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Fall 2024

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Halal Consumer

A Publication of the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America

Magazine

6 *Pumpkins, Gourds,
& Squash: Beyond
the Décor*





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ISSN: 1532-351X

ABOUT HALAL CONSUMER

Halal Consumer is a publication of IFANCA (Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America). IFANCA is a non-profit Islamic organization with the mission to promote halal food and the institution of halal. IFANCA objectives include making halal foods conveniently available, introducing halal to food companies and institutions, creating awareness of halal among consumers, and providing halal solutions to consumer needs.

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Editor's Note

Assalaamu alaikum,

Autumn is a time for reflection and appreciation as the world around us transforms into vibrant colors and settles into a slower rhythm. This season invites us to pause, to savor the beauty of change, and to embrace the cycles of renewal and rest. It's a time to nurture both body and spirit, share moments with loved ones, and appreciate the abundance we have.

As Thanksgiving approaches, we express gratitude for the shared meals that connect us to one another and to the earth. Our cover story, "Pumpkins, Gourds, & Squash: Beyond the Décor," reveals how these fall favorites are more than just colorful ornaments on the table. Rich in nutrients, they fuel the body and enhance our fall meals, offering both beauty and sustenance.

We also explore "Harmony with Hormonal Balance" and "Nourishing New Moms with Traditional Foods"—two articles that focus on rejuvenating the body and supporting recovery. Achieving hormonal balance boosts energy, stabilizes moods, and strengthens health, while traditional postpartum foods help mothers heal and regain strength, enabling them to nourish their babies.

Our spotlight article features Saffron Road® and their delicious halal-certified products. They present their unique twist on a holiday classic, Tikka Masala-Spiced Roasted Turkey. We also include other festive recipes to complement your Thanksgiving table.

In "Low-Impact for a Lifetime," we dive into gentle exercises that revive the body, especially for those recovering from injury or age-related changes. We also highlight "The Role of Public Policy in Expanding Halal Food Access in Public Institutions," which looks at efforts to ensure halal meals are available in schools, hospitals, and prisons, accommodating more people in finding nourishment that supports their needs and beliefs.

Lastly, we explore IFANCA's partnership with Zaytuna College in "ZCELL: Reviving Our Tradition of Ethical Living & Learning." This program promotes ethical living by encouraging sustainable practices, teaching students how to grow their own food, and fostering a deep connection with the earth. Just as we nourish ourselves with the food we grow, Islam teaches us to care for the land so it can continue to provide for us.

As we embrace the seasonal changes of life, whether it's nourishing a new mother, harvesting food to sustain our families, or ensuring access to halal meals for all, let us give thanks for God's blessings. May we appreciate the abundance that sustains us and the connections that unite us, especially as we gather for Thanksgiving.

To stay up to date with all the latest IFANCA and Halal Consumer Magazine news, follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [X](#). You can also email us at halalconsumer@ifanca.org with any questions or feedback. We love hearing from our readers!

Sincerely,
Zehra Jafri [editor](#)

From the Publisher's Desk

Assalaamu alaikum,

It has been an eventful summer for IFANCA. We recently celebrated the Mawlid of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) at our Sabeel Center in Des Plaines, IL. We had an esteemed lineup of speakers and reciters from the Chicagoland area and our special guest, the renowned Hooria Fahim from Pakistan. The event was a great success, bringing the community together to celebrate this joyous occasion

Mawlid, meaning "birth" in Arabic, refers to the celebration of the birth of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). In Urdu, it is known as *Milad*, and both terms are used to honor this occasion, often through gatherings that include recitations of poetry, prayers, and sermons about the Prophet's life. It is observed in the month of Rabi' al-Awwal, and celebrations vary across the Muslim world, with some countries featuring large public gatherings, processions, and community meals, as well as lectures on the Prophet's teachings. Likewise, we endeavored to create an event that embodies all these traditions at our center.

