

There's No Recipe For Growing Up

My mom's Kashmiri cooking has always tethered me to home. So it's no wonder she won't give me (all) the secrets to doing it myself.

[Scaachi Koul](#) November 2, 2016, at 9:53 a.m.

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Aimee Bee Brooks for BuzzFeed News

On Diwali evenings, my mom let me eat as many sweets as I wanted. She'd buy jalebees, even though she'd complain that they weren't as good as the ones she used to get in India. These were too cold, too sticky. But Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights and good conquering evil, is and was a day for eating, so she'd also make a big vegetarian feast and sweet puris piled high in a metal bowl as a religious offering. After dinner, she and I would sit in front of her makeshift temple and she'd mutter something about Lakshmi in Hindi. In a clay diya, she'd make a candle from a cotton ball and ghee, pull smoke from it with her hands, and wrap it around my face, mithai crumbs on my lips.

Food is a big part of any Indian holiday, but in my parents' home, hearty homemade Indian food was a fixture every day. Nightly, we had mounds of basmati rice, baby eggplants stewed in spices that I'd hold up to my face like bejeweled earrings, collard greens and turnips (gross, until I grew up). Best of all were the nights where she made Kashmiri rogan josh, a lamb dish she'd whip together in a pressure cooker that was perennially broken, the whistle propped up with a wooden spoon and screaming every five minutes on a Saturday afternoon.

Mom cooked, Mom piled food on your plate and made chutneys from scratch. When you scooped the last of your rice up with a fork, she'd instinctively know and pop up next to you with "More?" holding another cup of steaming rice aloft. (Usually, she'd dump it onto your plate without waiting for an answer.) My brother and my dad and I were all spoiled, but I was the youngest, which means I was the most spoiled.

I moved out at 17, but it took a few years before I craved my mom's Kashmiri food. Restaurant Indian food is too oily, too bland, with too much cream and too few of my mom's recognizable cooking quirks. I miss things that hardly matter, like how her potatoes always ended up crescent-moon shaped, or the way her parathas were always triangular and puckered.

Instead, as I've gotten older I've been trying to learn my mom's recipes myself. She got hers from her mother, who died more than a decade ago in India, and who used to make the most delicate little pats of paneer. (We called it *tsamen*, a word I learned is used only in our little corner of North India.) My mom has been cooking for maybe 40 years, probably longer, but, unfortunately, in the five years I've been cooking, I've learned I have no instincts in the kitchen. I panic if more than one burner is on at a time, and if there isn't a concrete recipe, I can't wing it. I've burned through the bottoms of so many pots that my old roommate put a moratorium on me attempting to cook any grains.

This past Sunday was another Diwali spent away from my family, sorting through that inexplicable loss you feel when a holiday is happening and there's no one to celebrate it with you — not really your cousins who are a trek away, no siblings nearby, no aunties you want to call. I decided I'd do it myself, and invited two of my favorite (white) people, hoping to not poison them. Diwali isn't our family's most exciting holiday, but celebrating it felt important, the same way I try to avoid meat on Shivaratri (when my mom calls to remind me), or the same reason I send my brother a red thread on Rakhi even though we otherwise never talk.

On Diwali, like most days that remind me of Hinduism and India, I miss my mom. I've been living away from my parents for nine years, long enough to make a new life in another city, to have friends and a live-in partner. Two of my cousins live a half hour away. But Mom, regardless, refers to me as "alone, out there," like I could starve any minute.

When I do come home a few times a year, Mom asks me what I want for dinner and plans meals for my entire stay. She loads food on my plate and freezes the extra so I can take it on a plane with me and defrost it when I'm homesick. I'm homesick a lot these days, seemingly the same way my mom was homesick for her parents after she left India. When my mom moved, she took all of her mother's little secrets with her. My mom had watched my grandmother cook for years, knew her languages, knew how to pleat a sari or mutter a Kashmiri insult ("*Thrat*") or throw a wedding for her son, 25 years after she moved away. I don't have any of these secrets, because I was born in North America and raised around white people in a family that wanted to integrate. So it felt important to at least try to remember how my own mom did things.

"Add a teaspoon. Or maybe a tablespoon. Well, try a teaspoon and see what happens."

