

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALKA JOSHI

*The*  
SECRET  
KEEPER  
*of*  
JAIPUR

A NOVEL



“Captivated me from the first chapter to the last page.”

—REESE WITHERSPOON on *The Henna Artist*

**EXCLUSIVE READERS GUIDE**

# A CONVERSATION WITH ALKA JOSHI

## What inspired you to write this novel?

Before I became a writer, I was an avid reader, and I used to marvel at how writers could make characters come to life on the page. I could picture each in the gown or slacks the author had described, moving about a scene, talking to the other characters. And I would wonder: Did the characters feel as real to the author as they do to me?

Fast forward fifty years. I'm sitting at my laptop, creating a scene between two characters when Malik, the enterprising servant boy I created in *The Henna Artist*, starts to tell me he'd like to tell his story. He's no longer eight years old; he's twenty. I ignore him for a while, but he's persistent—and persuasive. An extremely likeable and loyal character, Malik has captured the hearts of thousands of readers around the world. So I finally set aside the project I was working on and let Malik tell me his story. It came pouring forth. True to his character, Malik's story is full of adventure and danger, and his love interest is a woman of unique character—not unlike Lakshmi.

And the answer to the question I used to wonder about? Yes, characters do come to life for authors as much as they do for readers. And when they do, you have to listen!

## What are you working on now?

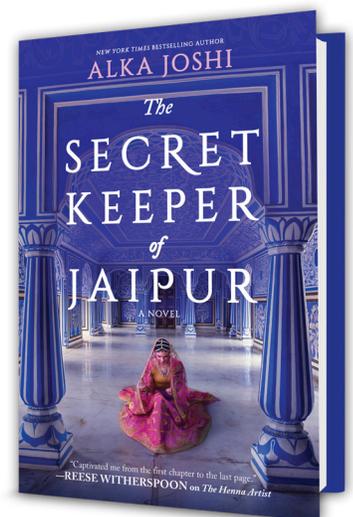
I'm currently researching the third book in the trilogy. Little did I know when I started writing *The Henna Artist* ten years ago that I'd end up writing three books, each focusing on one major character. The third book centers on Lakshmi's sister Radha as an assistant perfumer in Paris, where she lives with her French husband and two daughters. She's created the family she's always wanted and surprised herself with an ambition she hadn't known she harbored: to become a master perfumer, a difficult accomplishment for a woman in 1974. She's on the cusp of developing a scent using an Indian ingredient unknown to the French when a visitor from the past upends her future.