The event commenced with a beautiful recitation of the Qur'an from Ustadha Tahera Ahmed. Next, we were enlightened by speeches from our esteemed speakers from various schools of thought: Shaykh Trent Carl, Maulana Yousuf Abdullah, Professor Inamul Haq, and Sister Fatima Zaidi. They reiterated the message of Muslim unity and the importance of embracing our shared values. Their words resonated deeply with the audience, inspiring attendees to reflect on their faith and renew their devotion to living according to the teachings of the Prophet (ﷺ).

After prayers, our event resumed with poetry recitations from Hira Mubashir in Urdu, Muhammad Almajid in Arabic, Dr. Javed Bhatti in Punjabi, and Bülent Köze, who delivered a *naat* recitation in Turkish while playing a

tune on his *oud* instrument. This showcases the rich diversity within Islamic cultures and highlights how we can come together to respect and share the various ways we celebrate this joyous occasion.

Finally, our special guest from Pakistan, world-famous artist Hooria Fahim, delighted the crowd with her soulful recitations of traditional *naat*. The lyrics conveyed profound meanings, reflecting the love and respect for the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). The event concluded with a delicious dinner of Pulao, Shami Kabobs, Bagharay Baigan, and Kheer.

At Sabeel Center, we are dedicated to keeping the Mawlid a vibrant and meaningful tradition, recognizing its importance in cultivating love and respect for our Prophet (ﷺ). We strive for our community members to not only enjoy poetry but also to feel spiritually inspired by the words of wisdom shared by our guest speakers. Even for those who do not partake in the Mawlid, we want them to understand that there are many ways to honor the teachings of the Prophet (ﷺ). By promoting unity and diversity among different sects and ethnicities, we hope to inspire others to hold similar programs in their communities, fostering bonds that strengthen the *ummah* and encourage a shared commitment to our faith.

Sincerely,
Muhammad Munir Chaudry **president**

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Pumpkins, Gourds, & Squash: Beyond the Décor

By Maryam Funmilayo

I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE: UNTIL RECENTLY, I never viewed gourds as possible food items. Growing up in Nigeria, I had seen gourds displayed as decorative items in people's homes, marketplaces, museums, in palaces, and even used as drums during folklore and moonlight stories from the elderly in the community.

According to Ronda Anson of the [Missouri Botanical Garden](#), pumpkins, gourds, and squash (PGS), along with cucumbers, watermelons, and melons, are a family of vining plants known as the 'cucurbits.' All edible plants from this family are technically fruits, deriving from the ovary of a pollinated flower, even though we might call them a 'vegetable.' Learning this truly amazed me!

Agricultural Characteristics

Tim Elkner, Horticulture Extension Educator for [Penn State Extension](#) at The Pennsylvania State University says that pumpkins, gourds, and squash varieties (summer and winter squash) all belong to the same cucurbit family, just like eggplant, zucchini, and melons. Summer yellow squash, eggplant, and zucchini are harvested immaturesly and tend to have softer skins and underdeveloped seeds, and do not last very long, thus they need to be harvested and consumed quickly. In contrast, winter squash, like butternut, delicata, and pumpkins, develop a thick skin and mature seeds, [making them ideal for storage for several weeks or even months.](#)

What fascinates me about pumpkins, gourds, and squash are their distinctive, often bulky shapes and vibrant colors. Interestingly, these plants are perceived as either fruits or vegetables depending on the culture. Let's look more closely at what makes each unique.

Gourds — Known for their varied shapes, gourds are usually inedible due to their very thick, firm skin, making them perfect as ornaments. They are sometimes referred to as "ornamental squash."

Squash — Squash varieties such as butternut, hubbard, and acorn are popular in grocery stores and have edible skins, making them versatile for baking, roasting, soups, and purees.

Pumpkin — The most popular in this family, pumpkins are not only edible and widely used in baked goods and soups but also celebrated decoratively, especially in seasonal festivities.

