

IFTAR MENUS—HOW DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES BREAK THEIR RAMADAN FASTS

April 9, 2024



During Ramadan, Afsari Jahan prepares chana, a South Asian chickpea dish, with black chickpeas that are easier to digest than white chickpeas. Photography by Caroline Mardok

By Leila Darabi

You don't have to be one of the world's nearly two billion Muslims to know that for observant followers of the faith, Ramadan marks a month of fasting, from sunrise to sunset. What non-Muslims may not realize is that seasonal traditions also include self-reflection, donating to charity, volunteering, and spending time with family—and that for many, breaking the fast each evening is a joyous, communal event.

For this issue, the *Linewaiters' Gazette* ("Gazette") spoke with four New Yorkers from four different countries about what they prepare for *iftar*, the meal eaten after sunset during Ramadan.

A BANGLADESHI COOKING INSTRUCTOR PREPARES A FEAST

On a recent Sunday morning, Afsari Jahan rose before sunrise, and after a simple pre-dawn breakfast of a banana and some coffee, she began preparing a Bengali feast for the *Gazette* team to sample that afternoon, and for her son and grandchildren to enjoy that evening.

She started by preparing *haleem*, a stew thickened by slow cooking bulgur wheat. She then added meat and five kinds of lentils to the dish, resulting in a hearty, savory porridge that she garnished with fried shallots.



Cooking instructor Afsari Jahan prepares traditional Bengali cuisine

Alongside this main dish, Jahan cooked a special Ramadan version of *chana*, using black chickpeas—which are both higher in protein and fiber and easier to digest than white chickpeas. She then battered and fried slices of eggplant; made *pakora* (veggie fritters); fried some chicken rolls. Afterwards, she mixed a batter and cooked simple pancakes that could be used to scoop up the other dishes.

To accompany this spread, she fixed a platter of coarsely chopped ginger and soaked yellow chickpeas to aid in digestion, and a bowl of plain, puffed rice that could be sprinkled onto any dish for added texture. For dessert, she prepared two selections: fried, donut-like cookies, as well as crispy spirals of *jalebi* (a sort of funnel cake), doused in a sweet syrup.

Spending hours in the kitchen during Ramadan, surrounded by the aromas and temptations of food, no longer bother Jahan, a garment merchandizer turned food entrepreneur who has fasted for the holiday since the age of ten. On this day, she broke

her fast in the evening first with a medjool date (for the burst of sugar and calories) and a cantaloupe smoothie seasoned with ginger and lime.



A refreshing cantaloupe smoothie seasoned with ginger to aid in digestion. When not cooking for her own family, Jahan shares her culinary skills through a plethora of businesses and hobbies. She teaches cooking out of her home through League of Kitchens, a collective of immigrant women who offer culinary classes showcasing food from their homelands; she caters full meals and creates edible fruit bouquets and arrangements for events; she teaches edible design and food business skills; and she is a member of a co-op of small food business owners; and she recently began another part-time job as a second-grade teaching assistant at a local school.

Whereas iftar in Bangladesh meant a large family gathering, Jahan said she typically breaks her fast on her own in Brooklyn, or sometimes brings food to the Moroccan employee and Yemeni proprietors of her corner bodega who, like her, are often still working when the sun sets.

“In all the Muslim countries, they adjust to the evening prayer time. But here it’s not possible.”

AN IVORIAN FATHER SHARES FAMILY TRADITIONS WITH HIS SON

A bit further north in Brooklyn, Bobo Diallo was pleased when his 14-year-old son Ismael expressed interest in joining him in observing Ramadan this year. Originally from Cote D’Ivoire, Diallo has fond memories of the communal nature of Ramadan during his childhood.

“It’s a completely different experience,” he said of celebrating Ramadan in a Muslim--majority country. “Growing up, [I had] memories of Eid with my parents, waking up before morning prayer to eat. So, the house is full and everything is lively...You wake up and then you do the prayer, then most of the kids go back to sleep. In the evening, during the break of fast, it’s very festive.”