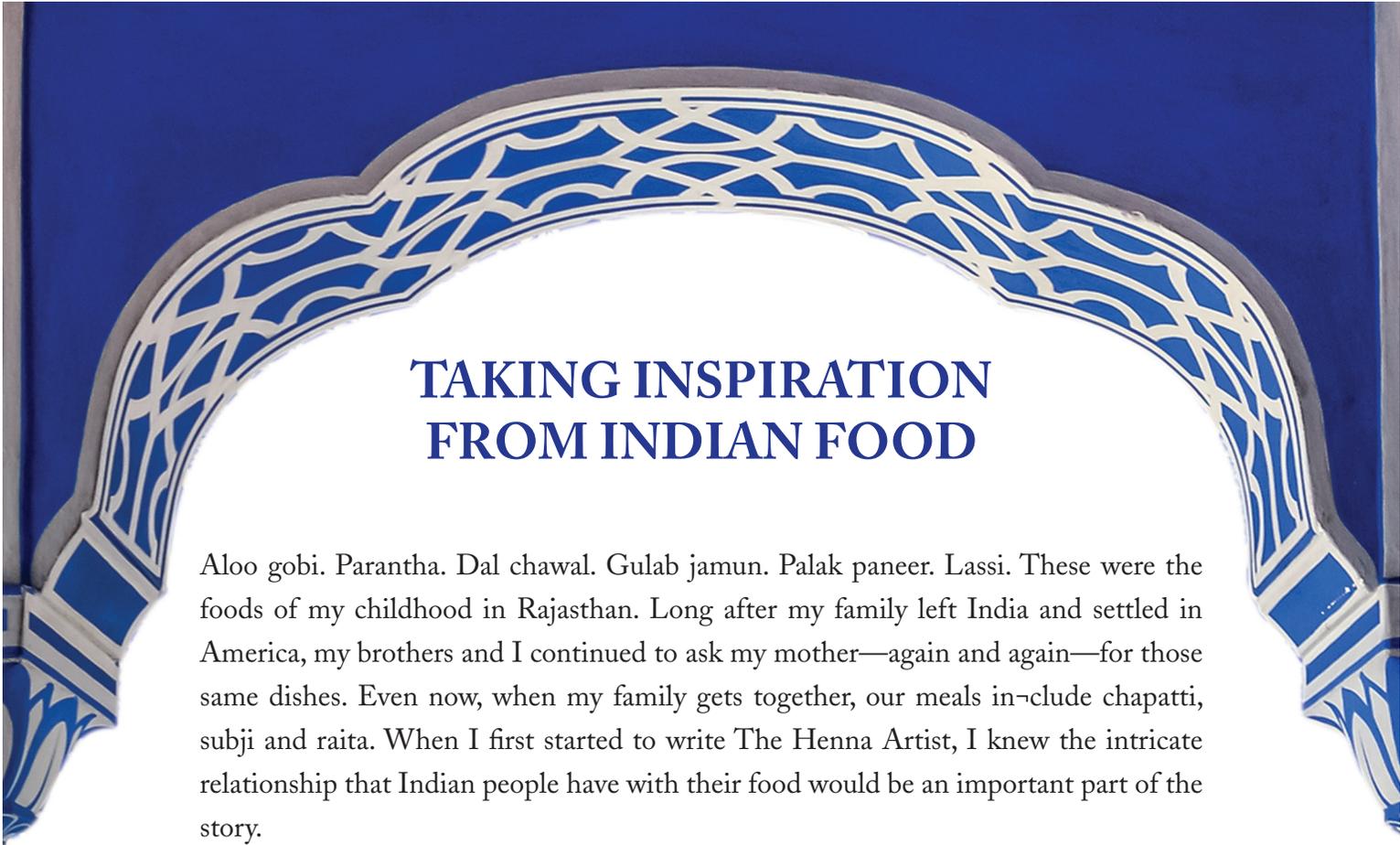
It's utterly fascinating: the hundreds of ingredients that go into fragrances Radha works with, the mystery of perfume houses like Chanel, Dior and Guerlain, the musky base notes that kiss the skin long after the spicy top notes have dissipated, and the lengths to which perfumers will go to create the perfect scent.

I'm so eager to return to the world of Radha, Lakshmi, Malik, Kanta and the Singhs as their stories develop over the decades. Who knows? Perhaps even the Maharanis of Jaipur will make an appearance in book #3?

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you think Lakshmi does the right thing by asking Malik to go to Jaipur and learn the construction trade? Could she have found another way to keep Malik out of trouble?
2. What makes Malik such a likeable character? What three things do you think a great book character needs to make readers fall in love with him/her?
3. In what ways has Malik transformed from the grubby street urchin he used to be? Has he changed from the outside or the inside, or both?
4. Could Nimmi have done something to keep Malik from leaving Shimla? Ultimately, do you think it was good for them to be apart? Does Nimmi learn anything about herself as a result of their separation?
5. How are Nimmi and Lakshmi different? How are they similar?
6. What do you think Malik learns about himself and his place in the world of the Singhs? What are the class differences between him and the Singhs? How do those differences manifest themselves?
7. What secrets is Malik privy to? What makes him keep those secrets to himself?
8. How does Lakshmi use her influence with the Maharanis to help Manu? Do you feel she's manipulating a volatile situation or strategically deflecting it?
9. What kind of power do the Maharanis wield? What are the limitations to their power?
10. Is Sheela making a play for Malik or is she merely flirting? What is her motive for either? Does she betray him on purpose or inadvertently?
11. Lakshmi and Jay trade proverbs playfully. Do they resonate with you or remind you of sayings from your own upbringing?
12. What do you learn about the significance of gold in Indian culture, especially as it relates to married women? In your own family, what do gold or precious metals signify?
13. The book is set in the late 1960s. What does it showcase about life at that time of India's history? Does it reinforce or change any of your assumptions about India?
14. In the end, Ravi is not penalized for his part in a criminal endeavor. What did that signal to you as a reader? Do the wealthy ever pay for their transgressions?
15. Why does Radha refuse to learn anything about Niki's life? Do you think there will ever be a time when she's ready to know more?