Health Benefits of PGS

Research, including studies from the *Journal of Medicinal Food*, shows that pumpkin consumption can assist in managing blood sugar levels due to its unique antioxidant properties. Pumpkins are also rich in beta-carotene, a powerful antioxidant responsible for their orange hue, and a great source of immune-boosting nutrients. Squash



...pumpkin is highly nutritious, and its by-products—including seeds, peels, and pulp residues—contain bioactive compounds with numerous potential applications that remain largely underexplored by the food industry.



is similarly beneficial, particularly for its vitamin C content, which supports immunity. Various edible gourds, categorized as either summer or winter squash, are associated with numerous health benefits: they aid in improving blood circulation, strengthening bones, enhancing eyesight, and reducing inflammation. Gourds have also been studied for their role in combating diabetes and preventing gallstones, making them valuable additions to a health-conscious diet.

Summer squash varieties include zucchini, yellow squash, and pattypan, while winter squash varieties, such as butternut, acorn, and spaghetti squash, are known for their thicker skins and longer storage times. However, while many pumpkin and squash varieties are edible, it's essential to distinguish them from ornamental gourds, which often contain high levels of cucurbitacin, a bitter and potentially toxic compound, and should be used for decorative purposes only.

PGS in the Clinic

According to an August 2024 article in *Foods* titled, "[Pumpkin and Pumpkin By-Products: A Comprehensive](#)

[Overview of Phytochemicals, Extraction, Health Benefits, and Food Applications](#)," pumpkin has recently gained significant attention due to its variety of health benefits. Authors Gavril et al. state that pumpkin is highly nutritious, and its by-products—including seeds, peels, and pulp residues—contain bioactive compounds with numerous potential applications that remain largely underexplored by the food industry. They further explain that pumpkins and their by-products are rich in compounds such as carotenoids, polyphenols, tocopherols, vitamins, minerals, and dietary fibers. These elements exhibit antioxidant, anticancer, anti-inflammatory, antidiabetic, and antimicrobial properties, which may help reduce the risk of chronic diseases.

PGS in Cultural Dishes

People from diverse cultures around the world enjoy pumpkins, gourds, and squash in their cuisine. For example, the Yoruba tribe in southwestern Nigeria is known for *Obe Egusi*, a rich, hearty pumpkin and melon seed soup popular at communal gatherings. In Ghana, a similar pumpkin soup called *Ponkie* is made with ground seeds and vegetables, creating a thick, nourishing meal. In Morocco, pumpkins are often incorporated into traditional dishes like couscous, tagines, and *Harira*, adding depth and richness to these staple meals.

In South Asia, pumpkins and gourds are essential to Indian and Pakistani cuisine, where they're used in dishes like *daal* and *halwa*. Popular varieties include bottle gourd (*lauki*) and bitter melon (*karela*), often incorporated into curries and stews. In the United States, pumpkins find their way into cakes, cookies, pastries, and soups. Personally, I especially enjoy the homemade taste of pumpkin pie.

PGS in Islam

In a narration by Anas ibn Malik, he stated, "I saw the Prophet (ﷺ) being given some soup, and I found out





People from diverse cultures around the world enjoy pumpkins, gourds, and squash in their cuisine.



that it contained pumpkin, so I started collecting them and bringing them to him because I knew he liked them” (Sahih Muslim 2041). This hadith affirms that pumpkins were a part of the meals consumed and encouraged his companions to eat healthy foods.

Making the Most of PGS

Inspired by my recent discoveries, I am determined to bring gourds into my meals for the first time. With all its benefits mentioned above, I would not want to take it for granted the way I took pumpkins for granted for years, and I am very excited to try out new recipes. I encourage


you to do the same; let’s go beyond using these vegetables (or fruits in some ways) as just Thanksgiving decor. Pumpkins, for example, yield seeds that can be roasted, baked, or even grown in your garden. Or, you can get a lot of soulful rewards by placing the seeds in a feeder or tray and sharing them with your neighbors—the blue jay birds, sparrows, wood pigeons, squirrels, and chipmunks.

