. It is the same passion, the same desire to reach out to someone else through food, I will never have roots or feel I belong to the soil unless I invest in the soil. I cook from the soil and even today, one of the things that I don't do, is I don't fly in jackfruit and okra from India, I use everything British. All my ingredients, I try to keep it as local as possible, because I need to pay homage to the soil on which I am now. And whenever I ever leave, I will take a fistful of the soil from this country, because this soil has made me what I am. And you know, the food, the soil, the ingredients from the soil – it was all, for me, very important, because how would the land recognise me if I didn't glorify what it grew? And you know, I always tell people, I'm not... I have a British passport, you know, I'm not Indian. I'm not British. I'm a Londoner. I belong to the city, but the city belongs to me. I don't think I could have done this – an all-female kitchen with housewives and home cooks in India. The bias – people wouldn't have accepted us. This is why even today there isn't a single restaurant like Darjeeling Express in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh. Because in every home you go to, there's an Indian, Pakistani woman cooking at home, in every restaurant you go to it is a man. Somewhere along the way, the community sidelined us. I want them to notice me. To remember my name. And the name of all the women who cook for me.

Jimi 13:44

Yeah, of course. So Asma you've mentioned about growing up in a palace, being born into royalty, and your family background. It sounds like a fascinating way to grow up. Can you tell us a little bit more about it? And the reality of it?

Asma Khan 13:59

Well, it's not the kind of Princess life that people see on *Frozen*. It's impoverished royalty. So you know, we had crumbling palaces. These are actually white elephants. So you know, you don't have the money anymore to restore and to maintain these houses. But there is a realisation – so my father very, very left wing, worked for trade unions, my grandfather gave away the entire lands to the village so that everybody had land that they could till on, and no villagers were starving. So, I have a very strong... my family has been famous for actually giving back lands to people – very, very socialist in their outlook. And I'm very proud of that, of my family background. So we're ironically very feudal and Royal, very socialist all at the same time. And I had this incredible schizophrenic existence, where I would walk into this palace and everyone would bow down to you as the Princess, and you know, and yet I knew, my father always telling me that this is a privilege of birth, your chance to change the world. Go out and make a difference to people's lives. And he would stand, where there were strikes and where workers got locked out, my father would be standing at the gates of factories and everybody knew who he was. Standing at the gates till they opened the gates for workers to go back to work. So proud of that. So, it's royalty, but not the way that people think its royalty. But we had an incredible heritage of food. And to some extent, we lost everything else. All the kind of grandeur and the kind of elegance of the palace, but we still had the food. We still cooked for villages, we cook for the entire village. So when everyone got married, even when I got married, whole villages came to eat. And we still did that. Because that's the one thing that stayed. And that's the one thing I carry with me. So my royal heritage is really about being able to celebrate through food. But not in this way of being, you know, something exclusive, but very inclusive. My family because of its own politics, cooked the same food for the palace as they did for the villages. And they all ate together. And my father and grandfather, we've all heard these stories where, you know, everybody ate on the same table. Which in Indian context is very unusual. But I think that I'm very proud of my heritage, for this reason, not because of the royalty but because it taught me how important it was to use privilege to reach out to those who are deprived.

Alison 16:56

I really love the idea that you're using local British ingredients from the local soil. How are you finding that affects the end recipe, and the end dishes that you're serving, the recipes? Do you get any comments that there's no jackfruit in there or...?

Asma Khan 17:13

People do ask me: 'You don't have okra fries?'. I said: 'I don't want a jetlagged okra on my table'. You know I feel horrible after a 13 hour flight from India. Can you imagine the poor okra? And then the plastic, and then the wrapping, and the moving it around? You know when we make beetroot chop, which is a very good housewife thing, and on the streets of Calcutta, they fall off the truck, but people basically just steal them off the truck as they get out. And they made this chop on the streets. I have the recipe from there and I made the chop. So soft, so succulent, so sweet. It is British beetroot from the Fens in peak season. And it's so exciting for us, you know, and also that smell when we cut it, we make aloo gobi matar – so Indian. With the cauliflowers there is that moist smell that comes out of the cauliflower. I can't, you know, please do not get stuff that is refrigerated, that is in cold storage, and flown out. This country has beautiful stuff, let's support our farmers. It is all our responsibility.