Bobo Diallo prepares fish to break the Ramadan fast



Bobo Diallo explains preparation of iftar to his son Ismael



Typical Ivorian dinner of fish and alloco (sweet plantains)



Dèguè, a sweet yogurt-based couscous porridge enjoyed across West Africa

At his son's request, on a recent evening, Diallo prepared a traditional Ivorian meal of fish with sweet fried plantains, or *allico*. For dessert, he made *dèguè*, a yogurt-based couscous porridge mixed with vanilla, sugar and raisins. "It's very, very delicious," he said as he enthusiastically listed off the ingredients. "I love it. I can eat bowls and bowls of it during Ramadan."

Like Jahan, Diallo notes that Ramadan takes on a far more festive feel in his home country. "Of course, being here [in the US] you don't have that. It's just me and my little family."

Beyond fasting and family iftar gatherings, Diallo speaks reverently of other aspects of Ramadan. "For me, it's really a time of reflection. It's a time when you feel you are really living your faith... It's a time to be even more generous than you are [the rest of the year], the sense of community, helping people in need, doing some charity work, feeding the poor."

A SENEGALESE COOP STAFF MEMBER RETURNS HOME FOR THE HOLIDAY

In search of the same sense of community and charity, Coop staff member Ibou Diallo traveled home to his native Senegal this Ramadan.

“I feel at home,” he said during a WhatsApp call one recent afternoon in New York (evening in Dakar). He added, “[Iftar] is a tradition that people enjoy, not only eating a meal but sharing time with loved ones.” Like Bobo Diallo (no relation), Ibou Diallo contrasted a warm West African Ramadan with a more isolating experience in New York.

“Here I feel good—I look forward to a beautiful evening. You don’t eat alone,” he said. “In Brooklyn it’s totally different. I was by myself. I was all alone, I had to take care of myself and get everything myself in addition to working at the Coop.”



Ibou Diallo's Senegalese *iftar*. Photograph by Ibou Diallo

In contrast, Diallo described a recent evening in Senegal when he found himself on a bus when the sun set, and another passenger produced a bag of dates and passed them around, sharing with fellow commuters and a police officer—a scene Diallo could never imagine transpiring in Brooklyn.

In Senegal, he noted, female family members spend the day preparing the evening meal. Business slows down as it is universally understood that people are fasting and have lower energy. Students from local religious schools go door to door in the morning and receive donations of food to later break their fast.

Growing up, Diallo recounted, his mother would prepare a huge pot of corn or millet porridge. “My mother was one of those who would feed 50 people,” he said. “Different households came together.”

A NEW YORKER TAKES A GRAB-AND-GO APPROACH TO IFTAR

Back in New York, Coop Membership Coordinator Jana Cunningham describes Ramadan as: “Some of my best times of year to focus, an opportunity to slow down and focus in a way that life doesn’t always allow.”

She tries to visit with family during Ramadan, watch fewer videos, and generally be as present as possible.

“Being a New Yorker, the idea is that if you don’t have five jobs and 20 hobbies, you’re a lazy bum,” she jokes.

Cunningham, who grew up in Harlem and the Bronx, told the *Gazette* in a previous profile that she discovered Islam through an older sibling and converted as a teenager.

On a typical evening during Ramadan, she gets off work at the Coop around 5:30 p.m., then heads to one of many classes she takes or teaches: tai chi, yoga, or salsa. She might break her fast with dates, like so many other Muslims around the world. After that, she said, her iftar menu mirrors what she eats the rest of the year.

“For me, dinner last night was broiled salmon and broccoli with cauliflower, and two nights before it was asparagus with cauliflower and sauteed mushrooms.”

LONGING FOR COMMUNITY

Though their iftar menus varied, each of the four people the *Gazette* spoke with echoed similar sentiments: that observing Ramadan can be an isolating experience (particularly in a Western city like New York), and that the season is a time to focus on community.

As Cunningham put it, remembering fondly traveling to Senegal and experiencing Ramadan outside of the U.S. in a completely new light: “It was a whole month of people

being courteous, conscious, and kind.”

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She is the cohost of the feminist TV podcast Cringewatchers and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients via @persian_ish on Instagram.