

FROM PAKISTAN WITH LOVE

After immigrating to Canada, **Hina Husain** struggled to find authentic Pakistani food in Toronto's restaurants. Karahi Boys, and its traditional cooking methods, is changing all of that.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HECTOR VASQUEZ



BELOW: Photographs of Pakistani life set the tone at Karahi Boys, which has expanded to five locations in and around the GTA

CHICKEN KARAHI WAS a childhood staple at my home in Pakistan: A tomato-based, thick masala curry, with the consistency of a jammy gravy, topped generously with fresh chopped cilantro, green chillies and slivered ginger. Every Pakistani family has its own prized recipe for the dish, and my mother's was no exception. Heavy on the black pepper, and cooked in its namesake karahi — a wide-mouth, flat-based wok — piping hot karahi with fresh, homemade rotis were often enjoyed by my brother and me upon coming home from school in Lahore. We'd lick our fingers completely clean as we scooped up every last bite off our plates, falling back on our chairs in exuberant ecstasy before a wave of sleepiness washed over us.

When I immigrated to Canada with my family as a teenager, karahi wasn't something often found on menus in so-called Pakistani restaurants in the GTA. Butter chicken, which I had never heard of when I lived in Pakistan, reigned supreme in most Indian and South-Asian establishments. But it lacked the punch that comes from using fresh, whole spices characteristic of the mildly spicy, highly aromatic karahi. For 15 years, the only karahi I ate was the kind my mother cooked, but that all changed in 2018 when Karahi Boys opened its first location in Mississauga.

Established by two Pakistani veterans of Toronto's restaurant industry, the idea for Karahi Boys was conceived while Taha Yasin and Sultan Zahid were running their successful Fat Bastard Burrito franchises in the GTA. At the time, Mississauga's Café De Khan and Toronto's Lahore Tikka House on Gerrard Street were the region's most well-known restaurants serving Pakistani cuisine. Lahore Tikka House was where my family frequently went to celebrate Eid and Pakistan's Independence Day. But when their menu started to offer more generic South-Asian fare to attract a wider range of patrons — and they put up a giant mural of India's Taj Mahal in the restaurant's entrance — it didn't make any sense for me to make the 1.5-hour journey from Mississauga to eat what had essentially become North Indian food masquerading as Pakistani.

In Yasin's mind, "there was a niche market for karahi and not enough restaurants serving it," he tells me over a cup of hot chai at Karahi Boys' Scarborough location. "We didn't want to juggle too many menu items," he says. "In Pakistan there are many old restaurants which have been around for 40 years and



ABOVE: Tired of searching for authentic Pakistani cuisine in the Toronto area, Taha Yasin (left) and Sultan Zahid (right) founded Karahi Boys

people line up for their speciality items. We wanted to mix street food karahi with Starbucks culture: elevate the experience, keep the authenticity, but provide it in a casual setting where people can have the ambience to experience karahi."

To achieve this goal, everything from the interior decoration, music, art and photography to the lighting and the kind of wood used to construct the restaurant tables were meticulously picked by Yasin, who holds a degree in architecture from Pakistan's National College of Arts. One of the first things you see when you walk into any of the Karahi Boys' five locations are the framed photographs adorning the walls, showcasing everyday life in Pakistan.

"We didn't want monuments; we wanted the real people and streets of the country," Yasin says, pointing to a photo of young boys playing cricket against the backdrop of a sunset at the Minar-e-Pakistan monument park in Lahore. "People bring their kids and show them the pictures of what they remember and miss most about Pakistan."

Three Karahi Boys locations — Queen Street West in Toronto, Mississauga and

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Vaughan — are also home to three unique, hand-painted murals by Toronto-based Pakistani-Canadian multidisciplinary artist and muralist Farhee Chundrigar. When initially approached by Yasin to paint "something Pakistani" on a bare wall at the Mississauga location, Chundrigar was fascinated. "If you looked at the culture for Pakistani food at that time, there was no fine-dining Pakistani restaurant to name, where you could go to and sit down, and the ambience was really nice," says Chundrigar. "You had good Pakistani food in random places that were not made with a focus on interiors and aesthetics, so I was excited ▶

when I realized they wanted to offer a different Pakistani experience.”