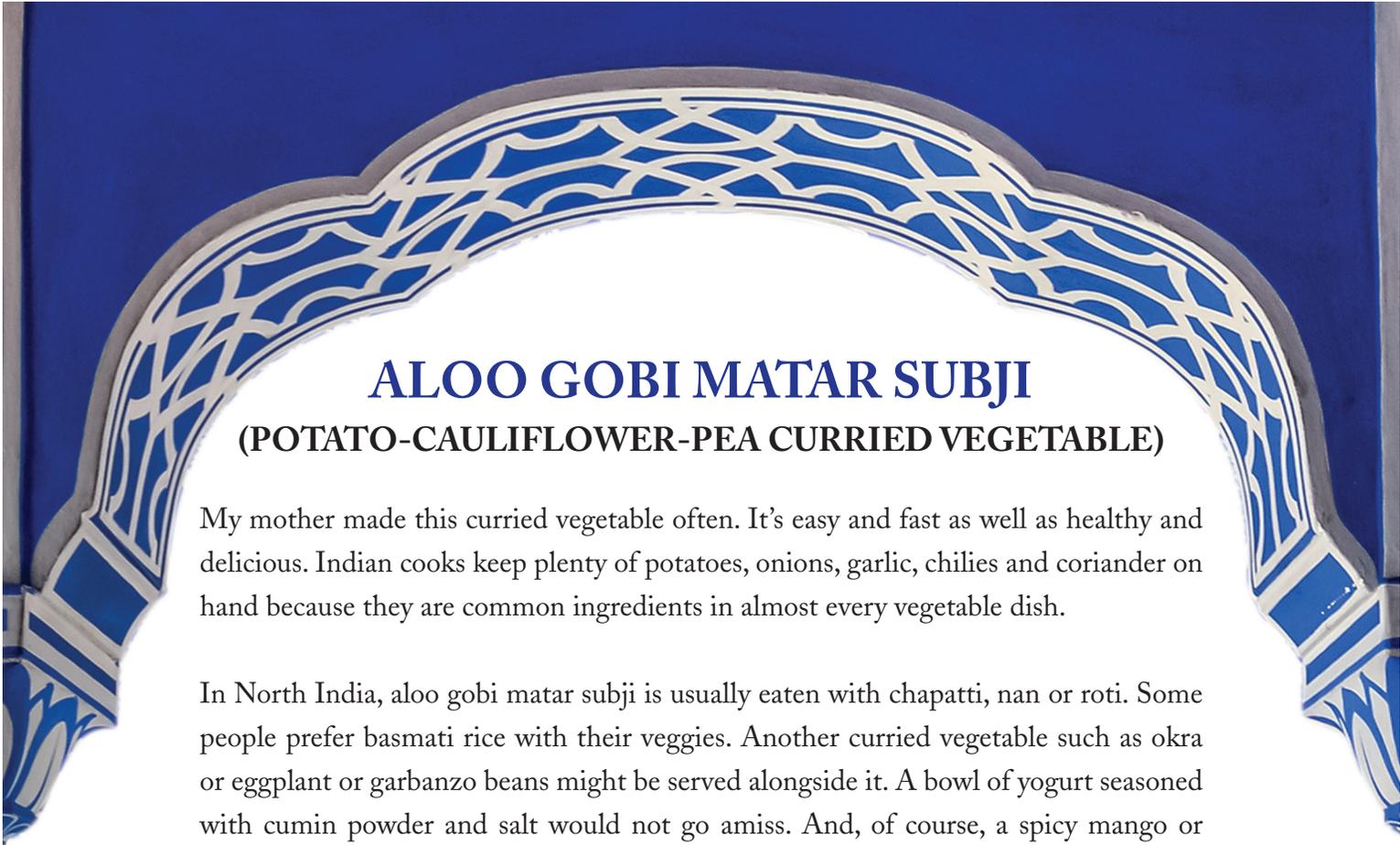


## TAKING INSPIRATION FROM INDIAN FOOD

Aloo gobi. Parantha. Dal chawal. Gulab jamun. Palak paneer. Lassi. These were the foods of my childhood in Rajasthan. Long after my family left India and settled in America, my brothers and I continued to ask my mother—again and again—for those same dishes. Even now, when my family gets together, our meals include chapatti, subji and raita. When I first started to write *The Henna Artist*, I knew the intricate relationship that Indian people have with their food would be an important part of the story.

