# Positively Sixth Street

Learning to make a Bangladeshi chicken korma by way of Indian Row.

**Curtains of chile-pepper** lights that look like Christmas at the bordello, sitar players in every window, seven courses of food for $7.95: I've always thought of Curry Row on East Sixth Street as one of the great minor mysteries of New York City. How did a clone colony of Indian restaurants sprout on one random block in the East Village? Is it true that they all share a kitchen? And why are they lit like a rager in the art-school darkroom?

Fifteen years after my first Sixth Street saag paneer, I was finally getting some answers from Shelley Mubdi. "We weren't the first to open, but we were the first to open in style," he said, smiling widely. Mubdi is retired, but in 1984 he got in the curry game, opening the restaurant Gandhi — a little bigger and brighter than his peers', he noted proudly — when there were about 10 restaurants on the block, before they rocketed to 27 in the '90s.

Nearly all these Indian restaurants were actually owned by Bangladeshis like Mubdi, in the classic "my cousin showed me the ropes when I got here" way. The old joke of them all sharing a kitchen was nearly true — because there were so many personal ties, workers and costs and recipes flowed freely from one to the next.

"My cousin brought me to Sixth Street," Mubdi told me. "The East Village was just a terrible place in the '70s — drugs, muggers, smelly. He took me to a tiny basement restaurant. The owner was very nice, from my country. We ordered dinner, and it was really no dinner, just a rotten thing. So I asked the owner, 'Who eats this?' And the owner said: 'Ah, all the hippies eat here. The business is fantastic!'"

Hippies! As soon as Mubdi said that word, the mystery cracked open. In 1968, the Beatles were in their sitar phase, the flower children were tripping up and down St. Marks Place and two blocks away, an enterprising Bengali man named Manir Ahmed realized they would pay a

Food stylist: Maggie Ruggiero. Prop stylist: Theo Vamvounakis.



Photographs by Grant Cornett

dollar for some chicken curry ostensibly from the land of their yogis. (Maybe the drugs explained the lighting.) Ahmed's restaurant spawned another, then another, then cousins and friends started coming from Bangladesh to get in the mix.

I asked Mubdi about the oddity of "Indian Row" being mostly free of Indian people, and he laughed again. "We had to call the restaurants Indian, because nobody knew what Bangladesh was! We named ours Gandhi, because people knew Gandhi from the movies. Our next place was called Passage to India. That was another movie!"

The milky northern Indian food these restaurants served wasn't food the cooks grew up with in Bangladesh. "We didn't even know what a tandoor was," Mubdi said. Chicken tikka masala was just something customers kept asking for, so someone had to figure out how to make it. "Everyone loved chicken tikka masala!" Mubdi exclaimed. And for a while, it really did seem like everyone: hippies, proto-foodies, uptowners, downtowners and out-of-towners all flocked to Indian Row.

The curry cream eventually curdled, though, as Indian restaurants popped up in other neighborhoods, siphoning away customers. By the late '90s, things were desperate, and unsustainable price wars ensued; lunch specials that cost $10 sold for $5. Mubdi sold his places not long after 9/11.

It sounded like a heartbreaking end for such a happy entrepreneur, but Mubdi's wife, Shama, said, winking: "Oh, Shelley never *worked* at the restaurant, not a proper job. We would just go at night to talk to people." She showed me how to make a chicken korma very different from the one people ate on Sixth Street. I'd known the dish only as a curry on training wheels, fattened up with cream, cashews and raisins.

"This is Bangladeshi-style, home-style," Shama said. She stirred together chicken with puréed aromatics, yogurt, a few sweet spices, and turned on the flame. I was surprised at the technique, or rather, the seeming lack of it, but Shama assured me: "You always see chicken korma at parties, because it is the easiest good food."

I'm guessing this means that all Bangladeshi parties are delicious parties. The chicken's juices bind with the onion and ginger to make a deeply savory, mellow gravy, with floral cardamom and clove floating through every bite. A last-second flourish of butter-browned onions gives it a dark, subtle sweetness. I wish I could retroactively trade Shama's home version for every too-sweet, gut-bomb korma I've had — which never really tasted all that different from chicken tikka masala.

"Oh," Shama explained, "the restaurants, that's how they make every dish in minutes — they just take a scoop of the base, add whatever else. But any good thing, you have to put a lot of effort into it."

"Except for korma?" I asked, smiling.

"Except for korma," she agreed.

**'You always see chicken korma at parties, because it is the easiest good food.'**

**Bangladeshi Chicken Korma**
Time: 1 hour

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| 2 | pounds skinless, bone-in chicken pieces (preferably dark meat) |
| 1 | teaspoon salt, plus more to taste |
| 1 | medium onion, peeled |
| 1 | 1½-inch knob of ginger, peeled and chopped |
| 3 | cloves garlic, chopped |
| ½ | cup whole-milk yogurt |
| 4-6 | green cardamom pods, cracked open |
| 3-5 | cloves |
| 2 | bay leaves |
| 1 | 3-inch stick cinnamon |
| ½ | teaspoon black peppercorns |
| ½ | teaspoon sugar |
| 2-3 | small hot green chiles (optional) |
| 2 | tablespoons butter |
| 2 | tablespoons vegetable oil |

1. Place the chicken in a medium Dutch oven, and season with 1 teaspoon salt. Thinly slice ¼ of the onion, and set aside. Roughly chop the rest of the onion, and purée it in a blender with the ginger, garlic and 3 tablespoons of water, until smooth. Add splashes of water to keep it moving, if necessary.

2. Combine the onion purée with the chicken, yogurt, cardamom, cloves, bay leaves, cinnamon and peppercorns. Bring the mixture to a simmer over medium-high heat, stirring. Cover the pot until the chicken releases its juices, 5 to 7 minutes.

3. Uncover the pot, and adjust the heat to maintain a gentle simmer. Cook, stirring and flipping the chicken occasionally, until tender and the sauce is gravylike in consistency, about 35 minutes. Adjust the thickness of the sauce by adding water or cooking it down. Stir in the sugar. Pierce the chiles with a knife, then add them. Season to taste with salt. Keep warm over low heat.

4. Heat the butter and oil in a small saucepan over medium-high heat. After it foams, add the sliced onions, and cook, stirring, until they are richly browned, 3 to 4 minutes. Season with a pinch of salt. Add the onion mixture to the korma. Serve with steamed basmati rice.

*Yield: 4 servings.*
*Adapted from Shama Mubdi.* ◆