Jimi 18:23

I think that's a really important thing to say. And it comes back to how you've been quite a radical force in terms of the restaurant scene and in the food landscape. And, you know, okra fries, I love okra fries, everybody loves okra fries – but people don't really think about the reality of where that's coming from. And people need to understand the impact of what it takes to grow something, how something travels onto your plate. And you being... digging your heels in, and being part of that positive conversation is a really interesting, and important, thing to be doing. I wanted to pick up on something related to where you're sitting right now. And it kind of ties in with some of the stuff you've been talking about. You were very adamant that your new restaurant, or the new guise of your new Darjeeling Express, you would be charging a premium amount for your tasting menu. And that in itself was a political stand to you, and we can hear in how you talk about it that food is hugely political to you. I wondered if you might talk about that decision, and you know why you chose to make it? And how difficult it was to kind of stick to your guns really, and just kind of stick to that?

Asma Khan 19:39

The thing is that I've always noticed, that food of people, of certain communities is seen as cheap and cheerful. You know our food is not seen as skilled. And you would pay £95 for a French tasting menu, for a Spanish tasting menu, but why wouldn't you pay that for someone who's cooking the food of Ghana, Tanzania, Somalia, India, Pakistan? Because somehow our food is seen, not as skilled, not as sophisticated, not as elevated. This is racism. That's it. Because if you watch traditional cooking in Africa, Asia, and you look at the women cooking, the love and the patience, and the rhythm that goes... when they beat the cumin, the roasted cumin, the women will chant: 'Hhmm, hhmm'. Because in that roasted smell, there's approval. That is the love that goes into my spice. How can people think our food as not elevated? That it is not something sophisticated? We have centuries of tradition, of cooking. It's just that we've been bad storytellers. That is our problem. And things have changed now recently, with people travelling, with the internet, with a lot more information available, cheap flights to India, cheap flights to Africa, you know, people travelling. You get a taste of street food. But I just think that there's still that bias. There is a very deep rooted bias. And I wanted to introduce a tasting menu. It has... each plate has been made by hand for that tasting menu. Not to impress. But in that layering of the terracotta and the porcelain that has been made by my friend, but I have sat with her in a studio while she made each plate. This is the frame of my dish. I present to you my entire heritage, in this tasting menu. It is not about trying to impress you. It is about telling you a story – through my food. It is asking you to acknowledge that I have the right to be respected. Not just me. The women in their graves. The generations of women who cooked in villages, never got honoured, you need to understand that we are the hands that cooked. We are the storytellers. We are the custodian of recipes. Yet, we've always been sidelined. Behind the walls. And in many houses in India, the women don't even come on the table to eat. The men and the boys eat first. This is so wrong. We cooked. Our food is patriarchal. Garam chapatis – garam means hot – you know, hot... hot rice.. Who is making that rice? Who is making that bread? It was never designed that we ate together. People were never equal when it came to food. So I am fighting this fight. It's a war cry for every woman in my culture, who cooked with passion and love, but had no glory. And in their name, I wanted to honour Asian women and our contribution to food.

Jimi 22:46

Perfectly put again.

Alison 22:47

Do you have any food heroes that you want to elevate even further than they already are? Or any unknown foodie heroes that we should be elevating?

Asma Khan 22:57

I actually love Andrew Wong. I think it's so interesting, because he is unashamed of his Chinese roots and he talks about, you know, the red sweet and sour chicken that everybody knows. He is interested in Chinese medicine. Trying to demystify Chinese food – it's so great. You know, I wish there were more chefs from different traditions, who stepped out of their own ego, and what they were about. And talked about community and their people and the food and the stories. I think that I love Andrew, for that. I would love to see more people doing that, when you know, this is not about the fact that this is such an Instagrammable picture. I'm the first who's come up with this kind of crazy idea. Well, I'm good, great for you. But, you know, let's also hear stories about, you know, what is the significance? Because it is important to understand... you understand people through their food.