Late last week, I called my mom to get a refresher on a few of her recipes. I wanted to make rogan josh, aloo gobi (potatoes and cauliflower), chicken biryani (chicken and rice), and paneer with palak (spinach). But my mom, like so many Indian mothers I know, has always avoided giving me complete recipes. Even when I visit home and watch her, she somehow manages to divert my attention by, say, dangling in front of my face a gol gappa, a globe of fried wheat flour filled with chickpeas and potatoes and yogurt. I'm always missing a spice, a cook time, a stove temperature. I'm never clear if when she says "ginger" she means "fresh ginger, about a pinky-size, cut into strips" or "ginger powder, a teaspoon or two." Or, if she's feeling really casual about a

recipe, she'll say, "Add the usual spices," a mix of 5 or maybe 10 different spices that might be usual to her but are patently unclear to me. Salt? Does she just mean salt?

Worse, her measurements are not based on any contemporary or commonly used metric. A teaspoon, to her, is the size of the white plastic spoon with the snapped-off handle that she uses in all of the containers in her spice drawer that originally came from Dairy Queen when I was 6 or 7 and abandoned a half-eaten Oreo Blizzard. A tablespoon, conversely, is anywhere between two or three of the "teaspoons." A cup is the cup she uses to scoop basmati rice out of the five-gallon plastic tub in the pantry on the bottom shelf. It is unclear where the cup came from, but it is cloudy and cracked and significantly smaller than an actual cup.

Every other measurement she has, then, is specific to her grocery store, to her homemade spice mixtures, to her butcher who hands her a hunk of lamb the size of a small toddler, leaving her to break it down into digestible and cookable pieces. "How much frozen spinach do I need?" I might ask her, and she will answer, "One." One block, she says, as if I can go to a grocery store and say, "ONE BLOCK OF YOUR FINEST FROZEN SPINACH, SIR."

I suspect some of this is intentional. Indian women — mothers, in particular — hoard some of their recipes, refusing to give them in full. So long as they are the eldest women in their families, they are the gatekeepers for these particular culinary incarnations that exist only in their kitchens. (A cursory Google search for a good chicken biryani recipe yielded ingredients like chicken stock — my mom literally screamed when I suggested this — or curry paste, something that has never once been in her kitchen.) I've started to do this too, refusing to give my boyfriend a complete ingredient list, even when I need help cooking, because I *refuse* to let him in on a secret I have been scratching at for years.

Maybe it's about making herself needed as a mother, or forcing me into coming home and beg for my favorite lotus root, a recipe specific to Kashmir

that I've never found at a restaurant. Regional differences are lost, the little things my mother's mother's mother did in the kitchen get muddied — unless I ask. And I have been asking, for years, for as long as I've been away from home and have been trying to find my mom at the bottom of a 20-quart pot.

All of this reduces my cooking to a kind of trial and error. Once, when I tried to make her rogan josh, I ended up adding three times the right amount of cinnamon; my lamb tasted like an angry ginger snap. Two years after that, she casually mentioned that you're only supposed to use flat cinnamon sticks, and not the rolled up ones, *which apparently makes a fucking difference*. When I last visited, she sent me back to my home with frozen rogan josh in my suitcase. Later, when I defrosted and ate it, I picked through it, pulling out any identifiable spices I could find. At the bottom of my bowl was a dark ball the texture of soft wood. I cleaned it off and texted it to my mom with my trademark calm: “?!?!?!?!?” She gave me the Hindi word for it, leaving me to creative googling to figure out what it was. (I won't tell you; I've invested too much to give it up that easy.)

Mom swears that she's not actively keeping ingredients from me, that she just forgets because cooking is so second-nature to her. This doesn't explain why sometimes she'll *add* an ingredient to her list for me — a year ago, the rogan josh recipe had coriander powder in it — later saying something like, “Why would I ever tell you to put coriander powder in it? Nothing has coriander powder in it.” Now she says it's actually garam masala, but not the kind you buy in the *store* (she says this with her particular brand of derision usually reserved for “white” grocery stores) but the kind that she makes at home, fistfuls of unidentifiable brown spices hand-ground with a mortar and pestle. “I will give you some when you come home,” she always says, but she is a liar, because she never actually has. Food has always been my mom's domain, so maybe it makes sense that she doesn't want to give me her trade secrets just yet.

“You can't make this and be impatient.”

Is there a point when you stop needing your mom? I want to know if it will happen before she dies, or if she'll go and I'll be left figuring out how to contend without her. My dad talks about dying with typically alarming frequency — a few weeks ago, he answered the phone and said, “My body will never be what it once was,” and then passed the handset over to my mom — but it's my mom whose death I'm more concerned about.

