

Feast in Kabul.



A GRACIOUS AND VENERABLY LINED great-grandmother in a sequined gown pushed the plate of snacks at me. It was a small white dish, the only evidence of the wedding feast to come. A crowd of children eyed its passage across the table disconsolately.

I filled my hand with roasted soy nuts, yellow raisins and the things that tasted like spicy chow mein noodles, then slid the plate to the children. They lunged but managed only a maddening pinch. One of the other women at the table intervened with a pejorative explosion of Farsi and settled the plate back in front of me. Everyone beamed except the children.

This was my third trip to Afghanistan, but my first invitation to an Afghan wedding. I had heard plenty about these occasions, though. The women would wear amazing dresses, heavy as suits of armor with their rhinestones and seed pearls and gold braid. They would throw off the dull scarves that they wore outside to shimmy and snake their arms on the dance floor. The men would make occasional furtive forays into the women's party room — theirs lay across a mirrored corridor — their faces giddy at the sight of all those exposed coiffures. The food would come in celebratory waves. Not just the ubiquitous kabobs and rice, but the more festive dishes such as aushak — pasta stuffed with leeks — and, I hoped, all the fabulous things Afghans do with eggplant.

I was hungry. I had been in Afghanistan for nearly three weeks, staying in the home of friends who had gone on vacation. I hadn't managed to feed myself well in their absence. There are about 20 restaurants in Kabul where women are welcome to dine, but they were far from my friends' house. Going to a restaurant would have meant finding a driver — and not just a man behind a wheel,

but one who knew how to find the restaurant, a challenge in a city with few named streets or addresses. I could have cooked or asked the houseman to cook for me, but that also meant finding a driver to take me to a store, onto streets that seemed increasingly foreboding with the recent spate of bombings. Instead, I foraged for days in my hosts' cupboards and ate the pile of dark chocolate bars I'd bought as gifts for them. I discovered I could manage on one meal a day. I took to calling this The War Zone Diet. It was a bad joke in a country where so many people are hungry because of the deprivations of conflict, not just its inconveniences.

When the waiter finally arrived with platters of food, the women at my table did what people do everywhere to make a guest feel welcome. They made sure those platters traveled first and most often to me. I loaded my plate with salad, meatballs, rice and a creamed spinach that looked much like my mother's. But my forkfuls became smaller and smaller until I finally stopped. "So sorry we have only Afghan food!" one of the women cried, but that wasn't the problem. I was full. The days of eating less had left me unable to indulge.

In fact, there was more food than anyone could eat. The half-full platters and plates were pushed to the center of the table to make room for the dessert, which also went largely untouched. I watched the tower of leftovers grow, agitated by the excess. Then I remembered Kabul's waste management system. All of this would be bundled up and dumped at the end of the street. The local carnivores — cats and maybe a few coyotes from the hills — would clean up the meatballs. The goats that graze the city streets would finish the vegetables, in a cycle of life and death that might bring them back to this very room, an entrée at yet another wedding. ! |

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