

NONFICTION

A Memoir From a Young Chef Who Fought to the Bitter End

In “Savor,” readers get to know Fatima Ali, the brave woman who was beloved by Food Network audiences and her family.

By Mary Pols

Oct. 7, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET

SAVOR: A Chef's Hunger for More, by Fatima Ali with Tarajia Morrell

In late November 2018, Fatima Ali, a talented and ambitious chef from Pakistan who had been the fan favorite on the 15th and most recent season of the cooking competition television show “Top Chef,” hired the food writer Tarajia Morrell to collaborate with her on an unusual memoir.

The job Morrell accepted was an exercise in the bittersweet. Ali, 29, had Ewing’s sarcoma and had just learned her cancer was terminal. The chef had been told she had a year left to live and she wanted help from Morrell documenting how she’d live it to the fullest, working through a culinary bucket list of legendary restaurants where she wanted to eat, including Noma in Copenhagen and Osteria Francescana in Modena.

Morrell (the writer and founder of the food blog Lovage) braced for a “poignant but delectable voyaging,” but those plans dissolved after a sudden acceleration of Ali’s cancer. Instead she journeyed only as far as Los Angeles to interview the chef in January 2019, in what would be the last month of Ali’s life. For a week they talked at UCLA Medical Center’s cancer ward, interrupted occasionally by Ali’s doctors, who were trying — generally unsuccessfully, and not always gracefully — to ease her constant pain. On learning that the stranger in the room was working on a book with his patient, one doctor asked: “What’s it going to be? A book about you by a bunch of people?”

“Savor” is certainly a collective work, spun from the willpower of a young, brown, Muslim, queer feminist who came to America seeking fame, freedom and influence, then knitted together by the people who loved her best, as well as her “hired witness.” Morrell’s voice is audible in the book’s introductory pages, and through Ali’s vantage in that scene with the doctor, but otherwise, the ghostwriter evaporates. “Savor” faced so many narrative obstacles that its existence is a triumph. But its expert execution is a true piece of editorial alchemy.

Morrell intersperses chapters in Ali’s instantly engaging voice — including essays Ali wrote for Bon Appétit (the last of which landed her a posthumous James Beard Award) — with chapters written by her mother, Farezeh Durrani, who also wrote the book’s foreword. Loving and deeply influential, Durrani was understandably proud of her driven, determined daughter, but also resisted some of her biggest personal and professional decisions.

This back and forth between the two women strengthens the narrative, amplifying what Ali describes as “this push-pull, this vacillation” between her homeland and her adopted home. Her career and sexuality were suspect in Pakistan. America allowed her to live outside the lines, to stave off her mother’s expectations of finding her a husband. Ali wanted to have her own restaurant and cooking show, and the book leaves no doubt that she would have made this happen. (By the time she was 22, Ali had graduated from the Culinary Institute of America, was a sous chef at a Manhattan restaurant and was Food Network-famous, having won her episode of “Chopped” in 2012.)

But she still loved Pakistan, and wanted to change perceptions of her country. As she writes: “No one knows about our food here and people barely know about our culture ... except for the fact that Osama bin Laden was discovered hiding out in our hillsides. It’s time for some new information. I want to use our food to disarm them.”

After Ali won “Chopped,” she explained to the judges why the victory mattered: “I really want to be that Pakistani girl that other Pakistani girls can look at and say: ‘You know what? I can do it too.’” That theme runs throughout “Savor.”

This book is neither a cancer memoir nor a behind-the-scenes account of life on a reality show. Both elements are there, but “Savor” emerges as a sort of “Life Confidential” in the crowded field of books about chefs, kitchens and culinary inspiration. Growing up in Lahore and Karachi, with a couple of years spent in Austin, Texas, Ali and her older brother, Mohammad, watched cooking shows together. Nigella Lawson and Martin Yan’s “Yan Can Cook” were favorites. They shared adventurous meals with their father. Ali trailed her grandmother to the open-air markets in Pakistan, savoring every scent, color and flavor.

Her childhood was privileged but hardly idyllic, marked by the upheaval of her parents’ divorce and then a terrible trauma largely brushed under the carpet by her family. But food and the culture of sharing it in a generous community were constants. Recipes were a refuge. At 17, Ali bucked expectations that she’d use her brilliant private high school record to win a place at Oxford or Harvard and chose culinary school instead.

For the next decade, she plunged into the life she’d chosen, and the bulk of this inspiring book is about how she lived her one wild and precious life, ticking off goals one at a time and loving friends and family. Ali comes across as being sensual, vulnerable and wise. Even as she righteously mourns all that she’s losing, she maintains a wicked sense of humor. She writes, “I want to leave something behind, something traceable, that could perhaps help others to ride the bull, to grab life by the horns.” With Morrell as a posthumous guide, that is exactly what she has done with “Savor.”

Mary Pols works at Bates College. She is the author of a memoir, “Accidentally on Purpose,” and is working on a novel.

SAVOR: A Chef's Hunger for More | By Fatima Ali with Tarajia Morrell | 384 pp. | Ballantine | \$28