



# Off Menu – Ep141 – Asma Khan

## Ed Gamble

Welcome to the Off Menu Podcast, taking the bacon of humour, frying it in the oil of the Internet, and then removing the rind of bad vibes. Hello James.

## James Acaster

Hi, you take your rind off the bacon, do you?

## Ed Gamble

Well, if it's that horrible chewy rind of good bacon when there's a really hard bit of rind, you do need to take that off, but I like the soft fat, of course.

## James Acaster

I like the crispy rind mainly.

## Ed Gamble

I love the crispy rind, yes. I love the crispy rind, it's very nice, but sometimes you get that little gelatinous bit around the outside that's impossible to crisp up and impossible to eat because it's too chewy. That's what we don't have here, we don't have chewy rind.

## James Acaster

No chewy rinds here, this is the Off Menu podcast with Ed Gamble and James Acaster.

## Ed Gamble

Quite often, we do have chewy rinds, but Benito edits them out, doesn't he?

## James Acaster

Yes, and he chews them himself on his own in a little room, he chews them all up.

## Ed Gamble

And texts us going, 'Oh, I'm chewing this bit of rind.'

## James Acaster

I'm chewing the rind and we go, 'Oh, right, got to block this number as well now.' Having to block a different number from him every single week.

## Ed Gamble

He's got a bucket full of burner phones that boy.

## James Acaster

Yes, this is the Off Menu podcast, we are inviting a guest into our dream restaurant and asking them their favourite-,

## Ed Gamble

Their favourite what?

## James Acaster

My brain has stopped.

## Ed Gamble

Well, I know that, you know, it's only theoretical that you've been cast as the snake in the live action remake of Robin Hood, but it's nice to know you're going into it.



**James Acaster**

Theoretical, but I might still do it.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

I think I'm proving that I can do it. Favourite ever starter, main course, desserts, side dish and drink, not in that order and this week our guess is Asma Khan.

**Ed Gamble**

Asma Khan, a wonderful chef. We always love having chefs on don't we James?

**James Acaster**

Love having chefs on, feel very lucky boys whenever we have a chef on.

**Ed Gamble**

Always a bit nervous when we have a restaurateur in as well though.

**James Acaster**

Yes, because we might mention restaurants we like and maybe they'll be bad.

**Ed Gamble**

Well, no, I just mean we run the dream restaurant and that Asma is going to be able to see that we don't really know how to run a restaurant.

**James Acaster**

No, I hadn't even thought about that, great.

**Ed Gamble**

Luckily, we've built in a format point that means we can kick Asma out-

**James Acaster**

That's true.

**Ed Gamble**

If she mentions a secret ingredient, so then we can get off the hook easier.

**James Acaster**

Yes. An ingredient which we don't like, or the listeners don't like, depending on who has suggested it. This week the secret ingredient is, supermarket sushi.

**Ed Gamble**

Supermarket sushi.

**James Acaster**

Supermarket sushi. Sushi?

**Ed Gamble**

Suzie eats supermarket sushi in The Shard.

**James Acaster**

Yes, as everyone knows.



**Ed Gamble**

JP McMun, I guess JP McNamara is the full name, this is just a Twitter handle. McManaman, well, it's JP McMun on Twitter and JP has suggested supermarket sushi.

**James Acaster**

Supermarket sushi, which I agree.

**Ed Gamble**

I agree too, not sure it'll come up in the episode, I think we might be safe with this one.

**James Acaster**

You never know.

**Ed Gamble**

But supermarket sushi, awful, fridge cold, rock hard rice.

**James Acaster**

Horrible. No flavour.

**Ed Gamble**

I believe legally they're not even allowed to sell raw fish, so it's always cooked fish quite often.

**James Acaster**

The one that's like mackerel or whatever.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

That's the worst. The little, the brown fish that's, like, cooked on the top of the rice in Marks & Spencer.

**Ed Gamble**

To me, it's the tuna roll, the cooked tuna, like tinned tuna roll.

**James Acaster**

Horrible.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, really bad stuff.

**James Acaster**

Horrible, with a bit of cucumber if you're lucky in there.

**Ed Gamble**

You need the soy sauce to moisten up the rice.

**James Acaster**

Oh my good God.

**James Acaster**

Yes.



**Ed Gamble**

You know, all supermarket sushi, I feel like we're gunning for M&S here, but they do have a specific thing with that tuna one which is-

**James Acaster**

Yes, yes. It is bad.

**Ed Gamble**

All the way. But also for balance, Marks & Spencer's has revolutionised the service station game.

**James Acaster**

Yes, hey, look I'm not complaining about that.

**Ed Gamble**

I just worry that I'm going to be banned from there and I'm currently doing my UK tour, Electric and every day I'm having the cut up apple with peanut butter dip.

**James Acaster**

Well, you deserve it then because you're a Granny Smith lover and you know how I feel about them.

**Ed Gamble**

Only in that context, only in the peanut butter context. I love Marks & Spencer's cut up Granny Smith with peanut butter dip, and also the prawns that you can dip in the cocktail sauce, yes.

**James Acaster**

Yes, that's good, I like those.

**Ed Gamble**

That is every day on tour. Tickets available, [edgamble.co.uk](http://edgamble.co.uk).

**James Acaster**

Very nicely done this week.

**Ed Gamble**

Merci.

**James Acaster**

Also, people can pre-order my book, James Acaster's Guide to Quitting Social Media. Being the best you you can be, and curing yourself of loneliness, volume one. They can do that.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes. James struggling to remember the title of his own book there.

**James Acaster**

It's too long and too linear, I did a really long title for a laugh and now, you know, worried about that.

**Ed Gamble**

You messed up mate.

**James Acaster**

Also, Asma has got a wonderful book out.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, she does. Before we even speak to her we're going to mention this book because we've got it sitting here and it looks incredible. It's called Ammu, Indian Home Cooking to Nourish your Soul.



Asma Khan of Darjeeling Express. Which is her wonderful restaurant and I cannot wait to make some of this stuff/read this book when I'm sat in the kitchen and ordering a Deliveroo. It looks beautiful.

**James Acaster**

Yes, I think there's a big story behind it of Asma's mother, but we'll ask her about it. We were looking through it, every single recipe sounds delicious.

**Ed Gamble**

Oh man.

**James Acaster**

All the pictures of the food as well make my mouth water.

**Ed Gamble**

I'm so hungry.

**James Acaster**

Also, there's a huge personal story behind it and a very universal story all the way through that people can relate to. So, not just a cook book in my eyes, there's even more to it.

**Ed Gamble**

I can't wait. Right, so without further ado, this is the Off Menu Menu of Asma Khan. Welcome, Asma, to the Dream Restaurant.

**Asma Khan**

Thank you. I'm very excited.

**James Acaster**

Welcome Asma Khan to the Dream Restaurant, we've been expecting you for some time.

**Ed Gamble**

Here he is.

**James Acaster**

Pretty good?

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, that was good, that was the genie entrance there Asma.

**Asma Khan**

I worked that one out.

**James Acaster**

Yes, you knew which one was the genie immediately, right?

**Asma Khan**

Yes, absolutely.

**James Acaster**

Yes, which greeting did you prefer out of me and Ed there?

**Asma Khan**

Yours.



**James Acaster**

Yes, thank you.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

It was very dramatic.

**James Acaster**

It was dramatic. It was very ceremonial, would you say?

**Ed Gamble**

I always worry though now. Now we're in a pandemic era of the genie entrance being quite spit based, when we're in the room with people.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, I can't believe people used to blow out candles on a cake and then everyone eat it. We don't do all of this in the restaurant before. We used to always have candles and singing and everyone singing, and now we're terrified.

**James Acaster**

No candles at all.

**Ed Gamble**

What happens if there are people in the restaurant and they start singing, or they start blowing out the candles?

**Asma Khan**

They do, they do.

**Ed Gamble**

Do you shut it down?

**Asma Khan**

I'm very, very mean. I have a very mean streak to me, I come back and say, 'We are still in the pandemic.' Although we have an absolute idiot running the country, so you no longer can say that, after Thursday that we're still in a pandemic, because all rules are being removed, but yes.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Ed Gamble**

It's your restaurant, your rules, right? You can still ban happy birthday?.

**Asma Khan**

No, no, we are banning happy birthday for not just the candle reasons, but that's a long story and I won't bore you.

**James Acaster**

I don't know.

**Ed Gamble**

I don't know, I think we want to hear that.



**Asma Khan**

Well because the thing is that people bring in one cake and then we have to give them cutlery and cut, and if anyone has an allergy, it's all very stressful. There's a legal side of me which I hate and this is the bit that comes in of what if they have a nut allergy, it's in the cake? It's not in the food because we've got everything marked. Also, it hits the bottom line, because no one has dessert and someone gets some cheapo cake from somewhere, and they all have cake. We've got to wash all those plates and cut. I feel bad taking no cakeage, as it's called. It sounds a really weird thing to do, but some restaurants do. I've lost the argument, won the argument with my GM and my accountant on this one. So, yes, we don't do cake, for lots of reasons.

**James Acaster**

I'm on your side with that.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, I love that.

