

FOOD

The main food for our people is bread or “naan.” For a long time, wheat was grown and processed for domestic consumption. People were self-sufficient in food production and consumption. It has been only through the thirty-plus years of war and destruction that wheat imports have been necessary. Vegetables are important, especially onions, garlic, peppers, and tomatoes. Meat is consumed by the more prosperous and is usually lamb, beef, or chicken. Fish is consumed in places close to rivers and streams, but it doesn’t make up a major part of the cuisine. ● In my first year in America, I was always complaining about the food. I was shocked that people don’t eat bread. We always have bread and use lots of rice, and the bread here is not flat—it is like cake. I was eating mostly pizza because it is like bread. I love bolani, and we cook it here in America sometimes. I also cook lamb—that’s what people love and always ask me to cook.

TALIBAN & AL QAEDA

The Taliban and Al Qaeda are a creation of modern geopolitics. They were invented in Pakistan, funded by the Saudis and other Arab fundamentalist groups. They have no historical or sociological roots in our country. Afghanistan, while a devoutly Muslim nation, had never been fundamentally radical, and the clergy had never had political power/military power, before the U.S. decision to support radical Islamists against the Soviet-supported PDPA government during the last years of the Cold War. These radical groups have effectively led to the destruction of our nation, our culture, and our hopes for any kind of meaningful future. As a result of the thirty-plus years of war, many of our people remain refugees in different countries around the world, while those unable or unwilling to leave continue to be caught in the crossfire of the current war between U.S./NATO and Taliban invasion forces. ● My feelings about Al Qaeda are the same feelings that the families of 9/11 victims have. ● Al Qaeda is the most ridiculous and cruel group—worse than the Taliban in the worldwide context. But for Afghans, the Taliban is the worst. Everyone is frightened. You hope that you will be able to live a day without an incident. The important point is, if the international community leaves Afghanistan, then everything will be devastated. ● The Mujahideen were Islamic anti-Soviet fighters trained and supported by the CIA during the 80s and 90s. They were successful in overthrowing the pro-Soviet government in Kabul and forcing the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the country. As a collection of different groups, they soon fell into conflict with each other, especially in the city of Kabul. Their inability to establish a unified government led to the coming of the Taliban. This was a group of so-called religious students from the tribal areas of Pakistan, and they were financed, trained, and armed by Pakistan and the Saudis. The intention was to establish a fundamentalist, pro-Pakistani government in the country. The Taliban invasion and six years of barbaric rule created an ongoing civil war in much of the country. Their imposition of strict Islamic law, reflecting the Saudi Wahabi interpretations of Islam, violated human rights, especially the rights of women. The Taliban are also said to have forged close relations with Al Qaeda and Osama. After 9/11, this relationship led to the U.S. military action against the Taliban regime, forcing their ouster and establishing the current Karzai regime in Kabul. Al Qaeda is seen by some as a terrorist, radical-Islamist group led by Osama and intent on imposing Islamic rule in the Middle East and other areas with large Muslim populations. Others consider them as primarily a radical and fringe political group using Islam as a means for establishing legitimacy in Islamic lands.

ETHNIC IDENTITY

Afghanistan is a vast country and has a rich mix of ethnicities and tribes. When I introduce myself to a foreign person I say that I’m an Afghan from Afghanistan, but when I talk with my people from my country, I say I’m from Kabul, and I’m Tajek. ● The war has increased ethnic differentiation as foreign interventions used ethnicity to create divisions for political purposes. Today, the ethnic divide is the greatest it’s been for perhaps centuries. ● I am Hazara, but this is nothing for me since I am an astronomer. We astronomers believe that ethnicity, language, religion, and other diversity points are spurious. I never try to express my ethnic identity, since Afghans have suffered so much during the war between different armed ethnic groups.

EDUCATION

The quality of education, primary or secondary, is not standard and is often defiled with political interference. This political hindering is so strong that children are deprived of studying poetry and literature. They don’t know the name of great Persian poets. My main concern is the education of my three children. I am not satisfied with primary education here in Afghanistan, and I hope to make my way to the West or the U.S. in order to give them a better future, despite the fact that I have a good job here with the UN. ● Education at all levels can be found in the major cities. In past years, much attention was paid to the education of girls and women. The coming of radical Islamists in the last thirty years has limited the expansion of education to mostly males and suffused it with strong religious content. Educational opportunities diminished in the countryside as the Taliban and other religious fundamentalists consider modern education a threat to their belief system. Targeted especially were schools providing education to girls and women. Education in Afghanistan was “secular” only during the time of the PDPA government. With establishment of the Karzai regime, the U.S. designated Afghanistan as an “Islamic” Republic. This eliminated any hopes of secular politics or education.

