

Rice

The daughter of Indian immigrants, Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London in 1967. Her family moved to the United States, where she attended Barnard College and received multiple graduate degrees, including a Ph.D. in Renaissance studies from Boston University. She is the author of three books, including *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003), as well as many short stories. Lahiri has won several literary awards, including a Pulitzer Prize and a PEN/Hemingway Award. Her fiction often explores Indian and Indian-American life and culture — as does this personal essay, which originally appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine.

**Background on rice** Along with corn and wheat, rice remains one of the most important crops in the world, especially in Asia, where it has been cultivated for thousands of years. Rice accounts for between 35 percent and 85 percent of the calories consumed by billions of people living in India, China, and other Asian countries. Indeed, the ancient Indian word for rice (“*dhanya*”) means “sustainer of the human race.” But rice can be symbolic as well: we throw rice at weddings because it suggests fertility and prosperity. For Lahiri, the significance of rice is personal rather than universal. She describes her father’s pulao dish as both an expression of his idiosyncratic personality and a symbol that binds her family together.

My father, seventy-eight, is a methodical man. For thirty-nine years, he has had the same job, cataloguing books for a university library. He drinks two glasses of water first thing in the morning, walks for an hour every day, and devotes almost as much time, before bed, to flossing his teeth. “Winging it” is not a term that comes to mind in describing my father. When he’s driving to new places, he does not enjoy getting lost.

In the kitchen, too, he walks a deliberate line, counting out the raisins that go into his oatmeal (fifteen) and never boiling even a drop more water than required for tea. It is my father who knows how many cups of rice are necessary to feed four, or forty, or a hundred and forty people. He has a reputation for *andaj* — the Bengali word for “estimate” — accurately gauging quantities that tend to baffle other cooks. An oracle of rice, if you will.

But there is another rice that my father is more famous for. This is not the white rice, boiled like pasta and then drained in a colander, that most Bengalis eat for dinner. This other rice is pulao, a baked, buttery, sophisticated indulgence, Persian in origin, served at festive occasions. I have often watched him make it. It involves sautéing grains of basmati in butter, along with cinnamon sticks, cloves, bay leaves, and cardamom pods. In go halved cashews and raisins (unlike the oatmeal raisins, these must be golden, not

black). Ginger, pulverized into a paste, is incorporated, along with salt and sugar, nutmeg and mace, saffron threads if they’re available, ground turmeric if not. A certain amount of water is added, and the rice simmers until most of the water evaporates. Then it is spread out in a baking tray. (My father prefers disposable aluminum ones, which he recycled long before recycling laws were passed.) More water is flicked on top with his fingers, in the ritual and cryptic manner of Catholic priests. Then the tray, covered with foil, goes into the oven, until the rice is cooked through and not a single grain sticks to another.

Despite having a superficial knowledge of the ingredients and the technique, I have no idea how to make my father’s pulao, nor would I ever dare attempt it. The recipe is his own, and has never been recorded. There has never been an unsuccessful batch, yet no batch is ever identical to any other. It is a dish that has become an extension of himself, that he has perfected, and to which he has earned the copyright. A dish that will die with him when he dies.

In 1968, when I was seven months old, my father made pulao for the first time. We lived in London, in Finsbury Park, where my parents shared the kitchen, up a steep set of stairs in the attic of the house, with another Bengali couple. The occasion was my *annaprasan*, a rite of passage in which Bengali children are given solid food for the first time; it is known colloquially as a *bhath*, which happens to be the Bengali word for “cooked rice.” In the oven of a stove no more than twenty inches wide, my father baked pulao for about thirty-five people. Since then, he has made pulao for the *annaprasans* of his friends’ children, for birthday parties and anniversaries, for bridal and baby showers, for wedding receptions, and for my sister’s Ph.D. party. For a few decades, after we moved to the United States, his pulao fed crowds of up to four hundred people, at events organized by Prabasi, a Bengali cultural institution in New England, and he found himself at institutional venues — schools and churches and community centers — working with industrial ovens and stoves. This has never unnerved him. He could probably rig up a system to make pulao out of a hot-dog cart, were someone to ask.

There are times when certain ingredients are missing, when he must use almonds instead of cashews, when the raisins in a friend’s cupboard are the wrong color. He makes it anyway, with exacting standards but a sanguine hand.

When my son and daughter were infants, and we celebrated their *annaprasans*, we hired a carer, but my father made the pulao, preparing it at home in Rhode Island and transporting it in the trunk of his car to Brooklyn. The occasion, both times, was held at the Society for Ethical Culture, in Park Slope. In 2002, for my son’s first taste of rice, my father warmed the trays on the premises, in the giant oven in the basement. But by 2005, when it was my daughter’s turn, the representative on duty would not permit my father to use the oven, telling him that he was not a licensed cook. My father transferred the pulao from his aluminum

trays into glass baking dishes, and microwaved, batch by batch, rice that fed almost a hundred people. When I asked my father to describe that experience, he expressed no frustration. "It was fine," he said. "It was a big microwave."

### Comprehension

1. How does Lahiri describe her father? What is his most important character trait?
2. According to Lahiri, what is special about pulao? Why is it served just on festive occasions?
3. What is an *annaprasan*? Why is this occasion so important to Bengalis?
4. Why, according to Lahiri, would she never try to make pulao?
5. What does Lahiri mean when she says that pulao is a dish for which her father "has earned the copyright" (4)?

### Purpose and Audience

1. How much does Lahiri assume her readers know about Bengali culture? How can you tell?
2. Is this essay simply about rice — more specifically pulao — or is it also about something else? Explain.
3. Does this essay have an explicitly stated or an implied thesis? What dominant impression do you think Lahiri wants to convey?

### Style and Structure

1. Why does Lahiri begin her essay by describing her father?
2. This essay is divided into three parts: the first describes Lahiri's father; the second describes the making of pulao; and the third describes the occasions on which her father cooked pulao. How does Lahiri signal the shift from one part of the essay to another? What other strategies could she have used?
3. Why does Lahiri go into so much detail about her father's pulao recipe?
4. What does pulao mean to Lahiri? Does it have the same meaning for her father? Explain.
5. Why does Lahiri end her essay with a quotation? Is this an effective closing strategy? What other strategies could she have used?

### Vocabulary Projects

1. Define each of the following words as it is used in this selection.  
methodical (1) colander (3)  
deliberate (2) sanguine (6)  
oracle (2)
2. Throughout her essay, Lahiri uses several Bengali words. What might she have gained or lost if she had used English equivalents?

### Journal Entry

What food do you associate with a specific member of your family? Why do you think this food has the association it does?

### Writing Workshop

1. **Working with Sources.** Write an essay in which you describe a food that is as meaningful for you as pulao is for Lahiri. Make sure that your essay has a clear thesis and that it includes at least one reference to Lahiri's essay. Be sure that you document all material that you borrow from Lahiri's essay and that you include a works-cited page. (See Chapter 18 for information on MLA documentation.)
2. Write an email to a friend in another country in which you describe the foods you traditionally eat on a particular holiday. Assume that the person is not familiar with the foods you describe. Be sure your email conveys a clear dominant impression.
3. Write an essay in which you describe a parent or grandparent (or any other older person) who has (or had) a great deal of influence on you. Make sure you include basic biographical information as well as a detailed physical description.

### Combining the Patterns

In addition to describing Lahiri's experience with pulao, this essay contains an explanation of a **process** in paragraph 3. What purpose does this process explanation serve?

### Thematic Connections

- "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria" (page 232)
- "Two Ways to Belong in America" (page 404)
- "Tortillas" (page 507)