**James Acaster**

They don't bring their own cake to a restaurant, I don't care if it's their birthday.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, I mean, it's awkward, and it's awkward to say no to people. People can get very emotional, but it's a hard one and I think a lot of restaurants do struggle with this because you don't want to come across as mean. People have chosen to come to your place to celebrate a birthday and then they whip out this £2 cake which eighteen people are going to have slices of and you think, 'Oh, this is, like, a tough one.'

**Ed Gamble**

Have you thought about keeping some Colin the Caterpillars in the kitchen and then a real big mark up, like a wine mark up?

**Asma Khan**

Yes, we could do that, that would really make us popular, yes.

**James Acaster**

£60 Colin. You can do your own version of Colin the Caterpillar for that.

**Asma Khan**

I think I would love it, that's still my favourite cake. The first time I saw it I thought it was just so incredible. I grew up in India where we didn't get cakes with shapes and things like that. You got a very basic cake and you should be grateful you got a cake. It just blew my mind, that you could get a shaped cake for nothing. You could buy it even if it wasn't your birthday, you could get a caterpillar, yes, I just loved it.

**James Acaster**

It almost tastes better when it's not your birthday, a Colin the Caterpillar cake, just go and buy a Colin the Caterpillar.

**Ed Gamble**

I'm not that brave.

**James Acaster**

No?



**Ed Gamble**

I've thought about it, I've thought about buying a Colin the Caterpillar cake for no reason and then I'm like, what?

**Asma Khan**

Be brave, be brave, life is too short.

**James Acaster**

Yes, I did that as a teenager.

**Ed Gamble**

I'm not surprised you did it.

**James Acaster**

Yes, yes. Well, I didn't buy a Colin the Caterpillar cake. M&S had brought out these limited edition Shrek cakes that were the size of a face and it was-, I've just realised what I've said and you're going to try and tee me up for an accent, but I'm not going to do the Shrek accent in front of Asma because I -

**Ed Gamble**

James does a really good Shrek impression.

**Asma Khan**

Now you have to do it. You raised it.

**James Acaster**

Yes, well I knew that he was going to do it. As soon as I said Shrek.

**Ed Gamble**

Could you be Shrek finding out that you've got your own cake? He's gone so shy.

**James Acaster**

Well, yes, I'm shy.

**Asma Khan**

Can I please add, just because people can't see his face, he has also turned quite red.

**James Acaster**

Yes, which isn't good for a Shrek impression. You want to be as green as possible. 'Oh, oh I cannae believe Marks & Spencer's have done me a cake. It looks like my face, Donkey! Donkey have a slice of this cake. It's a thick fondant, the fondant is so thick. They've got jam and cream in the middle and two layers of sponge.' And that was what I ate.

**Ed Gamble**

And was it nice?

**James Acaster**

Yes, really nice, I ate the whole thing. I was a fifteen-year-old.

**Asma Khan**

And you lived to tell the tale.





**James Acaster**

I lived to tell the tale and do an impression of Shrek. But yes, I had been planning it for quite a while. I'd seen it in Marks & Spencer's and I thought, 'Man, I'd love to eat that whole thing.' And then my brain went, 'You can't eat a whole cake. That's illegal. You're not allowed to eat a whole cake.' Then as the days went on, I thought, 'Actually,' you know, fifteen that's the age where you start to think for yourself a bit more. I was like, 'I think I can eat a whole cake if I wanted.' So, I went in and bought it and ate a whole Shrek face.

**Ed Gamble**

So, growing up in India, you said there were no shaped cakes. Was it just round or square, were they the options?

**Asma Khan**

They're usually just square.

**Ed Gamble**

Just square.

**Asma Khan**

Just square and we didn't have a huge cake culture, you know, but birthdays cakes was a big thing. So, like, we don't have cakes in our wedding, I think there is no space, people are dying in any case after seven days of dancing and singing. But I have this obsession with cakes and I asked my mother very gently when I was getting married that could I have what I then called the English style, three-layered cake. And she passed out, she said, 'No way.' So, if I get married again, it's just for that opportunity to cut the cake. It is something that you see, when you grow up, it's very hard for you all because of the age that everyone is around this table. There was a time when there was no internet, you didn't see images and I grew up in a socialist Bengal where all Hollywood films were banned. So, we didn't get to see a lot of films as well. So, if you wanted to see images or pictures, you went to the library and you looked at an encyclopedia, there was no television at all. You had television for two hours in black and white. So, it was that time that you imagined how amazing these cakes were. It didn't taste as great as it looks, I have to admit. A bit disappointing, my first experience of fancy cakes in this country, but then that was the 1990s, things have improved a lot.

**Ed Gamble**

The first time you saw a Colin the Caterpillar was in black and white in an encyclopedia.

**Asma Khan**

Almost, almost, yes.

**James Acaster**

Let's talk about your wonderful book that has come out, Ammu. Have I pronounced that right?

**Asma Khan**

Yes, you've pronounced it correctly.

**James Acaster**

It looks beautiful as well, the cover and stuff, we can't show it to people.

**Asma Khan**

It's a very personal book. I think I always had this book in me, I wanted to write about a very special relationship. She taught me how to cook, but also she was someone who I learned a lot from. I only figured this out once I left and I was eating the Colin the Caterpillar cake in this country. I realised how much she had actually really taught me how to think, you know, the whole idea of equality deeply entrenched in her. She was very progressive for the kind of person she was. She didn't go to college, she came from a royal family, she set up a food business. She was fiercely, very committed



to equality, people who had emotional problems, women who were abandoned, so those who society was side-lining, women who were abandoned by their husband, of course the shame was theirs because the husband walked off. I remember I used to be so scared, she used to go into very difficult slums and tell everybody, 'She works for me from tomorrow, I don't want any man to walk in there.' She used to tell her, 'You don't have to sell yourself or your daughters. You come and you work for me.' And the next morning we used to hate Ammu at that point because there were, like, four snotty kids sitting outside. But that was remarkable and she did it in such a casual way, no one would dare tell her that what she was doing was wrong. She was unafraid to speak up. I think although she has never admitted it, I mean I can say it now, she was uncelebrated too. She was one of five daughters, she was the middle daughter, and she understands what it is not to be wanted. The pressure of having another son and I was not the son, she spent her entire life trying to be very fair to me and my brother.

I realised that if all you needed was someone to tell you you're equal, and it was harder for her because Indian society is very shallow. My sister, very, very beautiful, still looks ten younger than me, looks like a model and very fair-skinned. Very slim, long hair, and the comparisons were brutal. So, not only was I not a boy, I didn't look pretty, I was fat, I was dark. I was constantly being told all of this, and my mother was just incredible. She never made either of us feel different, she raised us to understand that we're equal. I learned this very young, this is why this book is so important because you understand the equality, and food is a great leveller. She cooked for us, she sat down and fed us and made us feel we were equal. She made me feel very powerful, she always said, 'You will change the world. I know it. I, in my lifetime, I want to see it.' How could I not write a book to her? Because she taught me how to live.

**James Acaster**

That's amazing.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, it's absolutely incredible.

**James Acaster**

I feel a bit silly asking poppadums or bread and, you know, still and sparkling water, after that.

**Ed Gamble**

Are there any highlights or recipes in here that mean the most to you, that you are most excited to put in the book?

**Asma Khan**

I think the biryani and the thing is that you know the biryani is very complicated, usually for large numbers. For those who have come to my supper club will know it's a massive pot of biryani that is opened. This is a biryani my mother made, usually when I failed in maths or I'd got into trouble or I'd bunked school and I was caught. My mother would make this biryani and I knew why, it was to tell me it was okay. So, when my brother lost a cricket match, or when I failed in, usually maths, sometimes science papers, and I was sent this report home that I'm a really stupid child, she would do this kind of thing. The biryani is that, I love that. So, the biryani is one of the dishes that I've got in there. It's very doable and it's for a small house, suitable for six people. You, you can eat it in one go.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

The man who eats a Shrek cake in one go, can eat that biryani for six in one sitting. Absolutely.



**James Acaster**

Mold that biryani into the shape of an ogre and I will eat it.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, James can't eat anything that's not Shrek themed, unfortunately.

**James Acaster**

It has to be Shrek themed.

**Asma Khan**

Yes. Can we make it Shrek themed? I'm sure that's very easy to do.

**Ed Gamble**

So, you were saying just before we started recording that you're menu that you're going to choose today is not necessarily going to come from the book?

**Asma Khan**

Yes, because that would be just plugging the book. The book is fabulous, you should just go and get it for all the right reasons. But as I have the two of you, I thought it would be fun to also-, I just think that there's this huge anger with British people in India. We hate the British, they stayed too long and far, far, far too long. They did some good stuff, but I always-,

**Ed Gamble**

I've never been, I just want to make it clear. I've not stayed too long, I've ever had the opportunity to go.

**Asma Khan**

You can go now, as long as you stay for a short time, it's fine.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, I won't outstay my welcome, I promise.