U.S. PRESENCE

I think after 9/11 the destiny of the U.S. and Afghanistan became linked with each other to maintain security and deter any terrorist attacks to the U.S. and the presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan is essential. The good thing is the U.S. overthrew the Taliban from power, giving women and children more freedom. ● The U.S. presence is an occupation force supporting a government not considered legitimate by the majority of the population. As such, it has been a tragic mistake, costing thousands of lives and the general destruction of the country. Without a legitimate government, the lives of our people are caught between U.S./NATO forces, the Taliban, and other terrorist organizations, local landlords, warlords, and drug lords. ● I think you know perfectly well that, as a whole, people are not satisfied with U.S. presence. They made too many mistakes and, after nine years of war, terrorism is not defeated yet. People doubt the reality of this war. Of course, after the Taliban falling, the ordinary people’s lives changed in a good direction. But these changes are more prominent in the lives of those Afghans who work in NGOs, UN organizations, or have private businesses.

PERCEPTION OF THE U.S.

In general, Afghans have had positive feelings about Americans. Unfortunately, the problems created by the present war may have changed this image for many. ● The majority of Afghans have the perception that U.S. people are not good, as they do not think about their own poor people. They always think about other countries and want to capture them. This is tied to pride and not much else. ● Most Afghans think the U.S. is going to be like Russia—that in the future, they will lose all their power and be in ruins. However, I think that the American people are a hardworking people who love their country. A nation as strong and as proud as America would never have been built otherwise. I can’t really tell you what other Afghans think about Americans because this particular topic is never discussed.

FAMILY

I see the family structure of America tearing apart. People here are busy with work and don’t even find time for dinner together. The way we respect our elders is amazing. We take care of them, they live with us, and they’re an important part of our lives. ● Growing up in Afghanistan, if a neighbor saw you smoking a cigarette, he would beat you up. Then he’d take you to get beat up by your parents, and you would never smoke again. All Afghans raise each other’s children, as well as their own. That’s why the family has that grip. ● Most Afghan families in America have a hard time with their kids. Here, you live a hybrid life. One is your culture and religion, the other is your life as an Afghan-American. All these freedoms contradict your religion or culture. You can’t share certain things with your family, who you depend on for emotional support.

BOLANI PAZI

is an Afghan take-out restaurant that sells bolani, a savory Afghan turnover. Bolani is a homemade Afghan bread, stuffed and grilled with your choice of spinach, pumpkin, red lentils, or potato and leeks.

This is the second iteration of Conflict Kitchen, a take-out restaurant that serves cuisine from countries with which the United States is in conflict. Conflict Kitchen is augmented by events, performances, and discussion about the culture, politics, and issues at stake of each country we focus on. The restaurant will rotate identities every four months to highlight another country.

The text on this wrapper is taken directly from interviews with Afghans both in the United States and Afghanistan.

www.conflict-kitchen.com

GOVERNMENT

The type of government is irrelevant at this point. What’s important is that whatever government comes to power, they will have the ability to respect human rights, defend national sovereignty, work for peace and social justice, and be recognized as legitimate by the majority of our people. The current government is an illegitimate puppet regime of the U.S. International organizations who have recognized that the Afghan “electoral process” is defined by corruption and fraud. The current government has little jurisdiction outside the capital city and remains in power with U.S. military support. Afghans in general would like the war to end, the occupation armies to depart, and the terrorism to cease. It is only then that people can get back to rebuilding a destroyed nation. ● The current government is very corrupt and polluted. Corruption has now become a culture. It’s too difficult to get rid of this disease. As an example, you as an Afghan can’t get your national I.D. Card without paying a bribe. You see all those human-rights violators in the top government positions. We need to curb the corruption. Even though the current system is good and based on democracy, it is sick already. ● They’re doing the wrong thing in Afghanistan. We’re people of royalty. It’s in our blood. We’ve been having king after king after king. So they’re trying to bring democracy? Yeah, right. The only way it’s going to work is if you wipe us out and bring in a new generation. The people who think democracy is going to work are the ones that have been living with it outside the country for over 25 years. They’re used to it. And then they come over here and think people who have been through the war and lost so much will want that democracy? I’m not saying democracy doesn’t work in some countries where there is some level of economic or ideological stability. But in Afghanistan, I feel like they’re trying to stuff it down people’s throats. Afghans can’t relate to this. So it’s like having a bird in a cage all its life and then, all of a sudden, you’re going to say, “Well, look at all these other birds. They go flying and then they come back home at night.” You try to do that to your bird that’s been in a cage all its life, most likely the bird’s not going to come back.

FUTURE

The future can only exist if we have hope. Afghans are strong and determined people, and many consider the current situations as temporary. The hopes are for a nation at peace, a prosperous economy, human rights, especially for women and children, and an end to political and religious extremism. ● Afghanistan has enormous mineral resources and huge agricultural lands, so, for investment, I can see a very good future for Afghanistan. ● The future looks bleak and I’m afraid of another civil war if the U.S. leaves Afghanistan next year. ● At the moment I am fully disappointed, fully disappointed. ● I still have hope that one day there will be peace and my children will not suffer as I suffered. There will be better education, modern society, and democratic government (which is a long way away).

