

The Taste Makers

Meet the Qureshis: India's first family of Indian cuisine, whose recipe for success borrows as much from tradition as it does from good old-fashioned ingenuity

by Antoine Lewis

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NE OF THE STORIES that Imtiaz Qureshi loves to tell is about how he tricked Jawaharlal Nehru.

The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, CB Gupta, had invited Prime Minister Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Zakir Husain for a private dinner in the early '60s. Nehru accepted reluctantly, and only on the condition that the food be pure vegetarian. Gupta called for Imtiaz, then a young cook with Lucknow's famous caterer Krishna Hotel, to take care of the meal. Imtiaz protested. He knew nothing about vegetables. But Gupta convinced him to take on the order and the worried chef spent the next month furiously figuring out how to make it work.

On the appointed day, dinner was served and soon after an angry Gupta called for Imtiaz. A very annoyed Nehru was peering over his glasses at the food. "I asked for a vegetarian meal," the PM said. "But here I can see murg mussalam, shammi kebabs and fish."

Imtiaz replied: "Sir, the fish is actually bottle gourd, the chicken is raw jackfruit and the legs, long brinjals. Even the shammi kebab has been made with lotus stem. Everything is vegetarian, only disguised." The thrilled guests had a good laugh. Zakir Husain complimented Imtiaz saying he had never eaten anything as tasty.

There's no dearth of fa-

mous chefs in India. But the fame is restricted to an individual. The Qureshis, on the other hand, are not all famous individually, but their surname has become a passport to success in the hospitality industry. More than 30 members from the same Qureshi family work at five-star hotels, restaurants, catering companies or run restaurants in India and abroad.

Mohin, Imtiaz's nephew, is a chef at Punjab Grill. His cousin Ilyas works for restaurateur Marut Sikka's Indus Culinary Team. Ilyas's younger brother Ghulam is the master chef of Chingari at the Le Meridien, Pune, while his other brother Meraj Ul Haque looks after The Great Kabab Factory at Radisson Blu Plaza. Aijaz, the elder son of Imtiaz's brother Ahmed Ali, worked at ITC Maratha and is at The Leela's

Jamavar. Aijaz's younger brother Javed works with his uncle Shaukat at Sofitel Mumbai's Jyran.

CHOICE CUTS

The story of the Qureshis' rise to fame begins with Imtiaz Qureshi. Born on 2 Feb 1929, a few weeks after Martin Luther King and the first publication of *Tintin* and *Popeye*, the fifth son of Murad Ali and Sakina Qureshi grew up in a family of nine boys and two girls. His ancestors were butchers and cooks to Awadhi nobility for over 200 years; his maternal grandfather had worked for the Raja of Mehmoodabad and his paternal grandfather and father with the Raja of Jahangirabad. It's not clear what position they held, but it is most likely that they were butchers who also cooked for feasts and festivals.

Imtiaz, like his brothers, began young, helping out at the butchery when he was only 10-15 years old. Their day began at 4am, when freshly slaughtered carcasses would come to their father. The boys would help him break down the animal into different cuts of meat. By 7.30am, when customers arrived, they'd get ready for school. Much was learned outside the classroom, working odd jobs with caterers – how mango and tamarind firewood left a lingering aroma in the food, how to cook for 100 to 10,000 people, what the elite liked.

By the time they were in their thirties, they could cook kilos of biryani, kebabs, sheermal, nihari and kormas in their sleep.

The brothers were well-known in Lucknow, some ran meat shops and catering outfits. But it was not until the '70s when the ITC (then the Welcomgroup Sheraton) in Agra hired young Imtiaz to help develop their Indian cuisine, that they turned more than local heroes.

Imtiaz signed on, taking on the formal surname Qureshi (the community of Qussabs, who practise halal slaughter had recently



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Ishtiaque Qureshi,
Kakori House



'Give us only water to cook with and we'll even make that flavourful'

