



Rahila David poses for a photo in her family's Bogda Restaurant in Waterloo.

PHOTO BY CRESTINA MARTINS

# Unique Uighur flavours

'It's not like Chinese food, Middle Eastern food or Turkish food . . . the flavours are a mix of everything'

In December 2004, Rahila David, her husband, Shaoket, and their young daughters, Shaida and Youli, stepped off a plane and into a new life in Canada. Toronto was different from Tokyo. About half a day earlier, they were in a bustling, chic city — a capital of world capitals — and now they were surrounded by a grey and slushy place.

But for the Davids, moving to a far-off destination wasn't new.

In 1995, Shaoket left their home in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China to go to Tokyo to begin his doctorate in city planning. Rahila followed a few years later for her master's degree in agricultural chemistry. Schooling finished and with two little ones in tow, they focused on the best start for their young family. Canada offered better opportunities and, importantly, better schools for their children.

The Davids' first few years in Canada were marked with the usual whirlwind of creating a new home in a new place. They connected with members of Toronto's Uighur community, learned English, and Shaoket found a job as a truck driver. Within a couple years, the family welcomed a son, Bogda.

Toronto was fine enough, but they wanted to be in a more family-friendly community and moved to Cambridge. It wasn't long before friends suggested opening a restaurant in Waterloo Region. Although there were many Chinese restaurants (Cantonese and Sichuan, usually) none served Uighur cuisine.

While they didn't set out for a life as restaurateurs, this wasn't the first time it was mentioned. When they were finding their feet in Toronto, they opened a restaurant with friends, but it was a difficult undertaking for newcomers with a growing family.

They decided to give it another go. With cooking duties shared by Rahila and Shaoket, they opened Bogda Restaurant in Waterloo in 2011.

"The first thing everyone said was, 'This is good! The chicken (Tohogoshi Narin)



Jasmine Mangalaseril

is good! You can't find these handmade noodles here,'" Rahila David says. "I think we were full every day for three months. Two friends came from Japan and the four of us worked every day. We closed at 10 p.m., cleaned up and got home to Cambridge at 1 a.m. We slept five hours every night for the first few months."

## UIGHUR CUISINE

Uighur cuisine reflects the long history of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and the influences of neighbouring peoples. The province, which is on China's north-western edge, borders several central Asian countries, as well as Russia, Pakistan, India and Mongolia.

Centuries ago, countless caravans laden with luxury goods — gold, ivory, porcelain, and silks, as well as spices, sugars and teas — criss-crossed the Silk Road, with some stopping at the market city of Kashgar. Today, the province's economy is driven by natural gas production, but agriculture, including grapes, melons and pears, is also important.

"The fruits are good because of Xinjiang's unique climate," David says. "There's little rain and lots of sunshine. The days are very hot and the evenings are cold and dry. High temperatures make the acidity in fruit low and keep sugar content high."

Historically, Xinjiang was two separate regions — together, they're about the size of Quebec — with the Tianshan mountains serving as a natural boundary. To the north was Dzungaria, home to the nomadic Tibetan Buddhist Dzungars. To the south was the Tarim Basin (also known as Altishahr), home to the Uighurs, a Muslim group of Turkic-speaking sedentary farmers. Throughout its 2,500-year history,

various empires tried to capture the overall territory, with the Qin Dynasty eventually taking control, later merging both regions into Xinjiang in the 19th century.

"Uighur food, it's not like Chinese food, Middle Eastern food or Turkish food," David says. "It is unique and the flavours are a mix of everything. We have food that's unique — mantoo (dumplings), polo (rice pilau), narin (chicken)."

As Muslims, pork isn't part of Uighur cuisine, but other meats — beef, chicken, lamb — are, often in spicing that combines cumin, garlic, ginger, and Sichuan pepper.

Growing up in Xinjiang, David remembers eating potatoes, carrots, traditional meats and hand-pulled noodles. In recent years, likely because of the increased influence of emigrants from other areas of China, the diet has shifted to include more vegetables.

For Rahila, the foods and dishes that were handed down are connections to her culture. The children, however, want to eat what their friends eat.

"My kids always ask why I only cook Uighur food," she says. "For a few years they said, 'Don't make laghman (noodles with meat and vegetables), don't make polo.' Once a week I'll make them chicken and fries or spaghetti. On other days I'll make Uighur food."