**Asma Khan**

Yes. But the thing is that there's the fabulous impact of the British staying in India, which was the food, which was the Anglo Indian food, which a lot of people don't know. Indians, like, I wrote in my first cook book, people were so angry that cauliflower was got to India by the British in the 1930s, very, very new. Aloo gobi matar, which is in the book, in Ammu the book, and it's a great recipe, is a British combination because they even got the potatoes to Bengal. The Portuguese got potatoes to Bombay, the British got-, and I just think that, you know, in this kind of xenophobic hatred which works both ways of the outsider and the other, I thought I was going to send you on a journey of discovery and make you get things where there is a very strong British influence and an Indian influence, and these are not so well known dishes, but I just thought, 'Let me make it more interesting.' And also, it's a shared heritage, our shared heritage.

**James Acaster**

We always start with still or sparkling water.

**Asma Khan**

Sparkling. Very, very boring.

**James Acaster**

Look at that, straight.

**Ed Gamble**

No, but still is the boring choice, right?



**James Acaster**

That's not boring.

**Ed Gamble**

So, sparkling is the exciting choice.

**James Acaster**

Sparkling, that's the exciting one.

**Ed Gamble**

That's the jazzy water.

**James Acaster**

Yes, it's the jazzy water, would you agree?

**Asma Khan**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

A bit more jazzy, a bit more fun. Why would you prefer sparkling over still each time?

**Asma Khan**

Because this is still something new to me. I mean, in India if your water had bubbles in it, you run. There's something alive at the bottom of the glass, breathing through that, well, you see the bubbles you don't drink it. It has been 30 years, but in my heart, there is still stuff I take joy out of. Yes, to see bubbles and you know that it's not an animal breathing at the bottom of the glass-

**Ed Gamble**

I'm going to think that every time I see sparkling water now. I'm going to have to check the bottom of the glass and go, 'Right, there's something breathing down there.'

**James Acaster**

I'd be quite excited if I had a little creature in my glass.

**Asma Khan**

Go and live in India, I am so scared of all creepy crawlies, I've had a snake coming out of my shoe. I know that there's this horrible impression that people have, we're the land of lions and snake charmers, but there are snakes. There are snakes and they live in your school shoe in some places.

**James Acaster**

I've tried to invite myself along, our mutual friend, Nish Kumar, he goes to India sometimes. I try and invite myself along to those trips and he always says I can't go.

**Ed Gamble**

Well, I think he's going on a family thing, mate. I don't think he-,

**James Acaster**

Yes. But I would like to go and hang out, I don't want to go on my own. Nish's family, they know all the hotspots, they know where all the good food is. His grandma makes good fish curry, that's what I want. I want to go with Nish's family and then they always say I can't go.

**Asma Khan**

Well, you have the book in front of you, this is all home food. India, you should go where you can eat in people's homes. The food in the restaurant is not our food, the same as the food in



restaurants here is not our food. But yes, you're absolutely right, wait, hold (TC 00:20:00) on and hang, otherwise I'll take you to my home.

**James Acaster**

Thank you, to be honest I think that works out better for me food wise.

**Asma Khan**

You should go and eat home food.

**James Acaster**

Yes, I will do. I'm going to get that fish curry one day from Nish's nan.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, you will, you will.

**James Acaster**

Poppadum or bread, poppadum or bread, Asma Khan? Poppadum or bread?

**Asma Khan**

Bread.

**James Acaster**

What kind of bread?

**Asma Khan**

Not naan bread.

**James Acaster**

Now, why specifically not naan bread?

**Asma Khan**

No on eats-,

**James Acaster**

A fire lit in your eyes then.

**Asma Khan**

No, because no one eats that in India. Your bloody house will catch fire if you have a tandoor. This idea, people ask me, 'Do you have naan bread?' First of all, it's like saying, 'Do you have bread bread?' Naan is bread, I mean, how stupid are you? Like chai tea. I'll kill myself, don't say it. Do not say naan bread, do not say chai tea, there are lots of little things that you should not be saying, especially not to Indians because we die, a little bit of us dies every time we hear this. So, please don't kill us so early in our lives. But poppadum, just for all you other folks who don't know this, is never eaten at the beginning of the meal. Somebody worked this out that because mainly white folks have starters, let's give them something which we eat at the end of the meal, just to mess it up. So, a poppadum is given at the end of the meal to wipe up all the sauces that are left behind, and the chutney is a digestive to help you break down all the fatty food you've eaten, dah-dah, so no poppadum and bread, no naan bread either. I just want any kind of bread.

**James Acaster**

But you just turned my whole world upside down.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.



**Asma Khan**

Yes. Yes.

**James Acaster**

We've been saying poppadums or bread to people on this podcast every episode.

**Asma Kha**

I've ruined it.

**James Acaster**

We should've been saying it at the end.

**Ed Gamble**

We should've been saying bread, we should've just shouted bread at the top.

**James Acaster**

Would you like some bread?

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, and then at the end shouted poppadum.

**James Acaster**

So, would you like a poppadum?

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

I'm so sorry. Just, we'll do my episode in the right order, and then you can go back to doing it the other way.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

Everywhere around here, it is being done the wrong way, so it's fine, you're just fitting in with the society you're living in.

**James Acaster**

Yes, yes, we've been duped, right, it's not our fault.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes. We're not at fault here.

**Asma Khan**

This is not your fault, this is what you've been told happens in India. It doesn't, it's all bullshit.

**James Acaster: Who started that?**

**Asma Khan**

Even though I've just criticised this whole idea of-, it really started in the '60s, some even earlier. So, there were - they're not even Indians, they're from one little village mainly in Bangladesh and they got off the boats and they didn't want to go back. And they were working on the ships, merchant ships and other ships. And they opened restaurants, of what they thought was Indian food and they created a cuisine to make white folks happy. So, lots of cream and made up dishes and messing up



the order of how food is served. But I actually think that it's incredible, 1960s Britain, no Irish, no darks, no blacks and no Asian person was going to be given money to open a business. They didn't want to go and get benefits and this what they did. They created make-believe cuisine and I think that this is fine. And unlike a lot of Indian chefs who are very critical of the curry house, I will never criticize them because I know I stand on the shoulders of giants. I don't know what it was like to be in the '60s in England, you know, people throwing stones through your restaurant window, people running away without paying and a lot of aggression, with drunk people. They changed the palate of the nation, I am where I am, I am absolutely sure of that, because I had first advantage, my cuisine.

Whatever happens, you know, your parents and you are young enough, will remember their first curry as the first exotic dish they had. You will remember going with your family, maybe you're a little bit too young still for that, but a little bit older than you, going to a restaurant to have a family meal, in a curry house. This is a huge advantage we have because it allowed us to actually be part of the fabric of this nation. That is a massive advantage for all of us who are now serving the same food. Different versions, but I hesitate, despite pointing out about the papa, poppadum as you call it, we call it papa, that there is a difference. So, yes, it's incredible that they did this and they came in and they were in every village and all over the place. I'm sure if you go and inspect Mars carefully, you'll find someone has a curry shop up there.

**James Acaster**

Also, that's quite incredible, coming to another country and just really analysing the market, what people would like to eat and just coming up with something that will work and it actually working.

**Ed Gamble**

It's pretty depressing that you take one look at British people and go, 'We're going to have to just dump a load of cream in there.'

**James Acaster**

Putting the cream in.

**Ed Gamble**

Get the cream.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, creamy.

**James Acaster**

Yes please.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, because India is so hot, you put so much cream in your food it will split, the food and then after that you will be sick for having eaten split food. So, yes, this is just something that was done-, the first time I saw it in an Indian restaurant was in Cambridge, I almost died. I couldn't believe it, I was trying to figure out, 'What is this?' Everyone was eating it, like, so happy, I was thinking, 'I don't understand, when is the food going to come?' I thought this was just things to play with until the actual food turned up.

**James Acaster**

So, what bread would you like?

**Asma Khan**

I would like chapati and chapati is what we eat every day. It's the most standard bread, it's made on a tawa which is like a flat iron plate. It's very basic, it doesn't have any fat in it, it's just chapati flour and it's the basic bread that people will eat every day.





**James Acaster**

I mean, you can't go wrong really.

**Ed Gamble**

No, yes, delicious.

**Asma Khan**

I think that people still don't understand our food, but I think they're getting there. They're getting there and it's exciting and you should say poppadum and bread to your next guest, please because that makes sense.

**James Acaster**

I will and do you know what, if they don't pick me up on it. I'm going to educate them.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, anyone from now on who picks poppadums, we're going to go, 'Oh right, I see. You don't know what you're talking about.'

**James Acaster**

Yes, would you like that at the end of the meal? Is there a place you've had the best chapati bread, is there someone who makes the best that you've ever had?

**Asma Khan**

One of the girls in my kitchen here, but no restaurant. Restaurants are run by men, they don't know how to cook. They have learned to cook in culinary school. If you look at every chef who is working in this country at a certain level, mid-level, upper, their CVs are identical. They all went to the same culinary school, they learned to cook there. They worked in five-star hotels, fancy five-star hotels in India. That's how they learned to mass cook, we had one fridge and we had power cuts for eight hours. You ate anything out of the fridge, you were bloody dead, yes, everything looked like Shrek inside. It was green and things were growing in it, yes. You would speak just like Shrek after you ate that, because you would be absolutely dead. So, we didn't grow up-, you couldn't mass cook, you couldn't cook in advance. It's a hot country, it's very hot and very humid. Half the time there was no power when I was there, now all the industries have closed so we have power the whole time, they've shut all the factories, so now people in the homes have electricity.

