

THE ESSENTIALS

UPPING YOUR CHICAGO RESTAURANT CRED ONE BITE AT A TIME



Karahi gosht
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

He is a chef mostly by osmosis. Amjad Kahn, owner of Khan BBQ in West Rogers Park, helped his mom chop vegetables and toast spices on occasion, but mostly he just watched her cook in his childhood home in Faisalabad, Pakistan.

A few years later in the 1970s while working as a mess hall cook for an oil company in Saudi Arabia, he whipped up her recipes from memory for friends at his apartment as a diversion from his job. In 1984, he immigrated to America, worked at restaurant near the now-demolished Robert Taylor Homes making sub sandwiches behind bulletproof glass. He traded that job for a series of restaurant jobs on Chicago's Indo-Pakistani corridor near Devon and Western avenues. He didn't always cook, but like he had with his mother, he watched the cooks he worked with and absorbed their techniques.

Eventually, he rented a tiny restaurant of his own on Devon, just east of Western. With bright red laminate bench seating, it evoked a 1970s Kentucky Fried Chicken. It was poorly ventilated, always smoky, and in the summer, without air conditioning, hellishly hot. I remember the first time I visited in March of 2006, Khan, who you'd recognize by his thick white Hemingway-esque beard and his ever-present plain baseball cap (never a logo), tried to wave me away, saying his food was too spicy.

And it's true: Familiar with heavily Americanized pseudo-Indian cream and butter larded dishes, not smoky and spicy Pakistani staples, I had no idea what I was in for. But, then again, as a connoisseur of the American backyard barbecue, in many ways I was primed for Khan's hardwood-smoked kababs and breads grilled in a tandoor, a clay oven used in Pakistani and In-

KHAN BBQ

2401 W. Devon Ave. 773-274-8600

Looks like: Barbie's Dreamhouse, thanks to pink walls and a crystal chandelier

Smells like: Coriander and cumin

Sounds like: Cabbies conversing in spit-fire Urdu and the tinkling of metal skewers as cooks scrape the clay walls of the tandoor while they cook

dian cooking. In fact, that first visit was one of the great meals of my life. Weeks later, a grease fire burned the restaurant down.

But, three months after the fire, in June of 2006, Khan opened up bigger and better in his current location at the corner of Devon and Western. The usual assortment of expatriate Pakistanis and Muslims breaking fast after sundown during Ramadan migrated to the new spot, but so did foodies and curious Chicagoans looking for what I consider the best Pakistani food in Chicago.

They come for the chicken hoti (\$10.99) a silver platter of charcoal-blistered juicy thighs and wings slathered in a mint-green chili yogurt sauce, and the sausage-like skewers of ground lamb fired up with ginger and chili and garlic known as seekh kababs (\$10.99). They stay for the karahi gosht (\$11.99), or braised goat bathed in a gravy of ghee or clarified brown butter. They sop up any remaining juices with puffy pillows of naan (\$2.49), made to order in the same wood-fired tandoors as the kababs. Even the most carnivorous love Khan's creamy lentil daal (\$5.99) or his fiery thick stew of chickpeas or chana masala (\$5.99). Mom would be proud.

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