By embracing pumpkins, gourds, and squash as nutrient-rich foods, we can nourish ourselves while respecting nature’s seasonal gifts. [®]

MARYAM FUNMILAYO is a freelance writer and public health researcher in Irving, Texas. She recently completed her one year of national service as a Public Health AmeriCorps Community Health Worker. With a background in human nutrition, health education, health promotion, and health disparities, she is always fascinated with Quranic and prophetic teachings regarding food, health, nutrition, and wellness.

Harmony with Hormonal Balance

By Asma Jarad



AS MUSLIMS, WE BELIEVE GOD CREATED US IN the most perfect condition, as He says in the Qur'an: "Indeed, We created humans in the best form" (Qur'an 95:4). Just as we are instructed to nourish our souls with prayer and remembrance, maintaining physical health is also part of worship and gratitude to our Creator.

A common misconception that pops in people's minds when they hear the word "hormones" is that they only relate to mood swings or reproductive health. In fact, hormones are important regulators of metabolism, sleep, stress response, and overall well-being for both men and women.

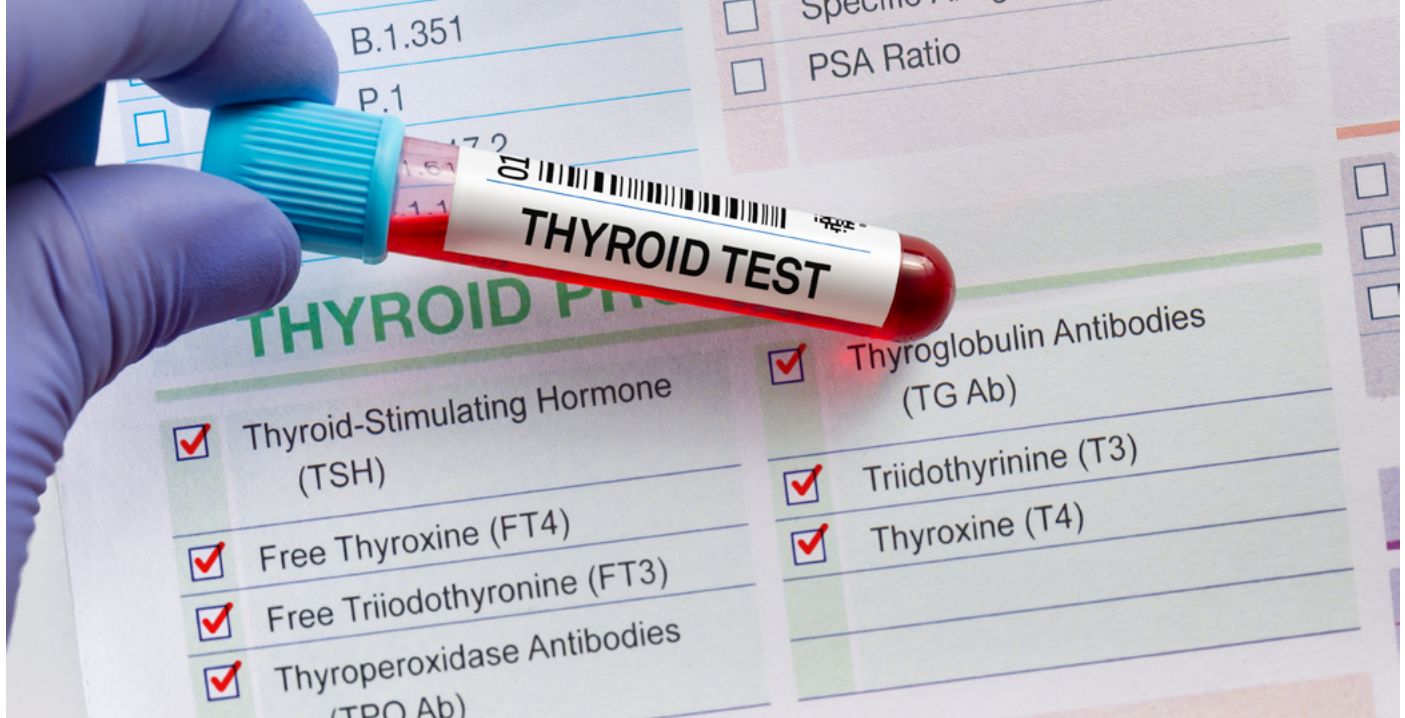
What are Hormones?