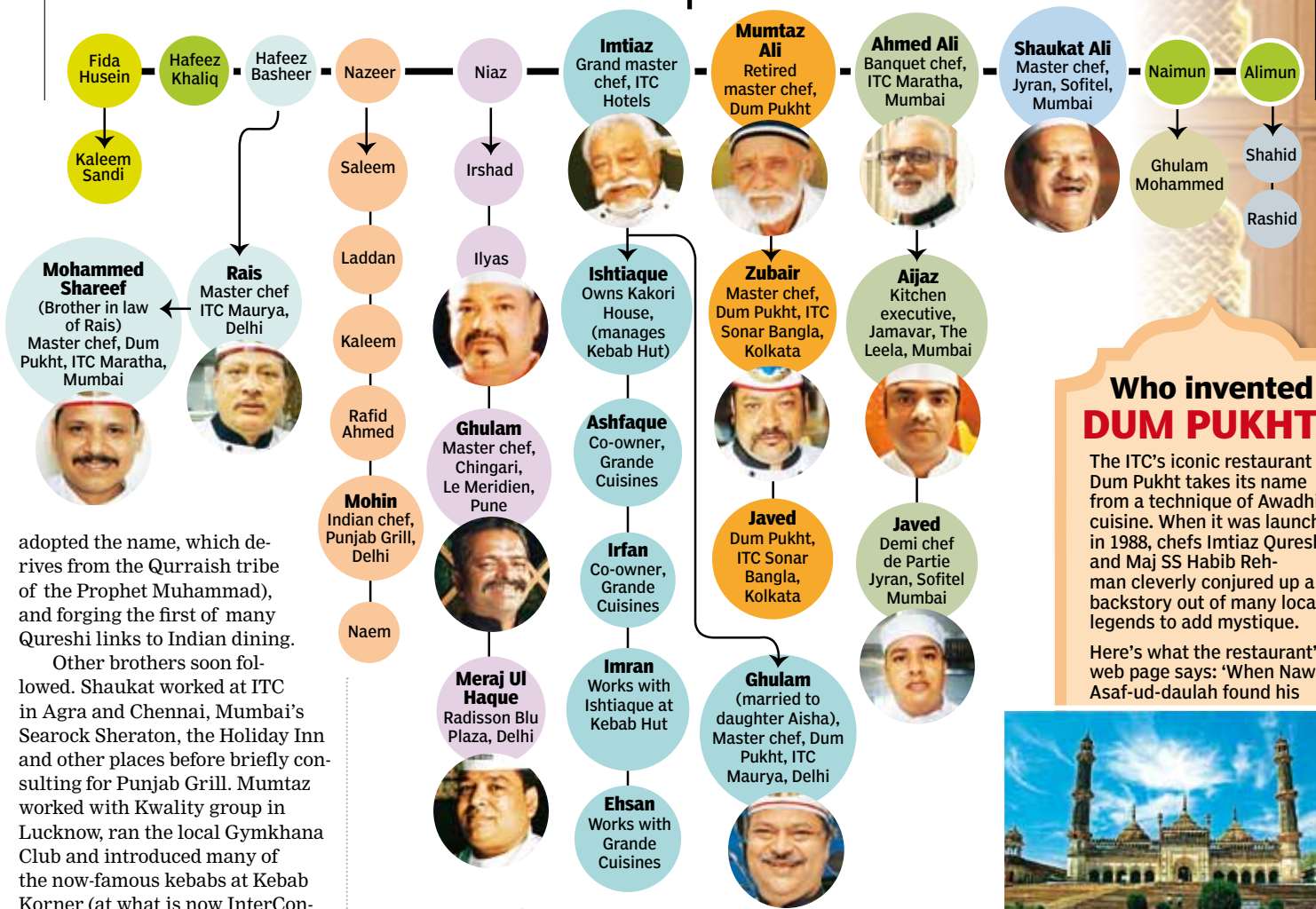
Ahmed Ali Qureshi,
ITC Maratha

TOP CHEF
Imtiaz Qureshi lords it over Awadhi cuisine at ITC

Photos: LABONY KAUSHAL

WHO'S WHO IN THE QURESHI FAMILY

Murad Ali and Sakina Qureshi



adopted the name, which derives from the Qurraish tribe of the Prophet Muhammad), and forging the first of many Qureshi links to Indian dining.

Other brothers soon followed. Shaukat worked at ITC in Agra and Chennai, Mumbai's Searock Sheraton, the Holiday Inn and other places before briefly consulting for Punjab Grill. Mumtaz worked with Kwaliti group in Lucknow, ran the local Gymkhana Club and introduced many of the now-famous kebabs at Kebab Korner (at what is now InterContinental, Marine Drive) before he joined the ITC.

The brothers became established names after they helped launch ITC's iconic restaurant Dum Pukht in 1988. Suddenly, everyone wanted a piece of that galouti. The Qureshi sons and nephews (some of whom had worked under the brothers) were swiftly picked up by other brands. India's appetite was truly whetted.