In the centuries before Marco Polo came to India in search of spices, Indians harvested black and green peppercorns, pressed oil from cloves, and ground mustard seeds to flavor foods, tantalize the senses, and heal the body. The flavors of cilantro, turmeric, garam masala and cumin are as much a part of my heritage, and my identity, as are the blue-green eyes I inherited from my mother, Sudha. Even as I write this, I'm sipping chai infused with cardamom seeds, a stick of cinnamon and whole peppercorns. These overlapping flavors bring the India of my childhood alive again in my imagination, with all its chaotic, phantasmagoric glory.

Making Indian dishes takes time: multiple ingredients must be cut, peeled or diced; preparation must take place in stages; flavor is enhanced only by adding spices (as many as eight) at just the right time. Indian food is bold, colorful, bursting with aromas and flavors. What better way to enrich a plot and show character development than to infuse a story with one of the boldest, most beloved cuisines on earth?



## ALOO GOBI MATAR SUBJI

(POTATO-CAULIFLOWER-PEA CURRIED VEGETABLE)

My mother made this curried vegetable often. It's easy and fast as well as healthy and delicious. Indian cooks keep plenty of potatoes, onions, garlic, chilies and coriander on hand because they are common ingredients in almost every vegetable dish.

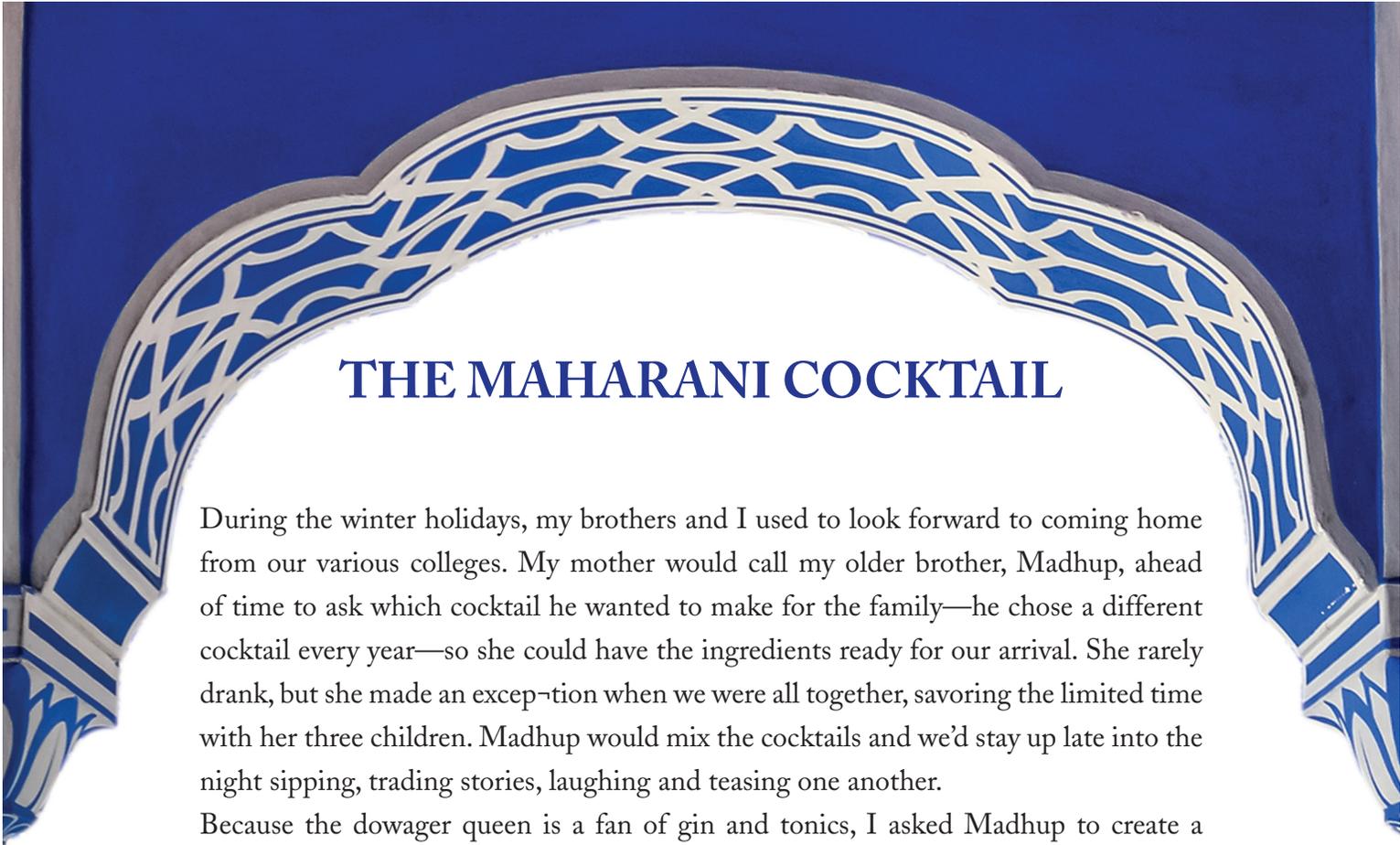
In North India, aloo gobi matar subji is usually eaten with chapatti, nan or roti. Some people prefer basmati rice with their veggies. Another curried vegetable such as okra or eggplant or garbanzo beans might be served alongside it. A bowl of yogurt seasoned with cumin powder and salt would not go amiss. And, of course, a spicy mango or lemon chutney would be an excellent touch for those who want a little more kick to their meal.