Hormones are chemical messengers that regulate vital functions. They are produced by glands in the endocrine system (our body's internal communication network) and control processes such as metabolism, growth, reproduction, and emotional states. The Qur'an describes how God breathed into Adam (عليه السلام) from His soul, giving life to a complex body, including the intricate system of hormones: "So when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My [creation,] fall down in prostration to him" (Qur'an 15:29).

When hormone balance is disrupted, it leads to issues like mood swings, diabetes, or infertility. By maintaining a healthy lifestyle, we help protect the natural balance God designed.

Hormonal health affects men and women differently, as each gender has specific hormones influencing various functions. Testosterone, for example, is the primary hormone for men, produced in the testes. It regulates muscle growth, bone density, and reproductive functions. Balanced testosterone is essential for vitality, strength, and mental clarity. Men also need smaller amounts of estrogen and progesterone to regulate mood and emotional health.

For women, estrogen and progesterone regulate menstrual cycles, fertility, pregnancy, and maintain bone and cardiovascular health. Hormonal changes are more noticeable during menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) showed compassion and understanding of these natural phases, as seen in the Hadith reported by Aisha during Hajj: "We set out with the Prophet (ﷺ) for Hajj and when we reached Sarif, I got my menses. When the Prophet (ﷺ) came to me, I was weeping. He asked, 'Why are you weeping?' I said, 'I wish if I had not performed Hajj this year.' He asked, 'Maybe you got your menses?' I replied, 'Yes.' He then said, 'This is what God has ordained for all the daughters of Adam (عليه السلام). Do what all the pilgrims do except that



you do not perform Tawaf round the Ka'ba till you are clean" (Sahih al-Bukhari 305).

Moreover, the Prophet (ﷺ) spoke of the immense rewards for women enduring the challenges of pregnancy and childbirth, highlighting the sacredness of these experiences. A woman who dies during childbirth is considered a martyr, illustrating the respect and honor afforded to motherhood in Islam (Sunan an-Nasa'i 3163).

Hormonal Functions

Understanding essential hormones helps recognize their impact on health and how to maintain balance:

- **Estrogen** is critical in regulating the menstrual cycle and maintaining bone density. Imbalances can cause conditions like Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). In men, it helps with mood regulation.
- **Progesterone** supports pregnancy and balances estrogen. Maintaining good hygiene, diet, and peace of mind through regular prayer helps balance progesterone.
- **Testosterone** in men regulates muscle mass, libido, and energy. In women, it supports muscle strength and cognitive function. Maintaining balance through healthy living is essential.
- **Thyroid Hormones (T3 and T4)** regulate metabolism and energy. Hypothyroidism causes fatigue and weight gain.
- **Insulin** is produced by the pancreas and regulates blood sugar levels. An imbalance can lead to diabetes, requiring mindful eating.
- **Cortisol**, also known as the "stress hormone," helps respond to stress. Chronic stress elevates cortisol, causing anxiety and weight gain.
- **Melatonin** regulates the sleep-wake cycle. Regular sleep patterns support healthy melatonin production.

Common Hormonal Disorders

- **PCOS** affects women's reproductive health and is characterized by irregular cycles and insulin resistance. A healthy diet, regular physical activity, and stress management through spiritual practices help manage symptoms, improve insulin sensitivity, and support hormonal balance.
- **Hypothyroidism** causes fatigue, weight gain, and depression due to insufficient thyroid hormones.
- **Hyperthyroidism** leads to anxiety and weight loss due to excess thyroid hormones.