KEY INGREDIENTS

Several Indian regions have produced chefs who are masters of their respective cuisines. So what accounts for the Qureshis connection to Indian restaurants? The family attributes it to their intimate knowledge of the cuts of goat. "Anyone can cut mutton," says Mumtaz. "But only a Qureshi knows which cut has to go into which preparation." Of course, it's also about knowing what spices to use when and how that sets them apart. As Ahmed Ali says with a benign smile, "Give us only water to cook with and we'll even make that flavourful."



'Any chef can make 10kgs of biryani. But no one made a 200gms for a single person till I did it at Dum Pukht'

Imtiaz Qureshi

Then again, it's not that the Qureshis are the only masters of Awadhi cuisine. Rahim ki Nihari in Lucknow's Chowk serves some of the best nihari and paya; Alam-

gir in Aminabad does delicate galoutis and kulchas that rival a puff pastry in flakiness. Perhaps the family's fame rests on two simpler reasons.

The first is that uniquely Indian character that has been debated extensively in the run up to the elections: family. When Imtiaz joined the ITC, he did not come alone, he brought his brothers and nephew Rais, sowing the seeds of dynastic succession in a commercial kitchen. Three of his five sons were employed by the hotel before they decided to forge their destinies elsewhere. Imtiaz's son-in-law Ghulam is master chef of Dum Pukht at Delhi's ITC Maurya, other relatives are in charge of other Dum Pukht outposts or manage the Indian section of hotel banquet kitchens. Even the younger generation, many of whom who grew up outside Lucknow and didn't start off at the butchery, still gained an edge by working under the senior Qureshi brothers.

Blood ties, however, can take you only so far and no company

Who invented DUM PUKHT?

The ITC's iconic restaurant Dum Pukht takes its name from a technique of Awadhi cuisine. When it was launched in 1988, chefs Imtiaz Qureshi and Maj SS Habib Rehman cleverly conjured up a backstory out of many local legends to add mystique.

Here's what the restaurant's web page says: 'When Nawab Asaf-ud-daulah found his



CONSTRUCTION OF MYTH

Awadh's Bada Imambara is the source of several legends

kingdom in the grip of famine, he initiated a food-for-work programme, employing thousands in the construction of the exquisite Bada Imambara. Large cauldrons were filled with rice, meat, vegetables and spices and sealed to make a simple, one-dish meal available to workers day and night. Then, one day, the Nawab caught a whiff of the aromas emanating from the cauldron and the royal kitchen was ordered to serve the dish.'

Yale professor Holly Schaffer in her essay *Dum Pukht: A Pseudo-Historical Cuisine* argues that this is more fable than fact. But none of it detracts from the beauty of the food or the success of the restaurant. If the price for keeping a cuisine alive is an over romanticised tale, it's a price worth paying.



FOREIGN AID

Irfan (left) and Ashfaq Qureshi are taking Awadhi food abroad

Photo: SANJEEV VERMA

or electorate tolerates a non-performer. The Qureshis also possess the ability to straddle two worlds. Though steeped in a culinary tradition, they have contemporarised Awadhi food for a modern diner without compromising on the character of the food. The Dum Pukht biryani is a classic example: Imtiaz took the traditional bulk cooking technique and adapted it to a la carte dining. "Any chef in India can make 10kgs of biryani, any chef can make five kgs, they can even make one kg of biryani. But no one in the history of India made a 200gm portion for a single person till I did it at Dum Pukht," says Imtiaz not too modestly.

"Imtiaz was the world's first modern Indian chef," says Gautam Anand, VP of the ITC Hotels. "He broke free from the past and reimaged Indian food for the world. He made it possible for chefs like Vineet Bhatia and Atul Kochhar to reinterpret Indian food."

ADAPTING THE RECIPE

The Qureshis outside the ITC mothership are no less creative. When given charge of the Indian restaurant Jyran at the Sofitel,

Mumbai, Shaukat was given a clear mandate: Indian food, but with a French touch. His response: a paya soup that's velvety and light but holds the flavour of the original version; and bhagu ke kebab, a version of the galouti with a pâté-like smoothness even though it uses olive oil, not animal fat.

