



Bringing Africa to Burnaby

BY ALFIE LAU

Ask Yasmin Khan what it feels like to have run Simba's Grill for the past ten years and she'll tell you how hard it was that first year in 1998.

"My husband Kurshid and I had come to Canada from Kenya and I was teaching ESL while Kurshid was taking business courses at BCIT," said Yasmin. "He was a civil engineer in Kenya but he couldn't get a similar job here.

"Kurshid had always loved cooking so he came up with the idea to open an African-themed restaurant. ... I gave him a year and if it wasn't working, he'd have to go find an engineering job."

Kurshid used his year well, finding a spot in the heart of Edmonds to open Simba's Grill.

And it's in the kitchen where Kurshid, who all his employees call Simba, the Swahili word for 'lion', produces the dishes he used to cook for family and friends on the beaches of Kenya.

"My two favourite dishes are the Simba's Chicken, which is a full Cornish game hen deep-fried in my special hot pili pili sauce, and the mishkaki, which is skewers of lamb cubes barbecued and marinated to perfection."

Kurshid is undoubtedly the lion of the kitchen but Yasmin is no slouch as the lioness who provides a steely determination and the unyielding charm that greets each and every customer who walks in through the door:

"We're a team," she said. "I kept teaching for some

time but once Kurshid started growing the business, we had to hire more people and it just made more sense for me to be working here."

Kurshid admits that getting customers to try African food was hard at first, but once people tried it once, they kept coming back.

"I'm trying to create an authentic African dining experience," he said. "I tell everybody this is what I grew up on."

Customers would come from all across the Lower Mainland to try Kurshid's cooking and four years ago, the couple expanded to a downtown Vancouver location, at the corner of Robson and Denman Street.

Running two restaurants means a lot of driving back and forth and yes, that means there's a second person needed to oversee the cooking: Yasmin.

"My wife's specialties are the curries," said Kurshid. "Barbecue is a man's food and that's what I do best."

Yasmin can't help but laugh at her husband's assessment, pointing out that both of them have trained their staff to cook everything on the menu.

"I like the curries and the sauces because they're a bit milder," she said. "And I love my dessert."

Her favourite dessert would have to be the Raas Malai, which is baked Ricotta cheese served in a cream base.

"It's not too heavy and it's something you won't find anywhere else," she said. "People are always surprised by how good it is."

Kurshid also knows his way around a dessert table but his favourite is the Lamu cheesecake, served with an authentic mango purée, almonds and pistachios.

"I used to make this back home with mangos that fell off the tree and at my feet," he said. "I'd pick the juiciest ones and it would be the sweetest dessert you'd ever have."

While the food is to-die-for, the couple haven't forgotten their roots and the reason why they moved to Canada.

Take a look around the restaurant and you'll see authentic African artifacts the couple have brought back from their homeland.

And always dropping in for a meal with their friends are the couple's two children, daughter Shezmin and son Nabil.

"We came here to give our kids a better future," said Yasmin as tears well up in her eyes. "I'm so proud of them."

Shezmin is a teacher at a Burnaby private school while Nabil is completing his business degree at the University of Victoria.

And if the children decide they want to get into the family business, that door is always open.

"I think they would make a great team," said Yasmin. "Shezmin knows how to work a room and Nabil would have great business smarts."

Kurshid and Yasmin will let their children decide their own futures because their present includes doing everything they can to satisfy their loyal customers.

"Ten years in business," said Kurshid. "That first year was tough but we survived because so many of our customers kept coming back. They became our friends. We can't thank them enough. I guess the best way is to continue serving the best food that we can."

Simba's Grill is located at 7413 Edmonds St. in Burnaby and 825 Denman St. in Vancouver. For more information or to call in an order for pick-up, call 604-525-8904 (Edmonds) or 604-974-0649 (Vancouver), e-mail info@simbasgrill.com or go to www.simbasgrill.com.