In terms of being needed, my mom will never get a break. My dad sometimes won't eat unless my mom is home to prepare food for him; even something as simple as a sandwich requires supervision. My brother and sister-in-law and their daughter come over every Sunday and my mom piles Kashmiri food on their plates like she does for anyone who comes to dinner. She'll sit next to my niece and watch her eat, her half-white, blue-eyed granddaughter licking daal off a teaspoon.

I started cooking this past Sunday around 3:30 p.m., peeling the potatoes and cutting the cauliflower into florets and quietly muttered “son of a bitch” when I realized I had forgotten to buy rosewater. I called my mom first at 4 p.m., to confirm that cumin seeds and fennel seeds are different (DON'T @ ME). Once she finished laughing at me, I put the aloo gobi in the oven and marinated the chicken in star anise and “the spices from that box.”

I called her again when my palak looked electric-green and tasted canned (“Well, *obviously* you forgot to add the haldi,” she said, as if I had called to ask a question as simple as “Why can't I breathe when I place a brick on my own throat?”) While I pan-fried the rogan josh, she called me back and asked, “How's it going?” I could hear her smiling, and it almost felt like a taunt. I told her I was sure something was missing, a spice that she considers too routine to even mention, or one that she's actively hiding from me.

But by then my kitchen *smelled* like my mom's, a clash of turmeric and paprika and chili powder and cumin (whole and ground) and the scent that comes from fresh meat when it's being slowly cooked in different pots at the same time. I loaded serving bowls with the food I made, called everyone into

the kitchen. The chicken tasted right, the rogan josh looked reddish-brown, the paneer had turned yellow and was easily cut with the side of a fork.

It had the markings of my mom's food, but of course it wasn't as good as hers. It wasn't as good because my food, as surprisingly palatable as it was, didn't include my mom hovering over me with a wooden spoon. (Was she going to give me more rice? Was she going to hit me a little bit for eating too fast? It's a journey.) It wasn't as good, because it couldn't be. I can't replicate the things my mom does; I can only build on top of them. But still, I made sure everyone had seconds, preferably thirds.

“When you're done, add a pinch of that spice in the yellow container. I gave it to you last time you were here.”

Aimee Bee Brooks for BuzzFeed News

I didn't poison anyone on Saturday. I made six, maybe seven times the amount of food intended, but I'm content with that being my biggest mistake. (I did use a pressure cooker for the first time and screamed every time it screamed, and I forgot to add the almonds to the biryani but, you know what, fuck nuts.)

After my guests left my house, I sent a photo of my spread to Mom, and she called me later that night. “The color was right,” she said, paying me the highest compliment she could give me from 1,500 miles away. “So, I guess you can do it yourself.”

More frequently than I think is normal, I imagine what we're all going to do when my mom dies. My dad will be completely incapable of taking care of himself (he once asked me to put his jalapeño potato chips in the oven to “crisp them up some more”). My brother and I only call each other now and then, because Mom begs us to, so who knows how far we can drift. I'll lose her

as a tether.

Mom doesn't talk about death; it's too macabre for our pleasant chats. But I can't help thinking about it, an anxiety that started to ramp up in my early twenties when I noticed how little I am capable of doing on my own. I still call her to consult on how to appropriately wash a lace bra, and she still buys me leggings if they're on sale, and she gets this rare herb shipped in from India that I have no idea where else to get outside of her pantry.

These gaps in my knowledge are terrifying enough, but what about all the things *I don't know* that I don't know? Sheer chai, for example, is the most disgusting product her home country has ever produced — but will I one day wish I knew how to make it?

When you emigrate, you end up the last person to touch a lot of your family history. Somewhere along the line, we'll forget my mom's maiden name. We'll forget what her actual name was before she changed it when she moved. We'll lose language and the way to make a candle from ghee and a cotton ball. I can't pull all of this information out of her, and I can't carry all of it after she's gone, and I panic when I think about how impossible it feels to one day not need her. But at least I can try to cook.

My mom's own mother died in India, seemingly suddenly, from a combination of declining health and crummy care. Mom was with her when it happened, but near the end my grandmother was confused and didn't seem to register that her daughter had flown all that way just to see her off.

When I imagine my mom's death, I picture her perched on her proverbial deathbed, lucid but weak, about to die. She'll raise one arthritic finger toward me, motioning for me to come closer to her. "Yes, mother," I will say, and kneel down so her face is close to mine, glistening with tears.

"Closer," she will say, and I will press forward, taking her hand.

“What is it?” I will ask.

And with one final rasp, the death rattle of a long life winding down, my mom will wheeze out her final words, releasing me from a lifetime of trying to keep her as close to me as possible: *“It was just salt.”* ●