ARIANA KABOB.

Carrying the History of Afghanistan in Every Bite.

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Max Mashkoor introduces himself with a wary gap-toothed smile. A Kabul native, he's brought the flavors of his homeland to Colorado at his Aurora restaurant, Ariana Kabob. The restaurant, one of few in the state serving Afghan food, takes its name from what historians call the region of Afghanistan in the pre-Islamic period, named after the Indo-Aryan tribes that lived there.

Mashkoor came to the United States in the 1980s with his entire family, part of the waves of Afghans displaced by the Soviet invasion. There is no one left for him in the old country. They were all able to leave Afghanistan, even as it became increasingly difficult to get out. The clan settled in the Los Angeles area where as a teenager, he studied to be an aircraft mechanic. He then took a job with American Airlines.

He took a second job to help his family, working as a line cook in a Marriott Hotel restaurant. He found he loved it and had a natural talent for the work. Over the years, he rose through the ranks, becoming a service trainer for the entire kitchen. At home, Mashkoor found himself cooking for family gatherings with the skills he honed on the job.

Understandably, Afghan culture is insular. Muslim custom dictates men and women inhabit different spaces when eating in public, but even in the relatively liberal pre-Taliban era when he grew up, most eating did not take place outside the home in restaurants. Rather, in this culture, lavish meals are cooked and eaten family-style, in a custom called dastarkhan. The term refers both to the large tablecloth spread over the rug, and the feast itself, comprised of many different dishes spread across the floor. A family is expected to provide a quality dastarkhan to guests, including many delicacies and specialties, each arranged so that favorites are within reach. The spread includes breads, relishes, rice dishes, fruits, marinated meats, and chutneys.

Mashkoor loved to cook and took over preparing his family dastarkhan. His experience in the kitchen brought him an ease with traditional ingredients and skill with new ones. He combined flavors to enhance customary dishes, and

the result was delicious. Everyone kept telling him he ought to open a restaurant, an idea he let percolate over the years.

In the meantime, he continued his work as an airline mechanic. American Airlines sent him to Denver in 1995 to support the new international airport being built, and he loved the familiar climate, which seemed like home to him after so many years in L.A. He got married, too, to a young bride named Farah. Just 17 at the time, she took a chance by letting her parents arrange her marriage. Her own family had fled Afghanistan in the 1980s too, moving west to New Delhi, India. She grew up watching Bollywood movies and speaking Hindi. Bright and bubbly alongside his stoicism, she draws an easy smile from him. The couple decided to make the move to Denver, and one by one, each of Mashkoor's extended family came along, too. They joined a relatively tight-knit Afghan community in Colorado, comprised of around 600 families.

He took a job managing a Pour la France, giving him more restaurant experience. The Mashkoors had three children, and were happy in their pairing. The children are now middle, high-school, and college- aged. Their oldest daughter wants to be a doctor. They say their children are definitely American, but Afghan too. They want to eat macaroni and cheese alongside their lamb kabob.

As United States forces invaded Afghanistan, Max left his family to return to the war zone his homeland had become. A Farsi/English translator as the Army advanced through the region, he found Kabul the same, and yet different than the one of his boyhood. Stalls selling familiar kabob, charred over live coal fires remained, while everything was more crowded, more overwhelming.

When he returned, he knew it was time to take another risk and open his restaurant. His wife worried about losing everything and pouring their savings into the project. Ariana Kabob opened in February, 2012, and according to Max, financially-speaking, it has broken even every month since it opened. The restaurant is cool, with tile floors and walls hung with traditional Pashtun dress and prayer rugs. Ariana's long, galley kitchen is, in contrast to the dining room of the restaurant, hot. Battered copper pots of enormous proportions sit on oven surfaces, bubbling. Huge vats of palau, or seasoned rice, simmer on the stovetop. Steel bowls piled with fresh jalapeno peppers wait to be turned into spicy chutney. A glowing brazier made of faux coals is lined with kabob meats on sword-like skewers. Naan bread is churned out of the oven by the dozen.

Afghanistan is a crossroads of flavor, and Mashkoor's hometown of Kabul its cultural hub. The flavors in Afghan food come from India, Turkey, China,

and Iran. Paprika, cumin, coriander [also known by the name cilantro], mint, and curry are all used. There are steamed dumplings called mantoo–twisted pockets filled with a peppery ground beef and onion mixture, then topped with a cooling yogurt sauce. Mashkoor adds his own touch: a flavorful tomato sauce with hints of cumin and a spicy aftertaste.

Tandoori-style kabob, featuring chicken marinated with curry applied with a light hand, is served with naan bread and a mug of steaming chai. Distinctly Afghan, it's a far cry from its heavily spiced Indian cousin. Chapli Kabab, which is a hamburger Afghans have been eating for 5,000 years, is a beef patty seasoned with onions, garlic, chilies, and coriander. It's served with lemon squeezed on top, alongside fresh tomatoes and onion and a side of the popular Qabuli Palau–seasoned rice with shredded carrots and raisins. For dessert, Baklava–honeyed layers of filo pastry and nuts, an import from Turkey, that decided to stay. There's also Jalabee, known in India as Jalabi, and described by Mashkoor as an Afghan funnel cake.

Max and Farah Mashkoor, whose children all come to help on Saturdays, bring the history of Afghanistan to their patrons, who come from all backgrounds. Most are curious what Afghan cuisine is about. For the Mashkoors, it's about history, and politics, and starting over someplace new. It's about tradition and culture, too. It's about a family coming to start a new life, sharing things that are familiar to them, with their new community. It's about the American dream, and raising a family in a new culture. Ariana is about all of these things, and like the fusion of influences that pass through Afghanistan, it's about mixing new flavors with the old. Ariana is as much about the history as it is about this mix: tart, sweet, salty, spicy. Just like real life.

Generations have survived the country's political chaos, in most cases by maintaining a daily routine: shopping, cooking, eating, going to school or work. Afghans run businesses, go to restaurants, get married, raise families. Their food is unfussy, it's the food of survivors. There is no star chef in the kitchen. No complicated recipes or perfectly presented plates. The food is real, and simple, and good. It's nourishing and flavorful, and it carries the history of Afghanistan in every bite.