Ishtiaque, Imtiaz's eldest son,



At Sofitel, Shaukat Qureshi gives Indian cuisine a French touch with food that is light but as flavourful as the original

the owner of the Kakori House restaurants decided that he wanted to make Awadhi cuisine more accessible. His outlets focus on consistent quality and affordable prices by going back to bulk cooking techniques but with modern packaging technology. "I want to minimise the craftsmanship and make it more mechanised," Ishtiaque says. "A consistent product is the only way the cuisine can go international." He has taken also great pains to stay in the background, so that the brand has greater recall value than the individual.

Ashfaq and Irfan, his younger brothers who run Grande Cuisines, a Delhi-based consultancy firm, have gone one step further. Many of their restaurants are only lightly linked to Awadhi cuisine. "One needs to reinvent oneself," says Ashfaq. "What my father and his father did is great, but I don't have to follow exactly in their footsteps." Pukhtaan (which means 'to cook'), his upcoming restaurant in Patna, offers dum pukht-style dishes from Asia, Persian-inspired dishes and food from Morocco, Tunisia and India. "I do respect my heritage," he

US TOO

Other successes from Sadar

Vakil Ahmed, master chef of The Great Kabab Factory (TGKF), worked under Imtiaz. He along with Jiggs Kalra created the menu and is custodian the quality for the chain.



Mukhtar Qureshi, who heads Neel in Mumbai, has created a large vegetarian section from a cuisine that leans on meat. Apart from his excellent galouti kebabs and tandoori nawabi chaps, he makes a chilgoza soup with such a meaty flavour it's impossible to believe that it's vegetarian. His innovations include a broccoli kali mirch tandoori and a Kashmiri seb ki subzi.



Shahnawaz Qureshi, at the kitchens at Saffron at the JW Marriott, Mumbai, is a master of meat. Whether it's the leh-suni jhinga, murgh nawabi tikka or a galouti, it's cooked perfectly.



says. "But as a chef, I have a moral responsibility to go beyond what's been taught to me."

Of course, the fame of the family has given rise to "duplicate Qureshis" says chef Ghulam Sabir, a family member who just finished a contract with Dubai's Movenpick Hotel. He says he's come across Qureshis from other parts of India who "learn a few names" and then claim they are of the family. Earlier, says Ashfaq, this would anger him and his brothers. But his rage was assuaged by his father, Imtiaz, who said, 'badnaami mein bhi naam hai.'

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WHERE TO SAMPLE SOME QURESHI HITS

IN INDIA

DELHI

Dum Pukht, ITC Maurya. Master chef Ghulam recommends the **Kakori Kebab and Dum Pukht Biryani**

The Great Kabab Factory, Radisson Blu Plaza. Chef Meraj Ul Haque recommends the **Galouti and Baurrah Kebabs**

The Final Frontier, Dwarka/Greater Kailash/NCR. Brand owners Ashfaq and Irfan recommend the **Galouti Kebab and Kali Mirch**

Ka Murgh Tikka

KOLKATA

Dum Pukht, ITC Sonar Bangla, Kolkata. Master chef Zubair recommends the **Kakori Kebab and the Dum Pukht Biryani**

MUMBAI

Jyran, Sofitel. Master chef Shaukat Ali recommends the **Murgh Shan-e-Shaukat and Tukra Shan-e-Shaukat**

Dum Pukht, ITC Maratha. Master chef Mohammed Shareef recommends the **Kakori Kebab and the**

Dum Pukht Biryani

Kakori House, Grant Road/ CCI/ Mahim/ Bandra (W)/ Oshiwara/ Saki Naka; Owner Ishtiaque recommends the **Kakori Kebab and the Nihari**

Kabab Hut, Sun n Sand, Juhu. Ishtiaque and Imran recommend the **Raan and the Matka Biryani**

PUNE

Chingari, Le Meridien. Master chef Ghulam recommends the **La Mirch Tikka, Raan Chingari and the selection of kebabs**

ABROAD

ABU DHABI

Indigo, Beach Rotana: Franchisee partners Ashfaq and Irfan recommend the **Duck Tikka Kebab, and the Rosemary Infused Tandoor Prawns with Goan Pickles**

DUBAI

Qureshi's Kebab & Curry, Country Club Hotel. Brand owners Ashfaq and Irfan recommend the **Nihari Gosht and Awadhi Gosht Biryani**

KUALA LUMPUR

Qureshis. Brand owners Ashfaq and Irfan recommend the **Dill Salmon Tikka**

