

TEX-MEX KASHMIRA

In the kitchen with my mother

BY VISHWESH BHATT

WHILE I WAS AWAY FOR COLLEGE, my father took a sabbatical from teaching at the University of Mississippi and returned to Austin, Texas, to do research. That summer, I went to visit my parents at the newest of their homes. Crunching gravel underfoot, I walked past a patch of herbs and flowers and saw my mother by the kitchen sink, looking out the window into the backyard. As I drew closer, she waved, turned off *Days of our Lives*, and refocused her attention to the stove.

I could smell the spices before I reached the kitchen. In Ahmedabad, and later in Oxford (where we all once lived and I now live with my wife), curry leaves, asafetida, and garam masala usually wafted through her kitchen. This was different. “Your father has invited some colleagues over for supper,” she explained. “I wanted to make something new, something Texan.”

BORN IN BHAVNAGAR, Gujarat, Dad had studied physics at the University of Chicago. Early in his career, he worked in the National Laboratory at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Recruited with other young and talented scientists to set up a research laboratory in Ahmedabad, he and Mom left a promising future in the States and sailed back to Bombay on the *Queen Elizabeth I*. As I was finishing high school, my parents decided they wanted to give my sister and me the opportunity to study in the United States. So back we came. He accepted a position at the University of Texas-Austin as an instructor in the physics department, a job well below his qualifications and customary pay rate.

Long before the house on Elm Street, our first home in Austin was a rental apartment on East Riverside Drive. That apartment complex—with its gray brick buildings and brown roofs—seemed a



Illustrations by Patricia Jacques



In Austin, my mother's visits with our diverse community of neighbors added to her pantry and to her box of recipes.

downscale move. But the place proved a gift. Those first months in that apartment complex opened my eyes to the true diversity of America. I got to know a community that worked all sorts of jobs and came from seemingly every ethnicity and background. Looking back, those eleven months in Travis Heights would shape my view of what America is and what it might be. That time would change my mother, too. Her afternoon visits with the neighbors added to her pantry and to her box of recipes.

I SHOWERED AND came downstairs. Mom handed me a cup of chai and three Pepperidge Farm cookies and removed the lid to the pressure cooker. I peered over her shoulder. Through the wafting steam I saw black-eyed peas bobbing with a stick of cinnamon, some bay leaves, a few garlic cloves, and a couple of deep maroon chili pods.

My mother didn't know the term *mise en place*, but she knew how to lay out a proper kitchen. On the butcher-block island arced a rainbow of carrots, radishes, purple onions, tomatoes, tomatillos, serrano chilies, limes, green garlic,

cilantro, and mint. Next to them was a white slab of jack cheese. Her trusty Mouli tripod grater stood ready on the counter; her Oster blender was plugged in and ready to go. Mom's instructions were clear and firm: "I want the carrots shredded, radishes sliced thin into circles, chilies minced. Please make the pico de gallo from the Diana Kennedy book."

She toasted cumin in a skillet, quickly pounded the seeds in a mortar, and slid the coarse powder into the peas. She heated oil in the same skillet, sautéed onions and garlic, and added chopped tomatoes, chili powder, salt, lime juice, and cilantro. When the tomatoes began to sweat, she dumped the mixture into the beans, added salt, and gave them a good stir. She worked the mix with a potato masher before replacing the pot lid.

She handed me a bowl for the pico de gallo and started making what she called "tomatillo (rhymes with armadillo) chutney," flavored with green garlic, mint, serranos, and onions. She gave the mix a good whirl in her Oster blender, poured out the loveliest jade-green sauce into a light blue bowl, and instructed me, "Please clean up the dirty dishes and go

get some proper beer. Mrs. Godinez said to serve chilled Lone Star and Modelo with lime wedges."

As I turned toward the door, my mother lifted the checkered kitchen towel from the familiar terra cotta dough bowl, revealing a pile of pale yellow balls. I watched as she pulled her rolling pin out and maneuvered the concave griddle into place over the gas fire. For decades, my mother, a native of Jafarabad on the Gujarati coast, skilled in the cooking of okra and lentils, had made chapatis over this fire. That day, she rolled and griddled tortillas. They ballooned and blistered from the heat of the fire. She looked at me and smiled. She knew that for the first time in my life, I grasped something she had known for decades—that the magic of this place called Texas, this nation called America, lies in the diversity of her people and their foodways. 🍷

Vishwesh Bhatt, the chef at SnackBar in Oxford, MS, is at work on his first book.



RHYMES-WITH-ARMADILLO CHUTNEY

- 12-15 medium tomatillos, husks removed, washed, and quartered
- 2 serrano chilies, chopped
- 1 yellow onion, diced
- 1/3 cup golden raisins
- 2 stalks green garlic (or 6 cloves garlic, sliced)
- 1/3 cup mint leaves
- 10-12 cilantro sprigs, chopped
- 2 Tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 Tablespoon cumin seeds
- 2 Tablespoons cider vinegar
- 1 cup water
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- Salt
- 3 Tablespoons vegetable oil

Soak the raisins in one cup water with 2 Tablespoons of vinegar and set aside to plump. Heat the oil in a heavy bottom pot until shimmering. Add cumin, serranos, onions and garlic and cook until the onions start to sweat. Add the tomatillos and cook until they soften and blister just a little bit. Turn off the heat and add the herbs, brown sugar, raisin mixture, salt, and pepper. Give everything a good stir. Once the mixture cools to room temperature, blend in a blender until smooth. Adjust the seasoning to your liking and serve.