**Ed Gamble**

You were saying to us before, that you have an all female kitchen at Darjeeling Express?

**Asma Khan**

Yes.

**Ed Gamble**

That was a deliberate thing when you set out to make the restaurant and put the restaurant together? You were like, 'I will seek an all female kitchen?'

**Asma Khan**

No.

**Ed Gamble**

No, it's just happened?

**Asma Khan**

I can lie, just to impress people and say that this is what I had planned. I couldn't find a man who knew how to cook the way I did, that's the main problem. Because they have learned through instructions and batch cooking, I learned to cook with my mother. It's amazing that I've written this





cookbook considering that her instructions are so bloody random. I burned something while I was trying to make the recipe, she only put one cup of water, I put one cup and the whole bloody thing burned. I said, 'What is this? One cup of water and it burned?' She said, 'Yes, it did.' Then I asked her which cup, her cup. It's a bloody jug, she used it on her windowsill, I said, 'Why did you say one cup?' She said, 'My cup.' I said, 'Yeah, but it's not.' So, this is the thing, you ask any south Asian, also east Asian, the randomness of which mothers when they give you instructions. So, we can't verbalise it, it's intuitive, it's through watching, that's how you learn how to cook. So, all the women who worked with me in the beginning from my house in my supper clubs, they just watched me. Some of them don't even eat meat but they've learned to make it. And also meat is expensive, many of them came from very deprived backgrounds. So, it's a luxury to have eaten meat, people sometimes ate meat once a year, they just watched me, they learned and they're great and they cook just like my mum or my grandmother because I've been able to teach them not by telling them instructions, like, 'Put one cup of this and that.' They just watch me and men don't cook that way in my culture because they never learned through their mothers.

We are deeply patriarchal, it's a deeply feudal society and if people say that my brother was in the kitchen, I'd be impressed if they did. I never saw a young boy in a kitchen. In our culture, boys and men eat first. Mothers and girls eat last. The leftovers, this was true in also other cultures. All these agrarian societies where the men had worked in the fields and come back. They were served the food, the best pieces of meat, it still happens today in all our societies. It's not just an Indian thing. When you go there and see the choicest cuts of meat are given to the men and there's nothing wrong with that, that's fine. But when he has not been actually harvesting the wheat the whole day, I don't think he deserves that big piece of meat, but that's still our culture. We take it for granted, it's internalised in us. But that is how women cook differently from men in my culture. Because we were in the kitchen, we served, we never got served the food complete. We had to make it. And even chapatis that I was talking about, it tastes like your shoe, my shoe, it tastes like my shoe within ten minutes, because it's hard and rubbery. It's made fresh, who is making that bread? Who is making that bread fresh and hot and ready to serve? In my book I write about this, I tell you a way to keep it warm. I tell you please make sure that the girls and the women eat together because it wasn't just that we were given food last, it often was burned. The ones that didn't make it to the table is what we got. You just thought you were unlucky because your roti was burned. (TC 00:30:00) Now, when you talk about it, and for everyone who is listening to me, they will suddenly make that connection. It's done in such a casual way, you don't even pick it up, that your chapati is burned, your chapati is dry. You are eating last, the hot, fresh fluffy ones go to the men on the table and the boys. So, I'm not going to get any guy to cook for me, because I don't think they've understood it. They have not understood what it is to serve.

I'm not cooking to impress, I'm not your Michelin star chef, I'm not doing poof and puff and putting edible flowers and micro herbs and making it look fancy like a garden. I'm cooking to heal you, if you eat things that I cook, you will feel it. What you will feel is my love and my time, for me the two valuable things in a cook is patience and generosity and that is why our food is what it is. It is about serving and watching someone eat, so it's not an easy place to be a woman, and this is why we are at the price point we are in the location we are. The only all-female Indian restaurant in the world, and I couldn't have done this in India, because we would not have been allowed to. It had to be London and this is why I love the city, this is the greatest city in the world. It accepts you, it gives you space, it gives you shelter. And under its umbrella, you can be anything you want to be. I have a kitchen full of immigrant woman, our identity is London, we're Londoners. We're not British, we're not Nepalese, Indian, anything. We feel a love for the city because we know the city made us.

**James Acaster**

That's great.

**Asma Khan**

I know I'm not like all your other guests. I am so sorry.



**Ed Gamble**

No, no, no. That's great. No That's great.

**James Acaster**

This is why it's good. We are just really enthralled with what you're saying. I went to your restaurant and you spoke a number of times during the evening and I said, 'We've got to get you on the podcast.'

**Asma Khan**

That's very sweet.

**James Acaster**

This is why you're here, because we like you talking about this.

**Asma Khan**

So, the thing is that, you know, it is storytelling. It's a restaurant but the bottom line is not about the fact that you've come here and we'll extract the most out of you and charge you extra for your poppadums, especially because you don't know which order it should come in. No, no, we don't do that, it's about storytelling. I am trying to hold your hand and take you through a journey. I'm not just trying to feed you, I'm trying to immerse you in my culture. This is why this restaurant is so different. We want to embrace you. It is an extremely intimate thing when you cook for someone. My fingerprints are unique, I touch something, I roll it. Even if you were next to me and we were both following the same recipe from the book, this is nothing to do with the fact that you're not from my culture, or you're a different gender, you're sensibility is different, your senses, your idea of what you are cooking with your whole being. So, when you give something to me, you are giving part of yourself to me. I must honour it and I want to know who you are. I will not just take your food and pay and walk off. People shouldn't do that. They need to know who are you, you've made this stuff for me, but I want to sit them down and ask them who they are. You can't do that in a restaurant environment and that's why I come up and I talk because I'm talking so that you know. I talk about my women, the ones that are cooking, not just about me or the food.

I tell the stories because it's very important. When you separate culture and food, this is where all the mess happens. This whole thing of appropriation, people using food and also I deeply feel this as an immigrant, as a Muslim, I won't let you take my food and not take me. You don't have the right to eat my food and get up from my table and walk away, listen to my music, wear the clothes inspired by my culture and then call me names, that you're not allowed to do. Please sit down with me and eat with me, break bread. You want to hate me after that, I forgive you, because at least I got a chance to talk to you. This is very important, this is why food is a bridge between host communities, immigrant communities. London is a great place, we have lots of different varieties of food, but we do not have the storytelling because too many men are cooking, who don't know the stories from the kitchen because they never learned there.

**James Acaster**

Your dream starter.

**Asma Khan**

Yes. I'm going to be very difficult. I want prawn cocktail.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, in India, that is in Calcutta, this is the height of sophistication. A hangover from the '60s, you know, when the British left, this is what they left behind. And prawn cocktail, I still absolutely love it. I went to Balthazar and ordered it that day, it was just, like, everywhere I go and I see the menu,



people are horrified because they think, 'What is wrong with you?' But yes, prawn cocktail is my ultimate starter.

**James Acaster**

What is it that you love about it?

**Ed Gamble**

Is it it's still back in India, it's still like the height of sophistication and you can't shake that?

**Asma Khan**

Yes. Yes.

**Ed Gamble: Even though you're now in London.**

**Asma Khan**

It's a posh thing.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, it feels fancy.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, it's a posh thing. In India, of course, we are all, anything that has got eyes on, you avoid, you take the heads off things, but you always had, because that was what they did in the times when the British were there, you still have a whole prawn with the head hanging on the side. You've got lettuce, which is a huge luxury, everything bloody wilts, human beings are wilting in the heat of Calcutta but somehow there is always this crunchy lettuce at the bottom. Yes, it's so exciting.

**James Acaster**

Probably about a week ago, I ordered a prawn cocktail and I don't normally but it looked delicious on the menu how it described king prawns, so I ordered it and it did not come with king prawns, it came with the tiny little ones.

**Ed Gamble**

The little shrimps.

**James Acaster**

I got about five of them and I was very-, I don't complain ever at restaurants, so I just ate it but I was very sad. So, you bringing up prawn cocktail makes me feel something that's too recent.

**Ed Gamble**

Especially bringing up the big guy hanging on the side. Yes. You need the big guy.

**James Acaster**

The big guy hanging on the side, I was like, 'Oh I wish, I wish I had the big guy.'

**Asma Khan**

Sometimes it helps to look at the price, although that's also not true anymore in lots of restaurants, they charge you and they give you complete garbage. If you look at it and think it's a bit expensive, you think, 'Yes, maybe it's going to be really nice.' Anyway, I loved the one I had.

**James Acaster**

Is there a particular place where we're getting it from, this prawn cocktail?



**Asma Khan**

Well, I've had it at Balthazar, but I usually get friends to make it for me. I don't want to risk it in the restaurant, I don't want to have the same experience as you. Teeny, tiny prawns, not my fun. I want big, big prawns and I want it to look really fancy and the glass has to be really nice. That'll kill me if it comes in some ordinary glass because in India they come in Martini glasses and it's always a silver spoon with a square edge to it, very nice.