Jimi 24:02

Yeah, he's a fascinating case study, and that he is a second generation restaurateur, isn't he? And his family had a Chinese restaurant and he's building on that and adapting that. And it goes back to what you were saying about the first generation of South Asian chefs, and adapting things to English tastes. And it feels like at this point, we are, you know, there is more readiness for people to delve deeper and give more authentic renditions of national cuisine and cultures. Your restaurant, you know, having been there to the Carnaby Street guys, it feels like an extension of the home. You're there, working the room – you feel like you're not going to leave unless you're properly fed in the way that you would hope for at a very good home. And I wonder what food says 'home' to you. Is there one dish that you smell it, you see it, and you're taken straight back to a particular moment in time or place?

Asma Khan 25:06

I think it's parata. Because, you know, it's the bread, and this is why parata features very heavily in my brunch menu in the deli as well. We decided to stuff paratas because there's something so beautiful about, you know, this... when it hits the... and starts browning the... on a tava – it has to be made on an iron plate. It reminds me of every meal where you wait, and you count, because you know where you are in the pecking order. The boys come first, and you know, the girls come last. And you're counting the paratas. As you know, that the last... that final stage, there's that smokiness that comes in and you know the paratas done. And then you wait. So I would count it down. So to me, this is the thing that the parata is – that comfort dish, but also where there was this anticipation and waiting. Because it's not like a loaf of bread that comes out the oven and is ready. Everybody can eat it. Parata is made one at a time. Rolled out one at a time. And that patience and waiting, and that is really for me -comfort. It's also about, you know, it's a great leveller because, for that time, even though you have to wait, you get to eat the same as everybody else. Which is not the case with other food because – I remember I always got a broken fried egg. So the cooks chose to give me the egg that broke. Because I was less important. And, it's... I only realised this later on when I was making an egg for my son, and in London, and, I said: 'Oh, this broke, I broke this, I'll eat it'. I was like, 48 when I realised. I didn't realise that. But paratas, each one looked the same. And you felt you were equal. So I loved it for that reason too.

Alison 27:01

So is that what you'd say is your favourite food? What type of food is your favourite? You've got street food, you've got train food on your menu at Darjeeling Express...

Asma Khan 27:11

I think street food, people don't actually, when you come into India, and you look at the food on the streets, people obviously get very scared because they're scared, they're going to get sick or whatever. But when I grew up in India, and I understood at a very young age, that the people who are selling food on the streets, they need to sell everything. Otherwise the family doesn't eat. And they know that people buying street food in India are mainly people who are very poor. Or that might be their only meal. They want bangs for their bucks. So real, proper Indian street food, is unbelievable. It is layered, it is textured. Plus, there's a lot of customisation. He might be serving six people – invariably he's a man who's doing the street food – but he will ask you: 'Do you want a bit of chillies, do you want a bit of lemon?', he wants to engage you so that you will come back tomorrow, and not go to his competitor. And that level of customisation – I will tell you a Michelin star chef would hang their head in shame. That's why I'm not impressed by chefs in their stainless steel empires, with every kind of machine, and all the equipment and the money. They produce a dish. Doesn't impress me. You go on the streets of Calcutta and you see the dish that is produced by someone who has worked all night in the prep, in getting all of that there. Carried it on their head, through the slums and into the city. These people don't live in the city. They can't afford to. Because the slums are pushed out and out, they've carried it there. Then they produce it. The dignity with which they will treat everybody. It's so important. Because they understand what it is to be respected. And street food vendors are respected in Calcutta. People understand this, and this is why it's very emotional for me. I have a lot of street food dishes on my menu in the deli. It is also there on my tasting menu. No, I'm not doing scallops and fancy stuff. I'm doing street food in the tasting menu. Because I want people to understand that this is, you know, I come from a royal family. But India is a country of the rich and the poor. It would be so incomplete if I didn't honour the labour and the food of the poor.

