

The following is an extract from *India's Soul Food* by Julie Sahni, who is famous for writing about Indian cooking, published in The New York Times Magazine.

The New York Times Magazine

BY Julie Sahni



FOOD; INDIA'S SOUL FOOD

5 TO AN INDIAN FAMILY, THE tandoori meal is not just food. Like Sunday supper for some Americans, this meal is the high point of the week. I remember gathering with my family and friends in cool breezes at an outdoor concert in New Delhi under tamarind and mango trees. There, we would dig a pit to smoke, grill and roast chicken and meat. As the juicy morsels of meat were taken from the pit, we'd devour them instantly.



10 Although tandoori cooking has become synonymous with India, it is not an Indian invention. Tandoor originated in Syria, then spread through Central Asia, including India, as a clay pit for baking bread. In the beginning of the 19th century, in Peshawar, in the northwest frontier region of Pakistan, then part of India, an ingenious technique for cooking meat was invented. Meat was first trimmed of all fat, then marinated for hours in a special yogurt and herb mixture. The
15 tenderized meat and poultry was skewered on spears and lowered into the glowing hot tandoor. After being simultaneously baked, roasted, grilled and smoked, the meat was tender and moist, imbued with a sweet smoky aroma and a rich flavor. The Pathans called this tandoori food. To ensure that it was mistaken for no other, they colored it bright orange – a trademark of all tandoori foods today.

20 The appeal of tandoori food is not surprising: children and adults alike love its mild herbal flavor. Because the food is trimmed of all fat and marinated in yogurt, it is low in fat and cholesterol.

25 Tandoori food has not always been popular. As recently as 1947, when the first tandoori restaurant opened in India, this food was labeled low-class. A visit to a tandoori joint was taboo for members of society. This is probably because it was born not in a state, or royal, kitchen, but in the open air among nomadic tribes. Tandoori food was meant to be enjoyed with wine and music. Eventually, however, many members of the upper classes drove in limousines to the narrow alleyways, where they sent their servants to pick up tandoori food.

30 Tandoori cooking is simple. It requires little time, effort or skill. The yogurt marinade reduces the cooking time considerably, because the marinade breaks down the protein in the meat. Almost any food that can be barbecued can be cooked in a tandoori oven. But many people never attempt tandoori cooking at home because they assume that it requires the tandoor clay oven. In fact, a traditional tandoori oven is not necessary for its preparation. What's most important is the enclosed heat, and a covered grill with an adjustable air vent is excellent for this. The kettle

35 grill with a domed lid works best because it reflects heat most evenly. The fire should be made with wood charcoal because it burns hotter than charcoal briquettes. Fresh or pre-soaked dried grapevine cuttings added just before barbecuing can substitute for the clay aroma of a true tandoori oven. Dried grapevines are sold at many specialty food stores. The vines should be soaked in water one hour before cooking.

40 The marinade ingredients vary slightly, depending on the meat used. For chicken, a marinade with olive oil lends an earthy aroma. Cornish hens or small broilers are more flavorful and absorb the marinade better than roasting chickens. Saffron is essential in the marinade for tandoori squab or quail to balance the rich gamey flavor of these birds.

45 Tandoori cooking need not be restricted to meat and poultry alone. Fresh fish, shellfish and vegetables work wonderfully, too. Take precaution not to over-marinate shrimp, or they will turn pasty during cooking.

- Discuss how different features are used on this webpage to create an impression of Indian culture.