### Ingredients:

- 2 russet potatoes (aloo), peeled and cubed
- 1 small cauliflower (gobi), florets separated
- 1 cup fresh or frozen green peas (matar)
- 1 yellow or white onion, finely chopped
- 4 cloves garlic (or more, if preferred), finely chopped
- 1/2 cup canola or sunflower or safflower oil
- 2 tsp cumin seeds
- 2 tbsp turmeric powder
- 2 tsp cumin powder
- 1 tbsp garam masala
- 1 tsp ginger, finely chopped
- 2 tbsp coriander powder  
(if not available, use more coriander leaves)
- 2 tsp red chili powder or 1 hot chili pepper chopped fine
- 2-3 tsp salt (or to taste)
- 1/4 cup water
- 1 cup coriander leaves

### Procedure:

1. Heat oil in deep skillet or large saucepan with heavy bottom. Add cumin seeds until they begin to sizzle.
2. Add onions and sauté on high heat until they're translucent.
3. Turn down heat to medium. Add turmeric, cumin powder, garam masala, coriander powder, chili powder and salt and stir for three to four minutes.
4. Add garlic and ginger. Stir. Add peas and stir.
5. Add potatoes and cauliflower. Stir until all ingredients are coated well with spices.
6. The mixture will start to sizzle. Add water so as not to burn the vegetables. You have an option here to add more water if you want a soupy curry. But my father preferred a drier version, as do many North Indians, so my mother didn't add a lot of water to her recipe.
7. Turn down heat and cover the pot. Cook for another 10-12 minutes, taking care not to overcook the cauliflower. You want to leave a little crunch in the florets.
8. Garnish with coriander leaves.
9. Eat!



## THE MAHARANI COCKTAIL

During the winter holidays, my brothers and I used to look forward to coming home from our various colleges. My mother would call my older brother, Madhup, ahead of time to ask which cocktail he wanted to make for the family—he chose a different cocktail every year—so she could have the ingredients ready for our arrival. She rarely drank, but she made an exception when we were all together, savoring the limited time with her three children. Madhup would mix the cocktails and we'd stay up late into the night sipping, trading stories, laughing and teasing one another.

Because the dowager queen is a fan of gin and tonics, I asked Madhup to create a cocktail just for her. Enjoy it with a samosa, pakora or any other savories Lakshmi has on offer.

### **The Maharani**

1.5 oz gin

Pinch of freshly ground cardamom

4 strands saffron

Combine and let stand for 5 minutes until flavors are infused in the gin. Strain.

### **THEN ADD:**

3 oz tonic water

3 drops Patrón orange liqueur

Ice

*Cheers! Sláinte! Prost! Na zdravi! Cin-cin! Salud!*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**ALKA JOSHI** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Henna Artist*.

Born in India and raised in the United States since the age of nine, she has a BA from Stanford University and an MFA from California College of the Arts.

She lives in Pacific Grove, California, with her husband.