**Ed Gamble**

I love that you just lit up talking about this fancy prawn cocktail, so excited.

**Asma Khan**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

You'd have to be careful if your mum was making you one and said, 'Make it in a glass.' It could come in a massive jug, right? You never know. You never know.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes. Yes.

Asma Khan: But my mum, it could all go pear-shaped, but because she ran a business for a long time, this was one of the big things that she would do in her kitchen business. People would have biryani but their starter would be prawn cocktail. It's the ultimate sophisticated thing to have in Calcutta.

**Ed Gamble**

You say you get your friends to make it for you, out of all your friends, who makes the best prawn cocktail?

**Asma Khan**

No, not getting into that.

**Ed Gamble**

What's going to happen? What's going to happen if you name them?

**Asma Khan**

No. No. Because they all will listen to this and then others will never make it for me and even though some of them make it really badly, at least they make it for me. I'm not going to burn my bridges.

**Ed Gamble**

No.

**James Acaster**

So, this is a known thing, everyone knows that you like prawn cocktail?

**Asma Khan**

Yes, it's a well known thing.

**James Acaster**

So, anyone who is friends of those, before we even asked you the question, they knew what you were going to say?

**Asma Khan**

Yes. Yes. Yes.



**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

This is why I'm very predictable. Which is very sad because you want to be mysterious and-

**Ed Gamble**

Well, it took me by surprise if I'm honest. I wasn't expecting prawn cocktail to come out with that.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, because people who know I'm from Calcutta would've completely expected me to say prawn cocktail.

**Ed Gamble**

It's a big thing.

**Asma Khan**

I sent Richard Vines, who was at that time working for Bloomberg, to my favourite restaurant in Calcutta and the first thing he wrote about, the prawn cocktail was amazing. So, it doesn't matter that your people have eaten in all kinds of sophisticated restaurants around the world, Calcutta does it so bloody well, really well.

**James Acaster**

Do you find that food critics, I don't know how friendly you are with a lot of food critics or how well you get to know them, but are they more easily won over by sending to them places aren't that fancy, that are more like homely dishes, or very simple dishes? If you're sending them to a chip shop to get some fish and chips, are they more likely to be like, 'That was brilliant.' Than they are at a Michelin starred restaurant or something like that?

**Asma Khan**

Well, my experience is that they don't ask me about fancy restaurants, because they know I've not gone to one. So, the food critics who are my friends, and I'm friends with quite a few, have always asked me, 'Where can we go?' One of the places where I really regret sending Tom Parker Bowles was to an incredible place run by Afghans in the border of Waziristan, they have a hook higher than this and they hang the naan on it. The naan is this big. It's the best chapli kebab, naan and karahi gosht I've had in my life. I told this to Tom Parker Bowles, he has ruined it, because that place is now packed. He wrote a review on that. Yes, those kinds of foods are really fabulous to get, and this is the middle of nowhere, I'm sorry if you live there, but next to East Hounslow. So, it's quite a hike and then from there it's quite a hike from the station as well, but fabulous food. I think it's important because people's pallets are probably jaded from food that is more or less similar even though there is now more variety. But these kinds of little gems which are very small and very niche and make just four things, are still incredible.

**James Acaster**

More and more now, the fewer items a menu, the more I'm quite excited about that place, because I think they probably do that really well.

**Ed Gamble**

Because it's ballsy, it's ballsy on the part of a restaurant, if they're terrible at four things and they put them on it. They're like, like four things on the menu and they can't cook any of them. That's always impressive.

**Asma Khan**

I have not thought of it that way, but yes, that's true. That's true. We have four things on our menu and we cook fresh. We don't use fridges and none of the girls in my kitchen had a fridge in their



house when they were growing up. I never saw a freezer, I thought bloody it was a coffin the first time I saw a freezer and someone opened it. I thought some human being was going to jump out of it. It was like a coffin in college, the first kitchen I had been to, a big kitchen, and they opened it and I thought, 'My God, there's a human being inside there.' What are you going to put inside there? It was huge.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

Your dream main course now. Is this one that your friends would guess as well, is it something that you're known for liking?

**Asma Khan**

No.

**James Acaster**

No.

**Asma Khan**

No. It's actually something that is bastardised in this country a lot. It's jalfrezi. I love jalfrezi, it's made properly in Calcutta, but a lot of people don't know, this is actually leftover Sunday roast, that they have made for the Saab, for the Memsaab, the English people who the cooks were making it for. And then all the rest of the roast chicken that was leftover and potatoes, they would shred with their hand and stir-fry it with chillies and onions for themselves. But soon, the main people in the house noticed there was this lovely aroma coming of chillies, but this is made with leftover chicken and in Calcutta, they do it beautifully. They have a very big Anglo-Indian community and jalfrezi is so good but I have it in a very strange way, I have it with bread and butter.

**James Acaster**

What kind of bread?

**Asma Khan**

White bread. White bread, we don't do brown bread. White bread with lots of salted butter and jalfrezi on top with tomato ketchup. That, for me, is my ultimate mains.

**Ed Gamble**

That's like a proper leftovers meal, right?

**James Acaster**

Ah, I didn't see the ketchup coming.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, I know. I've probably blown my entire reputation of being this authentic an Indian chef, talking about all this-

**Ed Gamble**

Prawn cocktail and then chicken jalfrezi with-

**Asma Khan**

Prawn cocktail and jalfrezi with ketchup on top with butter and toast. No, but the thing is, you know, I can't fake it. This is what I love.

**James Acaster**

Have you always had it like that?



**Asma Khan**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

Have you always had it with the bread and butter and the ketchup?

**Asma Khan**

Yes, of course. Because that's how, I mean, it tastes the best. I know, I know, I do it the right way.

**James Acaster**

What is it about the ketchup? I think the ketchup might get a bit lost in it?

**Asma Khan**

No.

**Ed Gamble**

Cold ketchup on the top?

**Asma Khan**

Cold ketchup on the hot jalfrezi, see?

**Ed Gamble: Yes. Right. Yes. I can see that. Yes. Yes. Yes.**

Asma Khan: You can get it, you've got it. He got it, you didn't get it.

**James Acaster: He's smarter than me.**

**Ed Gamble: I understand.**

**James Acaster: Yes, that's the dynamic.**

**Asma Khan**

Yes, so it just is a great combination, toast is crispy, all the masala is going through. Now you're going to obsess about this until you make it.

**James Acaster**

I probably am. Yes, especially because it's toasted.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, I really am. I'm going to roast a chicken and leave it until the next day so I can make it properly.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Ed Gamble**

Jalfezi is, like, my normal order in a curry house because I've found it's the one that between curry houses is the most similar wherever you order it.

**Asma Khan**

It's very hard for them to mess it up. I mean, they don't tell the story of what it is, it's a leftover meal and very much like yoga that was discovered by the West, even though we've done it in the East forever and also we had a meat-free day in Calcutta. We've always had in India, one day meat-free. Now you guys have meat-free Monday, so a lot of stuff that has been done for a long time in the East is now being done in the West. But this whole idea of no waste, people die of hunger in my country, people don't throw food. We don't throw food, even in my restaurant, if you have leftovers,





we beg people to take it. We pack it and then I've seen that, I try to figure out what kind of person is this? Do I use the emotional argument, or do I use the financial one? Because I use the financial ones for those who look like they may not take it. I say, 'You paid for it, you're going to throw away your money. Take it, give it to someone and then there are those who are these kinds of tree-hugging, soft-hearted people that you talk about hunger and, 'Take the food and it'll be really good for you.' So, we do all of that, but we don't throw away food, because the bad bit is my entire staff are horrible. All the leftover food that has been thrown, I have to throw it, because they have memories of hunger. They say it's cursed, if you throw food, you will be hungry your whole life. So, who do they get to throw food? Me. Because they will say, 'It might be good for you, you need to lose weight.' I was like, 'This is so bad.' So, yes, so when you come to my restaurant, please for God's sake, take all your food and go.

**Ed Gamble**

So, they're happy to curse you.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, because they were saying, 'You won't be cursed because you don't know what hunger is.' It's true, I don't know what hunger is. They do and so these are women with very large hearts, but this is deep superstition. It's about throwing salt and kissing the bread when it falls on the floor.

**James Acaster**

I don't know that's one.

**Ed Gamble**

Right.

**James Acaster**

Kissing the bread when it falls on the floor?

**Asma Khan**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

I didn't know that.

**Asma Khan**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

I know the throwing salt over the shoulder.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, well, in Eastern Europe culture, people drop bread, they will pick it up and they will kiss it because bread-, same like we do with rice. In India, in my part of India, if you drop rice, you kiss it.

**James Acaster**

Right.

**Asma Khan**

This is life. The grain of rice, piece of bread, it's about living, between life and death, that grain of rice can make a difference. So, when we drop it on the floor we kiss it. You're learning a lot.

**James Acaster**

Yes, learning an awful lot.





**Ed Gamble**

Do you kiss each grain?

**James Acaster**

Yes, because that could take a while.