What Can I Do?

Hormonal disorders are commonly diagnosed using blood tests, which help measure hormone levels such as TSH for thyroid function, estrogen for reproductive health, and insulin for blood sugar regulation. [According to Clinical Diabetes and Endocrinology](#), "testing for the presence, excess, or deficiency of hormones and the body's ability to produce them when provoked is a key step in the diagnosis" of endocrine disorders. This confirms the importance of medical evaluations in identifying hormonal imbalances.



When hormone balance is disrupted, it leads to issues like mood swings, diabetes, or infertility. By maintaining a healthy lifestyle, we help protect the natural balance God designed.



Balanced Diet and Nutrition

A balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is crucial for hormonal health. A study in [Frontiers in Endocrinology](#) highlights, "Diets rich in fish, seafood, vegetables, and fruit are positively correlated with the quality of ovulation, while processed meats and sugary drinks negatively impact endocrine health." Another study in [Nutrients](#) emphasizes that "the mechanisms for the biological actions of diet and its active natural components have been mainly attributed to their multiple actions affecting various cellular and hormonal pathways."

Physical Activity

Physical activity plays a vital role in regulating hormones. According to [European Food Research and Technology](#), "Regular exercise helps lower cortisol levels, particularly after endurance training, and promotes a balance in insulin sensitivity." This highlights how physical activity supports hormonal balance by managing stress-related hormones like cortisol.

Sleep

Sleep is essential for maintaining hormonal balance, especially for regulating melatonin and cortisol levels. Research from the [Mayo Clinic](#) states, "Consistent sleep patterns help maintain healthy levels of cortisol and melatonin, supporting overall well-being and reducing the risk of metabolic disorders." Sleep deprivation, on the other hand, can lead to elevated cortisol, which is linked to increased stress and weight gain.


Stress Management

Chronic stress disrupts hormonal balance by elevating cortisol levels, which can lead to anxiety, weight gain, and other health issues. A study in [Nutrients](#) mentions that "a well-balanced diet, coupled with stress management techniques like mindfulness and relaxation, helps

reduce the harmful effects of chronic stress on cortisol levels." This underscores the importance of stress reduction through lifestyle choices.

Fasting

Fasting during Ramadan or other periods can help regulate insulin levels and improve metabolic health. A [Frontiers in Endocrinology](#) study notes, "Fasting improves insulin sensitivity and aids in the regulation of blood sugar levels, making it beneficial for metabolic health when practiced carefully." However, those with pre-existing conditions like diabetes should consult healthcare providers before fasting.

In the end, hormonal health is essential to overall well-being, and maintaining balance is part of the trust God gives in caring for our bodies. Through proper diet, physical activity, sleep, and spiritual practices, we support hormonal health and fulfill our responsibility to maintain the best form God created us in. By seeking both spiritual and medical remedies, we achieve better health and well-being. 



ASMA JARAD is a Chicago-based writer and communications strategist. Her diverse body of work spans health, food trends, and the intersection of Islam and American culture.



Nourishing New Moms Through Traditional Foods

By Omolara Funmilayo

A NEW MOM OFTEN FEELS A HEIGHTENED SENSE of responsibility to optimally care for her baby, coupled with “the baby blues” and unending tasks on her to-do list. This is a time when many new parents become vulnerable to many health challenges including depression, and burnout, among others. No wonder many cultures across the globe engage in certain postnatal customs to tend to the new mom while celebrating the arrival of the newborn. These practices around postnatal care are geared towards ensuring the new mom receives adequate care and nourishment so that she can fully recover, become healthier, and better cater to the needs of her newborn.