Jimi 29:38

We've talked a lot about the food that you like, and the food that you rhapsodise about and enjoy. I wonder is there anything that you would like to never see again? Things that you're over, or foods that your, kind of... are tired of? What are the things that are prime annoyances for you?

Asma Khan 30:00

I think I'm just like... I'm not into avocado. It's like you know – nothing. I find the texture really strange. I know I probably sound very Indian when I say this, because it's neither soft, nor hard. I tried really hard to like it. I really have not liked it. And I don't like it.

Jimi 30:18

So there won't be any avo toast, or any avo on paratha – you wouldn't do that, no?

Asma Khan 30:25

Toast is... you know, should have nice things on it. Not avocado.

Alison 30:31

What would you put on your toast instead?

Asma Khan 30:33

I would put eggs and I love keema, which is minced meat. In our deli they go to have a keema toastie. So, you know, when we were in our school days, we came back from school, the cooks, especially the girls, wouldn't bother giving us lunch. To get back from school at three. So the leftovers they were put into a toastie and given to you. And for me, it is always spicy the filling – and that will keep you quiet till dinnertime. So we never got lunch. If you miss lunch, you miss lunch, no one is going to give you lunch again. But you got these sandwiches. And I love them. And it is you know, especially the one with all the, kind of... so that leftover chicken curry is just shredded and put into the toast. Ah, that's so good – with chutney.

Jimi 31:22

You're making us insanely hungry, or me at least, more than anything, Asma. You've mentioned the deli and the new restaurant, you are in a unique position. Some might say, unenviable position of launching, opening a restaurant amid all this uncertainty in the changing measures and restrictions. How have the last few weeks been? Were you kind of always firm that... talk us through the state of play with things now, and how you've managed to get through it really and negotiate this period?

Asma Khan 31:58

I've suffered hugely financially. I stay up at night worrying about my bills. But yet, I'm proud that we've closed. That, you know, people are not getting infected, that I'm protecting my staff and people. Because at the end of it, what good is just me having made money, if I know that people are still getting sick. And I have friends in the NHS who have worked tirelessly. And people of my community, and black people, working in the NHS have suffered disproportionately. And this is a genetic, or whatever – later on, we will know the answers. My people, my community are suffering a lot. So things have been horrible business wise, very tough financially, banks are not willing to give any money. I put my entire life savings into this business. Everything I own. Because yes, the furlough scheme is great but that only helps my staff. What about my business? I had to pay six months' rent in an empty business. And if anyone knows West End rents, that was debilitating – in Soho – but I have to do it. And you know, this is the thing that is very tough. But sometimes you have to be... think about the world and the community. So this keeps me going because this is part of also my philosophy. I tell myself that sometimes for the greater good of everybody, you must put your own interests down. And that is how I rise every day. And I survive every day, despite what's happening financially to me, I will make it. I will make it because I know that there are so many people who have compassion, who will come and support us. You know, who have been writing to me. I'm in tears every morning I wake up, I get these messages from people saying: 'You know, this is one sunrise, I'm sharing my sunrise, a lighter love to you'. They don't need to do this. I don't feel alone. So even though the pain is very personal, surprisingly, I feel supported by a lot of people. I don't feel I'm on this journey alone. I'm on this journey with a lot of people.

Alison 34:10

You're in the restaurant every day and eating there. But when you're at home, what do you... what are you cooking for your husband and sons when they're there?