**Ed Gamble**

If you drop loads of rice, that's going to take ages, right?

**Asma Khan**

Yes, so it's always a pain when people drop-, especially kids, when they drop a lot of rice. We do then just gather it together.

**Ed Gamble**

A big pile, yes. Yes. Yes.

**Asma Khan**

It's really about just showing respect, showing respect for food and I don't mind. I try and get my kids to do it, they don't do it. They were born here, they have no understanding of what it is. Although, I have to say, it serves them bloody right over lockdown, when there was no eggs and no flour. When there was no eggs, my son was flipping completely. You can't get a delivery slot and there are no eggs, I was thinking, 'Very good, for God's sake, now you understand.' You don't have a God-given right to eat whatever you want. My son was, like, the end of the world.

**Ed Gamble**

How old is your son?

**Asma Khan**

He's 22 now.

**Ed Gamble**

He loves eggs, I've never known anyone to love eggs that much.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, he's quite frightening because he trains as a boxer, he also teaches boxing. So, he eats everything raw, cooked, uncooked, unsafe, safe in the fridge. You leave him alone for a little while, the whole house, he's eaten everything up. So, yes he's quite something, it was quite a challenge when he came back during the lockdown. We struggled to feed the boy, yes. I felt I was-, at some point I felt I would rather feed 200 people in my restaurant than my two kids. They were so ungrateful, so demanding, so obsessed about things that we did not have in the house. I was like, 'You know, why are you doing this?' Even if someone came to my restaurant, even if you're bloody Paul Rudd, and said, 'I want to eat this.' I said, 'No, it's not in my menu.' He would not argue, I mean these kids, 'Why can't you get it, can you go and bring for us?' I had to learn how to make lasagne by looking on a YouTube tutorial because they said, 'No.' I said, 'Yes, go and get lasagne from Marks & Spencer's.' They said, 'No, you make it fresh, you're a cook.' Why am I doing this? The worst thing in my life, it took bloody forever and I hated it. I had to wash up so much afterwards. It tasted fine, you know, but it was just a nightmare.

**James Acaster**

I think we both have the same point that we would like to go back to in that story?

**Ed Gamble**

Which point, I've got a few?



**James Acaster**

Probably Paul Rudd.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, Paul Rudd as an example, immediately.

**Asma Khan**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

Did Paul Rudd-, has he eaten in your restaurant, or was that just-,

**Asma Khan**

No, Paul, he's so-, I can't believe he's the same age as me, oh my God, he looks so young.

**Ed Gamble**

Look, we're all absolutely bowled over by Paul Rudd.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, and he's wonderful. He's so nice, you really want someone who you look up to to be nice. So, Paul Rudd, Dan Levy, both incredibly sweet and kind and humble.

**James Acaster**

Yes, there was the photo of them together.

**Asma Khan**

My mother is the ultimate, she saw the photo and people were calling her saying, 'Hey Asma's-', I was in all, everywhere. She called me and said, 'I can see you, who are those two white guys?'

**James Acaster**

When he was in the restaurant, did he eat many things with sauce in it? How much sauce did he have?

**Asma Khan**

No, he had everything that I gave him, he was the most easy customer to look after and then he knows this rice story of mine, he packed all the left overs and took it home. Including five boxes of biryani, so he picked up everything, scrapped all the grain off and took it. Good boy.

**James Acaster**

We're told he's not a condiment guy, he doesn't like ketchup and stuff like that. If he had that jalfrezi you were talking about-,

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, he's not putting ketchup on that.

**James Acaster**

He would not put the ketchup on.

**Asma Khan**

No, he didn't have jalfrezi, he had very different kind of food with very little sauce and loved the food. Was with us, because he came back three times in three weeks.

**James Acaster**

That you know of, he might have shrunk down to Ant Man size.



**Ed Gamble**

Ant Man size, that's why you've got to always check your sparkling water just in case it's Paul Rudd is curled up in the bottom of your glass.

**James Acaster**

Yes, it might be some still water and he's there running around, breathing.

**Asma Khan**

So, those stairs are now called the Paul Rudd stairs in my restaurant. People come and take-, and even people bring their pets. So, they haven't eaten in my restaurant, but they bring their pet to stand and pose in front of the stairs.

**Ed Gamble**

The Paul Rudd stairs.

**James Acaster**

Bring a little pet, I love it. Your dream side dish.

**Asma Khan**

Is peas, peas with butter and a bit of sugar and salt.

**Ed Gamble**

This menu, every single turn has surprised me.

**Asma Khan**

We don't get-, I collapsed the first time I saw-, when I moved to Cambridge in 1991 that you've got frozen peas in a bag. In India you only get peas in winter and you have to pop them and we don't do things by halves, so a family wedding 5,000 people, but what are they going to have? Peas pilau, so who is the free labour that you can exploit? Children, so all the kids were lined up and bloody whole winter we are popping, and then creepy crawlies would come out from some of them, like little caterpillars, oh, horrible. So, you just kind of prayed and hoped that this one doesn't have an insect in it, this one doesn't have an insect in it and we had to pop the peas so all the fancy in-laws and important people ate peas pilau. But I love peas because aloo gobi matar is my favourite thing, and I love peas but I didn't like popping them. The first time I saw peas, my husband was away in Paris. My husband is typical, I mean, people look at us and think, 'How are you guys still married?' He's very-, he has no sense of humour, he doesn't like food, he's very, very boring, he's very introverted and doesn't even like-, he's just like, oh my god, he's a very boring person. He took me (TC 00:50:00) to the supermarket because I didn't know to do anything, I didn't know how to use a card, I'd just come from India, fresh, no idea. I saw the peas, I said, 'Woah, frozen peas, these are peas, can I open it?' I opened it in excitement, and there were peas everywhere because I couldn't understand. I could feel the peas from the outside, there were peas pictures and I didn't deliberately open them, but there were peas everywhere. My husband just left me, he just went, he was so embarrassed. It was just I was super excited.

**Ed Gamble**

You were just super excited that it wasn't a body in the freezer though, weren't you?

**James Acaster**

Did you pick up the peas and kiss them?

**Asma Khan**

Yes. I've had to learn a lot of things. I have no sympathy for people who come from India now and say, 'Oh, I miss my family.' You can bloody WhatsApp your dog in Delhi. When I came, you could do nothing, it was very expensive to fly, it was very expensive to call. You couldn't see anyone in the family for a year and a half. You couldn't call them more than twice a month. It was very expensive. I



remember I couldn't use a cashpoint card, I stood in the rain in Cambridge, my husband had gone away and told me to take it out, but don't put in the wrong number otherwise the machine will eat the card. That was enough to spook me, the idea that the machine would eat the card and also probably eat me. I was standing there in the rain watching people taking out cash. I'm surprised I wasn't arrested, you know, a person standing there looking at people. It was a very different time and I'm glad I went through that because these things still give me joy that people take for granted living here. I watch my kids and I see that they are so privileged, they don't understand. I came from a highly privileged background, I had everything with me in India, but I still find these things great. Like, you can get peas in a bag and this is why I love peas, but I want it with butter, salted butter and a little bit of sugar. And if I want to be very posh, some mint on the top.

**James Acaster**

Yes, some mint.

**Ed Gamble**

Sugar on the peas. I've never heard the sugar on the peas but I can imagine it.

**James Acaster**

Yes, that's the intriguing thing.

**Asma Khan**

So, just a pinch, not a lot. Just a pinch, yes, with sweet, a little bit more sweetness.

**Ed Gamble**

You won't do a pinch though, will you?

**James Acaster**

Well, I probably would, see this is the thing. The running theme on this podcast is I'm obsessed with desserts and sweets.

**Asma Khan**

You can have a peas dessert by adding sugar.

**Ed Gamble**

Pea brûlée.

**James Acaster**

Pea brûlée I would eat that, yes. But it's weird, because of how obsessed I am with that, for main courses and stuff, I don't often put-, like yesterday I made a curry and the recipe said to put sugar in it, and I didn't do that because I was like, 'Oh, I can't put sugar in my main course.' So, I didn't do it, but the recipe said that.

**Ed Gamble**

Just ignoring the recipe.

**Asma Khan**

You will find I put sugar in curries in quite a few of my recipes. It's this whole thing of balance, the sweet and sour and this idea that astringent, sour, so all these balances. Spices are not complementary, they are contradictory. Indian food is the only cuisine that does this, where things work against each other. Sugar acts to balance the thing, so that pinch of sugar, add it next time. Your food will not become dessert, believe me, I know this, I know this one, okay?

**James Acaster**

Yes. I should.



**Ed Gamble**

You're worried that you're having some of your sugar rations for the next course, right?

**James Acaster**

Yes, I'm basically just having a sugar fest. I'm having sugar main course, sugar dessert, I can't do that.

**Ed Gamble**

It's just a pinch though, just a pinch.

**James Acaster**

Yes, yes, just a pinch, I should just do it, I should do it, I should do what it says.

**Asma Khan**

Be brave, be brave.

**James Acaster**

Yes, I should be braver. Your dream drink then?