Since welcoming my newborn in the summer of this year, I felt a significant difference in how I have recovered, compared to my previous pregnancies and deliveries. During my first six weeks postpartum, I felt well taken care of. I received overwhelming support from family and friends who all encouraged me to rest while they took care of the baby. Friends from different cultures visited and showered me with their various traditional postpartum foods. I have enjoyed *Rfissa* and *Embassla* from my Algerian and Moroccan friends. It is almost as if my Nigerian friend, Dr. Abidat Lawal, knew I craved real cultural foods when she showed up the very next day at the hospital where I delivered my baby with hands full of freshly made food to last me a couple of days after delivery. These included *Amala*, *Ewedu Soup*, and some fresh fish stew. She even added *Ogi* and *Moin Moin*, which are known in western Nigeria to promote healing, increase milk supply, and restore the new mother’s health.

The postpartum period is a time for new moms to recover from childbirth, and many cultures across the globe enjoy specific postpartum foods and rituals to help new moms accomplish this. During my conversations with some Muslim women from different cultures, it was found that nursing mothers enjoy specific foods due to customs and traditions passed down from earlier generations.

When my neighbor, Raoushan Ummulwara visited me and my newborn, she told me how *Panjiri* helped her maintain a constant milk supply as a new mom and busy professional. According to her, nursing mothers in India have consumed Panjiri during postpartum for centuries. It has warming and healing properties and supports the new mom on her healing journey. Luckily, I was able to purchase homemade Panjiri from a local neighbor who makes it with wholesome, organic, and traditional ingredients. I consume a few teaspoons daily, and it’s been very helpful for my milk supply.

Panjiri is a traditional South Asian sweet dish made from assorted nuts, seeds, and semolina, lightly toasted in ghee and ground to a coarse and crunchy mix. Other

optional ingredients include sugar, tragacanth gum, coconut, cardamom, and dried dates.

When Eman Mahmood, mother of four became a parent, she enjoyed some of the nourishing cultural foods and drinks popular in her Egyptian culture. According to her, new moms and their guests are treated to a very rich nutritious drink called *Mughat*. Mughat is a popular herb in many countries, such as the Arab countries and Iran. The Mughat drink is made from Mughat powder (ground Mughat roots), ground fenugreek, and aromatic spices. It is added to natural ghee and sesame and roasted until a delicious nutty smell fills the air. “When we smell this delicious drink coming from a house, we know a newborn is there!” Fenugreek is known to increase milk supply for nursing mothers and also helps with uterus contractions after birth. In addition to Mughat, new mothers drink plenty of steeped fenugreek seeds sweetened with natural honey. “My mother and sisters made a giant thermos for me daily starting directly after birth!”

Nezha Mebarkia is from Algeria and a mother of four children living in Tomball, Texas. She recalls the postpartum experience of a new mom involves spending at least a whole week resting and recovering. “Depending on the customs of each region, female relatives and friends usually prepare traditional food that helps promote healing, and recovery, and establish a good breast milk supply. These foods typically include soups and broths containing spices like turmeric, cinnamon, ginger, cumin, anise seeds, a lot of fish, meat, and chicken tagines, as well as snacks like *Sellou*, a mixture of various nuts, seeds, toasted sesame seeds, and wheat, or *Embassla* and *Tommina*, that contain toasted semolina with honey, butter, and dates. My favorite was *Embassla*!”

Sihame Yousfi, originally from Morocco and now living in Spring, Texas, shared, “Every nursing mom in Morocco enjoys *Rfissa*.” When her youngest son was born, her





mother traveled from Morocco to prepare this traditional dish for her. It is a postpartum meal made with shredded *roti*, chicken, fenugreek seeds, turmeric, lentils, and some herbs like parsley and cilantro. The fenugreek seeds in this meal are essential for building milk supply. “When my sisters and sister-in-law delivered, I watched my mom prepare it for them.” According to her, barley soup is also encouraged and prepared for new moms. It includes cubed meats, onion, garlic, green peas, spices turmeric, ginger, pepper, salt, some celery, and any other vegetables of choice. Other foods known to increase milk supply include black seeds with honey, dates, apricots, bananas, and nuts like almonds. “We are told to avoid caffeine in terms of coffee, and sodas.”