Asma Khan 34:20

I don't make food into a battleground. So I have one child who loves Indian food, and another who absolutely detests it. So I tend to make a lot of Italian food, and I make Chinese food. I do pizzas and I do burgers. And this is part of life. You know that a lot of people celebrate me, as, you know, an Indian cook, but at home, my child doesn't want to eat it. And it was quite difficult during the lockdown when I suddenly found myself not having eaten a single meal with my children for three years. How different they were from what I was as a child. And how different they are from me. It wasn't just the fact that... it wasn't that moment, like when they were three and a half, and my son started speaking English, and he had a London accent. I almost died. I said: 'Oh my God, my child has an accent. He sounds British'. Because, you know, I was, like: 'Look at him', I was calling my parents and saying: 'Say: Hello, this is a car', because all he could say was: 'This is a car'. But the way he said car was like, so British, I was thinking: 'Oh my God, he's so British'. But it was the same kind of realisation when they were like, you know: 'We don't want this, it's a bit too spicy'. And then I'm thinking: 'Oh, we don't like the smell of...'. And I thought: 'Okay, I'm just going to live this through', because at the end of it, you know, I need to be able to eat a meal with them. And there were days when I thought it's easier to cook for 200 people, who are so grateful – they want to take your picture, or they want to take selfies with you – than my two kids! Who were like so, so unimpressed with every dish I cooked. It is actually demoralising and I have struggled to find a settlement with them. They do eat parata but with terrible toppings. Marmite. Oh God, all kinds of jams and peanut butter and honey on it. They are supposed to eat parata like this, but they eat it like this. I forgive them. I have to because they are my kids. But really, they're just so... you know, I keep telling them they're so hybrid, you know, why are you like this? It's... they are Londoners and so at home, people would be so shocked. I had someone, a journalist who came and said: 'Can I open your fridge?', and I said: 'No, you can't', because it destroys the image of this Indian food goddess. You open my fridge and you're going to see baked beans and all kinds of terrible things. Which is so unlike anything Indian, but you know, that's the reality of being a mum of two London born kids. They eat strange food.

Alison 37:04

I love it. I love it. I would like to be that journalist that had a look in your fridge just to see a can of beans in it. It's just brilliant. Are there any essential cupboard ingredients that you would have, for you, in your fridge, or cupboard?

Asma Khan 37:16

I actually use a lot of dried red chillies. Even in the restaurant we don't use powder chilli. It's something that is really weird that people think that all Indians use a chilli powder. Chilli powder – you wouldn't buy from a shop, my mother would never trust it. She would say: 'Oh, they coloured powder red'. My mother's very cynical. So she would go to the bazaar and buy chilli powder. So the chilli flavour – you infuse the oil with chillies, so anyone who's got my cookbook and using it, that is the method I've used throughout. It also means that chilli is layered. It doesn't hit you on your tongue. Doesn't hit you on your lips. It comes and hits you at the back of your thing, it's inside, infused into the meat, because when you're frying the meat, the chilli is sealing it with the oil. And then you put in vegetables, as well as

sealing it. Please try that, that sealing of the chillies. And then when the food is cooked, you take the chilli out, your stomach is not digesting chilli powder. I have no idea why people cook with chilli powder in Indian food. It's so unnecessary. Spice is a layer and a kind of amalgamation of lots of different textures. Chilli is one. If all you can taste is chilli and it blows your head away – you're a really bad cook. But the problem is too many men cook our food. And they use stuff from jars. And I have nothing against jars – please do cook from jars if you want. But it has to be balanced. And this idea that, I want the food to be super-hot or super spicy. Not everybody does. So yeah, so it's always dried chillies. And in my cookbook as well, I take people through that. So that they actually learn to cook this way.

Jimi 38:54

Well, every time I speak to you about food you make me understand it a bit more, and think about it a bit deeper. And, as I said before, just ravenously hungry because of the way you talk about food, and the way you cook as well.

Alison 39:10

Thank you Asma and goodbye. It's been just a real delight to hear from you. Thank you.

Asma 39:15

Thank you.

Jimi 39:21

You've been listening to Life on a Plate with Waitrose. I'm Jimi Famurewa, thank you to my co-host Alison Oakervee, and to our guest, Asma Khan. To learn more about the series, go to waitrose.com/podcast, and please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.