

FASTING, FEASTING FORM RAMADAN

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MUSLIM CUISINE SPICY

- Editor's note: This is the first story in an occasional series on how food plays a part in religious faiths.

THE man's voice wailed out over the loud speaker.

"God is most great. God is most great," he said in Arabic. Everybody in the room seemed to have one ear turned to hear this ancient and traditional call to prayer, but the women were also putting paper plates on the tables.

"I testify that there is no god except God," the man chanted.

Out went the napkins and plastic forks.

"I testify that Mohammed is the messenger of God," he said.

Out went the styrofoam cups and cola, tortilla chips and salsa.

"Come to prayer! Come to prayer!"

When it was over, the Muslims in Charleston did pray.

But first, they ate.

Not much, just enough to break the fast they had observed since dawn.

There was pakora, a dish made from fried chickpea flour. It looks like a small fritter to American eyes, and there was salsa to dip it in.

"At home we use chutney," said Ruby Abdulla.

There was chaat. It is also made with chickpea flour, plus fruit, plain yogurt and spices.

There were plump, luscious dates. Three dates, plus a drink of water, is the Muslims' traditional food for breaking a fast.

Fasting is not an everyday occurrence for Muslims, though it is one of Islam's "five pillars of faith," which makes it as sacred as the sacraments in Christianity. But fasting is the foundation of the holy month of Ramadan, which began Jan. 22 and will run for a month.

All over the world, Muslims who are physically able fast from dawn to sunset every day to celebrate the month 1,400 years ago in which God revealed the Koran to Mohammed.

For Muslims, the Koran is equivalent to the Bible.

At sunset on each day of Ramadan, Muslims gather to break their fast, often with other Muslims.

That is what happened at the Islamic Center of West Virginia in South Charleston Friday.

About 35 local Muslims gathered for a private party, a celebration of the sunset meal called "iftar."

Charleston allergist Syed Rehman said of fasting: "Spiritually, I am very much uplifted. It does not affect in any way my performance.

"It's very satisfying. What it basically teaches us is to suppress our desires. You may be hungry, but you can't eat," said Dr. Mohammad Yousaf, a South Charleston cardiologist.

Fasting also teaches compassion, local Muslims said.

"It makes you realize the problems of people who don't have food," said Dr. Raheel Khan, a specialist in pediatric infectious diseases on the faculty at Charleston Area Medical Center.

In fact, those who cannot make up days of fasting they missed in Ramadan must feed a needy person for every day they miss.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, so it shifts somewhat each year.

Hanan Ghannam of Charleston said Ramadan has health benefits as well as spiritual ones. "It's a good break to your system, this month," she said.

The Muslims who gathered Friday went to prayer in a second floor prayer hall after their small "breaking fast" meal, and then returned to the Islamic Center's social hall for the main meal of the evening.

The table was spread with large serving trays of dishes such as beef curry, cabbage rolls and spinach. The menu sounds familiar, but the tastes were unexpected.

Spices like coriander, curry, cayenne, cumin, allspice and nutmeg turned them into something that dazzled the palate.

These were not necessarily just spices off the grocery store shelves, either. Some local Muslim families have their spices sent from their homelands. Others buy them at local stores like the Middle East Mart and Taste of India.

There was pita bread, too, huge and soft looking. "This is not like at Kroger," said one young man. "We get this special. In fact, I think I'll have some." He snatched a piece of the stack of pita bread that was disappearing fast.

Many of the dishes served at this Ramadan sunset meal are really not religious dishes, but cultural ones, and have roots in either the Middle East or India and Pakistan.

But not all of them. There was Domino's Pizza, too. It was being grabbed up by the teen-agers.

There were no pork products and no alcohol, because Muslims abstain from both at all times.

At this particular Ramadan sunset meal, there wasn't any of Reema Ghannam's cake, either. She is Hanan Ghannam's sister-in-law, and had made two cakes to bring.

"My salt and sugar canisters look alike, and I couldn't taste anything because I was fasting," she said. She put salt in the cakes by mistake, and Friday night, she had to dump them in the garbage can.