**Asma Khan**

This is a hard one. Ginger beer, because I don't drink alcohol and you didn't get ginger beer in India. When I came here someone told me that ginger beer is not alcoholic but I still wouldn't have it just in case it was alcoholic. I was like, 'What does it taste like?' It's really nice with Indian food. I know people have lager and everything, I don't know because I don't drink, so I have no idea how it works. But I think that it's the bubbles and the fizz and the sharpness, it goes really well. So, sparkling water without Ant Man in it is nice and also then ginger beer.

**James Acaster**

How fiery are we going with the ginger beer?

**Asma Khan**

Not very fiery.

**James Acaster**

By the way I'm very excited that we've got ginger beer on the podcast.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

I don't like it super sharp, but the problem is, I still don't know which one is sharp and which one is not. I never have the brains to work out and look at the label and say, 'For next time, remember this one is very sharp.' So, I then get stung again and order one that is very sharp. So, I don't know the names of it, but no, I don't want it too sharp because I won't be able to taste the food with the ginger beer and not have my head blown off.

**Ed Gamble**

Is there a particular brand that you would normally get or is every time different?

**Asma Khan**

No, it's the one that comes in a glass bottle, I don't know what it's called. The one that comes in a tin is very sharp. The one that comes in a glass bottle is not. So, I'm very thing. I know I don't look at-

**James Acaster**

Fentimans?



**Asma Khan**

Yes, Fentiman's.

**Ed Gamble**

Fentiman's.

**James Acaster**

Fentiman's they're in the bottle. I think I like the fiery ones.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, I like a fiery one.

**James Acaster**

I think I like a fiery ginger beer.

**Ed Gamble**

Most things that I consume I want to be just absolutely kicked in the face by.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

See, that's not my idea of fun.

**James Acaster**

Also for me, ginger beer reminds me of the Famous Five.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, I knew that, I knew about ginger beer before that, because we all read Enid Blyton like crazy, that was, for us-, and I was so disappointed when I came to this country and I saw that it's not quite like that. I actually thought I'd see little pixies on the toadstools. I remember the porter in the college telling me, 'Don't go near that, that's poisonous.' I saw something that looked like a toadstool. I was so excited. They realised, 'Oh God, she has come from India, she has no idea. She'll only pick that up.' I couldn't believe it, the first time I saw one with the red cap.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

Like a real toadstool, very exciting.

**James Acaster**

It's irresponsible really of kids stories to make those toadstools out to be magical and nice, and then actually some of them are the worst ones that you could go near

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

No, no. I now know that you can't just eat every kind of mushroom. But it still is Enid Blyton and it's still stories that I read in India, so when I see randomly fungus growing here and there, I still keep thinking, 'Oh, someone lives under it.'



**Ed Gamble**

Ant Man.

**James Acaster**

Yes, it could be Ant Man again, it could be your friend Paul Rudd there, with his leftovers.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, so Paul Rudd, I think that as he's had enough biryani and done enough PR for my restaurant, I think the last scene off the next Marvel film should be a biryani in my restaurant.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

I don't know which one where the Shawarma was the last scene.

**James Acaster**

It was in Avengers.

**Ed Gamble**

In the first Avengers film, yes.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, I remember that.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, the next generation of Avengers should be eating a biryani.

**Asma Khan**

It should be biryani, yes. It should be London as well, yes.

**James Acaster**

The Darjeeling Express, we should go there after this. Then the post-credits with all of them there, with Ant Man leading it. When I was in your restaurant, there was an MCU star there as well, Kumail was there.

**Asma Khan**

So, now I know which night you were there, yes.

**James Acaster**

You gave him some biryani.

**Asma Khan**

I gave him biryani, yes.

**Ed Gamble**

He came on this podcast and he had biryani as his dream main.

**Asma Khan**

I made that biryani only for him.

**James Acaster**

Yes, I know, I was sitting there watching that. I was going, 'Are you shitting me' No, we all got to have some, it was delicious.



**Asma Khan**

Yes, because I remember seeing him and this crazy program where he was weeping and having chilli sauce and talking about my biryani scene from Netflix, and I thought, when he contacted me, 'I'm coming and I'm going to bring some friends and please get the table.' Trying to get tables for six in my restaurant is like asking for the moon. But I gave it to him and then I also made the biryani, because I was like, 'He's just so incredible.' And the big six, that's also this last scene with the biryani and the potato that his father got him, biryani is something emotional for him. It's a real privilege, it's exciting that famous people would-, for me, anyone who comes in with that story of wanting and yearning for food in that way, I feel it's such a blessing to be able to see them, and Kumail, for me, it was that. He could have been anyone, and I saw that and I knew that biryani was important for him. It was a pain in the neck to make it because we were so busy, but I thought, 'No, I'm going to make the biryani for him.'

**James Acaster**

Yes, well I see you're gradually racking up everyone from Marvel and it'll be in a film soon enough. Soon enough you're going to be in there.

**Asma Khan**

My dream is to have Samuel L. Jackson, that I really want to feed, so I'm waiting for him.

**James Acaster**

Yes, because he's got a lot of iconic food scenes from films if you can make him a tasty burger.

**Ed Gamble**

A royale with cheese.

**Asma Khan**

Yes. I love that film, and it's so bizarre because my kids are like, it's such a wild film mama, why do you like it?

**James Acaster: Also, before we move on, the other food thing that I think of with the Famous Five is cucumber sandwiches, I'm wondering if you like cucumber sandwiches?**

**Asma Khan**

Yes, yes, of course.

**James Acaster**

Yes. Yes.

**Asma Khan**

All these English things that you think English people have, I absolutely love. And my kids hate them, but I tried to make it for their school lunch, because they wouldn't eat school dinner, so I had to give them packed lunch. They were like, 'Cucumber sandwiches? No way.' I was saying, 'I would be so happy if my mother had given me cucumber sandwiches.' I would sit down and think I'm in the storybook, I'm living that life, but no.

**Ed Gamble**

Because it's based on that inspiration of Enid Blyton, do you want lashings of ginger beer?

**James Acaster**

Yes, it's got to be lashings, hasn't it?

**Asma Khan**

It has to be lashings, yes. Absolutely.





**James Acaster**

I'd forgotten that. It sounds good doesn't it? Lashings of ginger beer, sounds way more-,

**Ed Gamble**

I can't even imagine what container it would be in. It's just coming at you.

**Asma Khan**

I know how would it work? It just sounds so good, it sounds so good.

**James Acaster: If I had an empty glass and someone said, 'Do you want lashings of ginger beer?' If I said yes, I would expect my hand to be drenched with ginger beer.**

**Ed Gamble: Yes, or just a jet.**

**James Acaster**

Yes, they've just gone. We arrive at the desserts, as you know, my favourite course, excited. I always get nervous.

**Asma Khan**

I'm also now nervous because of the fact that you will not like my choice.

**James Acaster**

Well, this is the thing, it's like I always get nervous that people are going to pick-,

**Asma Khan**

I have two options and now I desperately want to pick the one that you like.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Ed Gamble**

No, the one that I'll like will be the one that he doesn't like, so you're pleasing someone.

**James Acaster**

My usual reaction for-, I can't do that.

**Asma Khan**

Oh God, I'm so nervous, but I'm going to still say it.

**James Acaster**

Yes, let's go for it.

**Asma Khan**

English Trifle.

**James Acaster**

Yes, I love that, love it.

**Ed Gamble**

That's great. No, no, that's good. He'll be happy with that.

**Asma Khan**

Okay, I was just so nervous.



**James Acaster**

What was your other option?

**Asma Khan**

Baked Alaska.

**James Acaster**

Come on, I'd eat both of those.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, you'd be happy either way, wouldn't you?

**Asma Khan**

Yes, so they are both this kind of-

**James Acaster**

I was worried you were going to say cheeseboard is what I was worried.

**Asma Khan**

Oh my God, what is a cheeseboard? I have to say.

**James Acaster**

Yes, I know.

**Asma Khan**

God, this is for people who are so tortured in their lives, who really need to go into therapy. People who need to go into therapy, those have cheeseboards, because after you've had a bloody meal.

**Ed Gamble**

Cheeseboards

**Asma Khan**

You eat sweet, what are you doing? I don't understand it.

**James Acaster**

No, no go on, do the full rant. I'm with you.

**Ed Gamble**

I like a cheeseboard. I like a cheeseboard, Asma.

**James Acaster**

He likes a cheeseboard, he likes them.

**Ed Gamble**

I do.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Asma Khan**

Why? What do you-, how do you want to end?

**Ed Gamble**

It's a delicious way to end the meal.



**Asma Khan**

On a salty, kind of, why?

**Ed Gamble**

Yum, yum. I've put some sugar in my peas.

**Asma Khan**

You need some sweetness in your life.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Ed Gamble: Well, I get that from a nice chutney with the cheese.**

**Asma Khan**

But it's all salty.

**Ed Gamble**

On a poppadum?

**James Acaster**

Yes, we have a poppadum at the end of the meal, we know that now. Yes, allow that.

**Asma Khan**

No but you have popadum and chutney and then you have dessert.

**Ed Gamble**

Right, okay.

**Asma Khan**

So, the salty end is, like, weird.