For the first mural, Chundrigar looked to Pakistani truck art for inspiration: colourful, ornate designs painted all over cargo trucks that transport goods around the country. “Ever since I made that, 10 or 15 new Pakistani restaurants have popped up and they’re all using murals. So I think it set a trend,” Chundrigar says. Daata Grill and Larachi — two new Pakistani restaurants in Milton, which opened in 2020 — both have hand-painted murals and wall-art as defining décor features.

Chundrigar’s next project was coming up with a mural idea for Karahi Boys’ downtown location, and this time she had an almost five-metre wall to get creative with. Not wanting to replicate the truck art style of the first mural, Chundrigar chose to tell a different story from Pakistan — the tragic love story of Anarkali from Pakistan’s Mughal history. Her goal was to portray the courtesan’s story and make it more than just something up on the wall. It was something people could talk about and most Pakistanis would get the reference.

“It’s really hard to compress Pakistani culture and history,” says Chundrigar. “In the mural I have kites flying, and I got Taha in touch with a friend of mine who had a Pakistani kite collection. They got these giant kites from Lahore, which are now framed and up on the wall. Anyone from Pakistan would be able to relate to the mural and the kites, but anyone who’s not familiar



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ABOVE: For Karahi Boys’ downtown spot, artist Farhee Chundrigar created a mural depicting a legendary Pakistani courtesan; BELOW: Colourful giant kites are also used for decoration

with it would be curious, and that’s what my intention was with the mural — to pique people’s interest in Pakistan.”

This focus on highlighting and elevating Pakistani cuisine and culture as distinct from India isn’t something most Pakistani restaurants have prioritized in the past, according to Yasin. Branding themselves as Indian and shying away from owning their Pakistani identity is part of the reason why Pakistani food hasn’t found a larger audience in the West. Although the ingredients used in both cuisines tend to have a lot of overlap, the cooking techniques vary greatly, even among the different regions of Pakistan.

Chicken karahis are easily the most popular menu items offered at Karahi Boys. Within these, the charsi karahi is the most authentic, Yasin tells me. It has the fewest spices, only black pepper, along with salt, ginger, garlic and tomatoes. Charsi in Urdu translates to “addict,” and the karahi gets its name from its street food origins: Truck drivers stopped by the side of the road order the item from street vendors and enjoy the dish with a side of hashish.

The chitti (white) karahi is Kashmiri, from Pakistan’s northern regions, and doesn’t have tomatoes. Kashmiri food relies on ▶

BELOW: Every Pakistani family has their own prized recipe for karahi, a flavourful masala curry



BELOW: Charsi Karahi is a special of the Northern area of Pakistan, using whole tomatoes and whole green chillies



cream and yogurt to make curry dishes. The mild flavours of the dish are brought out using yakhni (broth), milk and coconut. Potohari karahi, originating from the Potohar Plateau in Pakistan's Punjab province, is methi (the herb, fenugreek) based, and popular in Lahore.

No matter the kind of karahi, the most important aspect of making it is to ensure you use the traditional South Asian cooking method of "bhunai" to evaporate all the water from the dish and let the oil rise to the top. This is how karahi gets its distinct flavour. The cooking technique relies on using real fire at high temperatures to stir-fry or sauté the meat. This keeps the ingredients from sticking to the vessel (karahi) and prevents the meat from getting soggy as the tomatoes release their liquid while cooking.

Looking to the future, Yasin says they plan on expanding the vegetarian karahi options on their menu as people are eating healthier and there is a growing awareness around excess meat consumption. At the downtown location, which opened in February 2021, the most commonly ordered karahi is the vegetarian Moti Mehal Paneer Karahi. This bustling Queen

ABOVE RIGHT: Framed photos at Karahi Boys' downtown location; BELOW: The exterior of the downtown Karahi Boys location on Queen West



West spot is run by Zuhaib Malik and Muhammad Hadee Shakil, and is one of Karahi Boys' three franchise locations along with Ajax and Vaughan (Mississauga and Scarborough are under corporate leadership). Many Pakistanis, looking for

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the taste of home, are still keen to order the meat karahis, sticking to traditional flavours and ingredients.

Zainab Sherwani, a regular at Karahi Boys' downtown restaurant, says, "I feel like a good meat karahi has always been hard to come by — either it's too tomatoey, too bland or just not spicy enough. Karahi Boys does it right. They have a much wider selection of different lamb and chicken karahis and their portions are so generous."

"Pakistanis celebrate meat," Yasin says with a smile and a hearty chuckle. "That's what we do!"

And no Pakistani dish better captures the celebration of meat, culture, flavour and history than the humble but mighty karahi. 