CULTURE

I am a gallery owner in Kabul; the largest gallery outside of the national gallery. The largest cultural export of Afghanistan is the carpet. The industry here is like the automobile industry in first-world countries. I am a trained diplomat, but I saw all the “diplomacy” and said, “Forget diplomacy.” I started my own gallery as a way to communicate the depth and richness of Afghan culture and art to the rest of the world and to support Afghans financially—a sort of economic and cultural diplomacy. I don’t beg for money or tell them sob stories. I represent over 100 artists and craftsmen, and I’ve never gotten any grants to do it. I am doing it with my own money to prove that I can do this and that such things are profitable. This is very important nowadays. ● There are elements of cultural expression that are forbidden and taboo, such as dancing. Music has its own industry, but I’m not into it that much. I love music, but it is not highly regarded, so it’s better to stay away from it for now. I’m going with the flow and participate in what’s allowed. We can change culture later. ● Hospitality is the ultimate equalizer, and that’s how Afghans define themselves culturally. Even now. They live through this hardship of war and being tormented with poverty. Still, when you go to the market, you say “Hi” to the guy who is just a small store owner. If it’s lunchtime, he has a little plate of potatoes and beans with a piece of naan in front of him. And he will say, “Come on. Have some food with me.” He sincerely wants you to have the food. That’s a characteristic that’s been there for generations and still exists. It’s true for Afghans who are here in the West, too, though less so. If I were to say, “Hey come share some bread with me here in the street,” you might think, “What is wrong with this guy?” Because of these limitations, because of the culture here, Afghans in America have to hold back a bit. They can’t be as hospitable. ● The area today known as Afghanistan lies at the crossroads for anyone going from East to West or North to South. As a result, our culture has taken many things from many cultures and made them its own. Zoroastrianism originated in the North of our country, and Buddhism found its way from India to China through our nation. At a later date, Islam came through our lands and later spread to India. Our major language—Farsi or Persian—was once the court language of people from Istanbul to Calcutta, and north to the Central-Asian empires coming from Samarkand and Bukhara. Afghanistan was known for its distinct carpet designs, miniature art, ceramic-tile art, and Farsi/Dari poetry. The past thirty-plus years have not been kind to cultural affairs. At present, it’s the culture of war, military occupation, drug cultivation and export, and survival economics that defines much of what is “culture.”

DATING & MARRIAGE

Girls and boys have dreams and are fans of Indian songs and lovers and Bollywood. They love dating, but there are many restrictions. Mostly marriage is arranged, or you choose the girl and ask your family to present a proposal for marriage. Dating sometimes happens among younger generations. They hide from their family because dating is not in Afghan culture and tradition and seems to be a sin. With mobile and internet technology, young Afghan people have more access to make friendships and start to “blind date.” ● At the time of the Taliban, many girls were being kidnapped because they were beautiful. One of the Taliban even came to my father and asked about one of the neighbor’s girls, saying that he wanted to marry her. My father immediately informed the family and they escaped to Iran. I was young during the Taliban, only eight years old, but I remember everything. My father was not worried that the Taliban would punish him somehow, because he is a father. It’s very simple. He doesn’t want the Taliban to kidnap his daughter or the neighbor’s daughter, so he did his duty as a father. ● In Afghanistan, courting is very formal. You ask for the woman’s hand before you even know her. I knew people who met their mates when they were five years old. It’s just like me looking in your eyes and you understanding that I love you and you love me. Simple. And then it is very secretive. I wouldn’t talk to you once I had you in my eye. I would ask your neighbor about you, and then I would maybe follow you around for seven days. I would already know what family you are from and know you because I know your family’s values.

WOMEN

As of late, women have more freedom but some families still don’t let them out to work or study. Afghan culture is male dominant. Daily, women are mostly busy with house chores. Though it seems that women are powerless and docile in their houses, it is not so. They have their power within their family. They have the final say for choosing brides for their sons. Women organize and run the social aspects and interpersonal relationships of the family and household and among all relatives. ● As an Afghan woman living in Kabul, I now have the right to live like other women in the world. I can go to school and university, and I have the right to work and marry someone of my own choice. But 60 percent of Afghans can’t live like women in Kabul, the capital. ● Before the Taliban it was like the U.S.—the girls had their own freedom. When I went to university to become a doctor, I wore jeans, skirts, whatever I wanted. At that time, 80 percent of the university was women because so many men had died during the war with the Soviets. I want to go back, but my kids don’t want me to go. I am studying to become a physician’s assistant so I can bring my experience here in the U.S. back to Afghanistan. ● When I was young, when the Taliban were in greater control, I was upset because I couldn’t go out and play. I couldn’t run a kite, which is something that I always wanted to do. All of the boys were doing it, but girls were not really allowed. I just remember that once my brother took me out, and he let me keep the strings for him while the kite was in the air. I felt a freedom that I had never felt before, a girl holding a kite.

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