**Ed Gamble**

Overall, I would prefer a cheeseboard and then a dessert, but if I had to choose, sometimes I'd like a cheeseboard.

**James Acaster**

Awful isn't it? Yes, he's just a bad man.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, but you're okay with trifle, me choosing trifle?

**Ed Gamble**

Very, very happy with trifle, yes. Delicious.

**James Acaster: I think you're our fourth trifle on the podcast.**

Asma Khan: I'm surprised more people haven't chosen it.

**James Acaster**

I think I can remember who-, Jamie Oliver, Harry Hill-,

**Ed Gamble**

This is incredible James that you remember this.



**James Acaster**

Yes, well, because Harry Hill, we talked about the three layers of the trifle and who was who. So, it was Jamie Oliver, him and it was someone else who Harry Hill really liked, I think. But now I can't remember who it was. Armando Iannucci, yes. So, you're in good company here, this is the four of you, the trifle gang.

**Ed Gamble**

Armando Iannucci, yes. You're in very good company.

**Asma Khan**

I think I have blown my reputation of an authentic Indian chef who has just written an Indian cookbook, dedicated to her mother and I've picked, like, the most bizarre things that for me would be-, but the thing is-,

**Ed Gamble**

You gave us the heads up though, you did tell us what you were going to do. So, I think it's fine, I think it's a great menu.

**Asma Khan**

Yes, because I never play to the galleries, ever. Because actually, you can't sustain this whole thing, I cannot fake anything, so whereas Calcutta is still hung up on the Raj, the British left in the '40s. Calcutta hasn't really moved that far in some ways, we still have this bubble of what people think is sophisticated, what they think is beautiful. You will still go to very beautiful clubs, gentleman's clubs they used to be, but now, of course, you've got families there, and get baked Alaska, and get a trifle. It's just wonderful, coming from a city like that. I don't think everyone in India could even relate to what I'm saying. But Calcutta was the capital of the Raj. After London, and hated or difficult as it is, you know, at least you can look at the positives of it. It's very uncomfortable for all of us to have lived like this and known that our history is with all that happened with colonialism, but there are all these positive things that we got, prawn cocktail and we got trifle. So, I think there is always good and bad and we need to embrace things that happened and not hate. So, I refuse to hate anyone, and for me, trifle and peas, yes, any day.

**James Acaster**

Not together, like in Friends.

**Asma Khan**

No. No, that would be too much.

**James Acaster**

Although your mum wouldn't understand that reference, so that's good. Would you try the trifle that Joey ate in Friends?

**Asma Khan**

No.

**James Acaster**

You wouldn't even try it?

**Asma Khan**

No, I would not try anything that Joey ate, because somehow Joey is just slightly frightening. But we had David Schwimmer come into Kingly Court and I had never seen such chaos, more chaotic than when Danny DeVito came. Danny DeVito we were able to hide, David Schwimmer of course-,

**James Acaster**

Yes, he is small.



**Asma Khan**

Because of his height, or whatever, he just spoke and there was chaos. I mean, we were just, like, trying to protect him from everyone. Danny DeVito, people just thought was so-, he was so wonderful. I think people just hesitated, David Schwimmer was mobbed, we didn't know what to do, we couldn't control anything. It went out of control. He was too tall, too tall, yes. I think he was just too tall.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, DeVito is the perfect height for just sneaking in places isn't he?

**James Acaster**

Yes, him and Ant Man.

**Asma Khan**

Yes. No, Danny DeVito was like fridge-sized and so wonderful. We told him not to speak too much, he was so loud. Everybody outside the restaurant could hear him and would stop, 'Danny DeVito.' So, yes, it was just like, I told him, 'Shh, just keep it low key and then people won't see you.'

**Ed Gamble**

I love that. I think that's so brilliant. It's so brilliant how much you run your restaurant that you're like, 'I've got to tell Danny DeVito to shut up he's being too loud.'

**Asma Khan**

No, because it would have become unmanageable. Because people would just queue outside, like even Keira Knightley when she would leave, we were literally run her out because she had everyone chasing her down the stairs.

**James Acaster**

Wow, you could get Keira Knightley to be quiet by just, like, she could just write down stuff and hold it up on boards instead.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

And then no one will hear her and that will be okay.

**Asma Khan**

Food should be about this, it doesn't matter who you are, you come to my door, you put your burden down outside. I say this to everyone who comes, you know, 'Leave your burden out and who you are is out, you come inside, you sit down and I will feed and feed,' that's what I want to do. Because that's the great equalizer, food is. My mother taught me this. You feed with the same respect and honour, you do not ask that person who they are.

**Ed Gamble**

Unless they're Samuel L.Jackson.

**Asma Khan**

Samuel L.Jackson, I think I will just pass out if he does come to the restaurant, yes.

**James Acaster**

I will read your menu back to you now, see how you feel about it. Sparking water, chapati bread, starter, prawn cocktail. Main course, Jalfrezi with toasted bread and butter, ketchup on top, side



dish of peas, with salted butter, sugar and mint. You want lashings of Fentimans' ginger beer and dessert, an English trifle.

**Asma Khan**

Do I get to eat it now?

**James Acaster**

Ah.

**Asma Khan**

You're kidding? That's not how it works? It's not how it works, you are the genie.

**James Acaster**

Yes, yes, you're eating it.

**Asma Khan**

Yes. What's all the sound effect in the beginning if you're not going to deliver now?

**James Acaster**

Yes. Yes, Ed? Yes, you're going to eat that, no one has ever called me out on this before. I mean, that is pretty bad.

**Asma Khan**

It's one of those all sound and no show.

**James Acaster**

Yes, it's one of those, you go in the restaurant, we ask you what you want and then we just go, 'See you.'

**Asma Khan**

One of the difficulties of the perception people have that you are now successful as a chef and a cook or whatever, no one invites me. I really miss that. All my friends have stopped inviting me, they invite themselves to the restaurant and I don't think I've ever been-, anyone has cooked for me for a long time.

**Ed Gamble**

Well, if you're listening Paul Rudd, sort it out.

**James Acaster**

Yes, come on Paul. Also, I know how you feel, no one ever tells me any jokes anymore. No one ever jokes to me. I haven't laughed in years.

**Asma Khan**

Did I sound as bad as that? No, no, no, I love my friends. It's easier for them to come because there is food in my place than for them to bother making prawn cocktail for me in their house. Thank you so much, I've really had a great time.

**Ed Gamble**

Thank you. Thank you very much Asma, that was fantastic.

**James Acaster**

Thank you.

**Ed Gamble**

Well there we are, what a great episode, James.



**James Acaster**

Wow, it felt an honour.

**Ed Gamble**

An honour and I think it's always so lovely on the rare occasion we feel like proper podcasters.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Ed Gamble**

That felt like a really good interview, and that's mainly because Asma is very arresting.

**James Acaster**

Yes, we didn't talk as much, which I think that's when I feel like a proper podcaster.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes. When we don't trample over everything our guest says?

**James Acaster**

Yes, without us going - And actually remembering that they're the guest.

**Ed Gamble**

I like sweeties.

**James Acaster**

Yes.

**Ed Gamble**

Well, I like cheese. Well, we did do that a bit, but we still got that in there.

**James Acaster**

A leopard can't change its spots.

**Ed Gamble**

We didn't offer her a poppadum at the end.

**James Acaster**

Oh, I feel a bit-, that's annoying isn't it?

**Ed Gamble**

We fucked up. But what a wonderful interview, she did not say supermarket sushi, of course she did not, which means she has earned a full plug for her brilliant cookbook, Ammu, Indian Home Cooking to Nourish your Soul. That out now, so go and buy it. We've had a flick through and we're already very excited to cook some stuff from it.

**James Acaster**

Yes, if you've just listened to that episode and you don't want to buy it, then I think you weren't listening to the episode properly.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes, you're an idiot.

**James Acaster**

You're an idiot.



**Ed Gamble**

But if you don't want to buy James' book, I do understand, but I'm sure it's going to be very good. James, what is the name of your book, say it quickly and say it from memory.

**James Acaster**

James Acaster's guide to quitting social media, being the best you you can be, and curing yourself of loneliness, volume one.

**Ed Gamble**

So, make sure you go and get that book by James Acaster.

**James Acaster**

What?

**Ed Gamble**

You said James, that's how you started it.

**James Acaster**

No, oh God. Oh God.

**Ed Gamble**

My tour Electric is currently happening all over the UK, go onto [Edgamble.co.uk](http://Edgamble.co.uk), for tickets. Sure, I've been some places already, but there are a lot more places to go.

**James Acaster**

Yes, if you missed the ones so far, make sure you catch them later on.

**Ed Gamble**

Yes.

**James Acaster**

My chair nearly just slid into Benito's little desk there.

**Ed Gamble**

James, I'm trying to plug my tour and you keep doing your slapstick.

**James Acaster**

Sorry everybody, I'll be back on stage one day.

**Ed Gamble**

Oh James.

**James Acaster**

With the slapstick.

**Ed Gamble**

Thank you very much for listening, we'll see you again next week, goodbye.

**James Acaster**

Goodbye.