A family trip to Xinjiang sparked the children's appreciation of their parents' home cooking.

"They said, 'The food is so good!'" Rahila says with a laugh. "I make laghman the same way and they ask, 'Why can't you make this?' It's the same dish that I learned from my mom!"

Today, Youli and Bogda are in high school. Shaida is a university graduate, now working in Ottawa but returns for visits.

"Now, when my eldest is back she asks, 'Mom, can you make me this and that?' I'm so happy."

TRY IT YOURSELF  
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## TOHOGOSHI NARIN

Tohogoshi Narin is a popular, easy-to-make dish also known as “Big Plate Chicken.” You can make it with boneless chicken but definitely try it with bone-in chicken. If you don’t like eating around bones, cleave them after separating them from the flesh, and add the lot to the pot. As the dish cooks, the marrow enriches the gravy, making it more flavourful than if it were made with meat alone or mixed with whole bones.

Serves 6 to 8  
Preparation time: 20 to 30 minutes  
Cooking time: 35 to 45 minutes

**80 ml** to 125 ml (1/3 to 1/2 cup) peanut oil  
OR other oil suitable for shallow frying, as needed  
**15 ml** (1 tablespoon) white sugar  
**1 kg** (2 lbs) skinless chicken, bone-in preferably, cut into 5-cm (2-inch) chunks (eight or nine bone-in chicken thighs)  
**1/2 onion**, sliced from root to tip  
**45 ml** (3 tablespoons) Shaoxing cooking

wine (also called Shaohing or Shaoshing)  
OR dry sherry  
**6 to 10** whole dried chilies, to taste  
**3 cm** (1 1/4 inch) ginger, sliced thin  
**1 or 2** star anise pods, to taste  
**10 ml** (2 teaspoons) whole Sichuan peppercorns  
**5 ml** (1 teaspoon) black pepper  
**125 ml** (1/2 cup) chopped garlic  
**1 cinnamon** stick  
**5 ml** (1 teaspoon) cumin seeds  
**5 ml** (1 teaspoon) fennel seeds (optional)  
**1 black** cardamom pod (also called Bengal cardamom, brown cardamom, or bada/bara elaichi) NOT green or white cardamom  
**30 ml** (2 tablespoons) dark soy sauce  
**2 to 3** chopped tomatoes (optional)  
**3 Yukon** Gold potatoes, cut into 5-cm (2-inch) chunks  
**Water**, as needed  
**2 carrots**, cut into 5-cm (2-inch) chunks  
**1 green** bell pepper, sliced into strips  
**1 red** bell pepper, sliced into strips  
**2 green** onions (green parts only), cut into 3 cm (1 1/4-inch) lengths  
**Salt**, to taste

To serve:  
Flat noodles, naan or rice

1. Heat the oil over medium heat. When hot, add sugar and stir until it caramelizes, about a minute or two.
2. Stir in the chicken, onions, and then add wine. Cook for five minutes, stirring occasionally.
3. Add chilies, ginger, star anise, Sichuan pepper, black pepper, garlic, cinnamon stick, cumin seeds, fennel seeds (if using) and cardamom. Mix well and let cook for a couple of minutes.
4. Stir in soy sauce, tomatoes (if using) and potatoes. Add enough water to barely cover. With the lid off, heat for five minutes before adding carrots. Keep the pan uncovered and bring to a boil before reducing to a simmer. Skim the froth as needed and stir occasionally as it simmers for 15 minutes.
5. Add the red and green bell pepper. Stir and cook for five minutes or until the potatoes are fork tender. Adjust for salt, if necessary.
6. When ready, remove the cardamom pod, cinnamon stick and star anise. Sprinkle with green onions and serve.

Notes:

- This recipe can be halved.
- For a thicker gravy, use a wide-bottomed pan, such as a braiser, to allow for faster evaporation. Otherwise you can use a large wok or a Dutch oven and cook down the gravy for longer.

Stockists:

- Most spices can be found in major grocery stores, gourmet shops and bulk food stores.
- Black cardamom can be found at Indian and Middle Eastern grocers, including: Golden Indian Food and Spices, Kishki World Foods and Onkar Food and Spices, all in Kitchener. 🌱



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