

## WORTH WAITING FOR

*Publication: SUNDAY GAZETTE-MAIL*

*Published: 12/26/1999*

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Unlike Christmas, Kwanzaa and Hanukkah, Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim year, is not exclusively a December occurrence.

Based on the lunar calendar, Ramadan changes with each year. It was coincidental that this year's holiday runs from Dec. 9 to Jan. 9, encompassing other winter religious or cultural celebrations.

In the Islamic religion, Ramadan is the holy month of fasting. From dawn to sunset each day, the faithful must abstain from eating and drinking. It's their way of paying homage to those less fortunate, those who do not have necessary sustenance at any given time. And for reflecting on the many ways they personally have been blessed.

It wouldn't seem that much story could be told, especially in a food column, about an observance where noneating is a major focus.

However, after sundown, there is another story. My husband, Vic, and I recently were part of Ramadan's evening ritual held at the Islamic Center - a blend of welcoming fellowship and outstanding food.

As tradition dictates, the worshipers were called to prayer precisely as darkness fell. The day's fast was broken with a very light snack. (The thought behind it being that you can better concentrate on prayers if not concentrating on your hunger or weakened by it.)

This night there were fresh dates (a never-substituted staple), a steaming bowl of lentil soup and chole (a chickpea cousin of hummus).

Following prayers in the mosque (one side for women, another for men), some 200-plus diners were called to the mouthwatering array of foods set out in the dining hall for the eagerly awaited, only permitted meal of the day. (Again, women and children on separate sides from the men.)

"The only foods prohibited to Muslims are pork and alcohol," said Dr. Raheel Khan, our genial host. "Also, our meat has to be slaughtered in a regulatory manner, which we call 'halal,' similar to kosher."

Dirar Ahmad and Talal Fathallah, both from Charleston, cheerfully manned the buffet table, stirring large pans of kabsa (cardamom-flavored rice with almonds, tomatoes and raisins); baked chicken with tender potatoes, spices and onions, simmered in a tomato sauce, with a generous garnishing of cilantro; spicy beef curry (fork-tender veal and hot seasonings in a thickened gravy) and a refreshing, lightly dressed salad, served with soft pita breads for dipping into creamy hummus.

"One family, or as many that want, takes turns being responsible for the meal," said Fathallah. "They can make it all themselves, or have it catered. Since we have members from different origins, we never know what cuisine we are going to get - Syrian, Indian, Iranian, Pakistani and so on."

One personable tablemate, Abraham Falsafi, indicated that "American food" (spaghetti and pizza) is available for more picky tastes.

Falsafi, an electrical engineer, and Mahmoud Shahbandy, fourth-term president of the Islamic Association (he also lays claim to the secret spaghetti sauce recipe), conduct volunteer counseling ministries, teaching Islam at area jails and Mount Olive prison.

Some Charlestonians may better know Mahmoud as Mark. Trained at the Culinary Institute of America and The Greenbrier resort, Shahbandy was executive chef at Berry Hills Country Club from 1982 to 1989.

He works for the Bureau of Public Health as an administrator, tracking patients with AIDS and HIV.

We came away from the night well fed, armed with the good feelings of the hospitable group of women and men intent upon living their belief of generous spirit, kindness and good works. "Before the month is over," said Falsafi, "we each have to give either food or money for food directly to a needy family."

We also carried away a sincere invitation to the remaining holiday feasts. And a jar of their still-warm, special "American" spaghetti sauce.

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### Beef Curry By Ruby Abdulla

- 4 tablespoons oil
- 2 onions, sliced
- 4 large tomatoes, diced
- 2 teaspoons red chili
- 1 tablespoon crushed coriander seeds
- 1 tablespoon each fresh ginger and garlic, minced
- 1/2 teaspoon turmeric
- 1/2 bunch cilantro
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 pounds beef or lamb
- 1/2 cup yogurt

Heat oil; fry onions till pale brown; add tomatoes and all spices; fry slowly one minute. Add meat and yogurt; cover and simmer until tender. Serve over rice. Makes 8 servings.

*Nutrition information per serving: 390 calories, 260 calories from fat, 29 grams fat, 10 grams saturated fat, 80 milligrams cholesterol, 520 milligrams sodium, 9 grams carbohydrates, 2 grams fiber.*

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