It is also interesting to find that many of these cultures share similarities in the ingredients used, such as fenugreek, semolina, and spices like turmeric. These are encouraged for nursing mothers to help stimulate lactation.

The Qur’an underscores the significance of breastfeeding, recommending a period of up to two years: “Mothers may breastfeed their children two complete years for whoever wishes to complete the nursing [period]” (Qur’an 2:233). This guidance not only recognizes the nutritional and emotional benefits of breastfeeding but also the importance of the bond it fosters between mother and child. Islam further encourages Muslims to consume what is permissible and pure (*halal* and *tayyib*) from God’s blessings, while abstaining from all that is forbidden and impure (*haram*). This principle is particularly relevant for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, whose dietary choices directly impact their own well-being and that of their babies. Additionally, this guidance reflects the importance Islam places on child development and maternal health, supporting a foundation of care, compassion, and health consciousness during early childhood.

Among the many foods mentioned in the Quran is the date fruit. Dates hold a lot of significance in Islam. It was a favorite fruit of the Prophet (ﷺ). For this reason, he

encouraged Muslims to break their fasts with dates. Maryam (عليها السلام) the mother of Prophet Isa (عليه السلام) was also commanded by God to eat some dates to ease the pain from labor. Muslims all over the world have always enjoyed this fruit in their diets. [A 2021 article by Thanawang Modepeng et al. published in the Journal of Medicine](#) showed that the consumption of fresh dates is highly beneficial for women during pregnancy. It’s been found to be a popular natural galactagogue (lactation inducer) among breastfeeding Muslim women. This means that date fruit consumption was found to promote and increase breastmilk quantity in breastfeeding mothers. In addition, these fruits are rich in vitamins, and minerals like potassium, folate, and iron which are beneficial for both the mom-to-be and the fetus. They’re also rich in antioxidants that protect the body from cell damage.

Most cultural and religious food recommendations typically provide the breastfeeding mom with the nutrients she needs for a nutritious and balanced diet. The current medical recommendations encourage breastfeeding moms to make healthy food choices and eat a variety of foods. [According to the Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#), the body needs extra calories to make milk. Therefore, a nursing mom should consume an additional 340-400 calories from nutrient-dense foods for more energy and also to fuel milk production. The breastfeeding period is not the time to focus on losing baby weight; instead, the priority should be on nourishing both mom and baby. The weight loss will happen gradually over time.

Safia Hussain, a Registered Dietitian and Lactation Consultant in Houston, Texas, emphasizes the importance of maintaining optimal nutrition postpartum. “Oftentimes, you may get so focused on feeding and caring for your baby that you forget to feed yourself. Keep snacks nearby while you nurse or breastfeed. The best way to maintain your breastmilk supply is to feed your baby when they are hungry or express breastmilk if you miss a feeding session. This may occur 8-12 times in a 24-hour period during the

first 3-4 months and around 8 times a day for babies 4 months and older.” She advises parents to feed their babies based on hunger cues rather than timing feeds strictly three hours apart, as most breastfeeding babies will show hunger cues much earlier. According to Hussain, you can assess whether your baby is getting enough breastmilk by monitoring the number of wet diapers, weight gain, and overall behavior. There is no need to eat anything special to produce breastmilk. If you choose to consume cultural foods that are believed to “increase breastmilk supply,” remember that these foods provide overall nutrition, just like other meals and snacks.

She recommends that breastfeeding moms limit their caffeine intake to 2-3 cups of coffee (8 oz. each) or 2-3 cups of chai brewed for a few minutes, keeping caffeine consumption to a maximum of 300 mg per day. It’s also important to check labels on other caffeinated beverages, such as energy drinks, which can contain high amounts of caffeine. Fish is an excellent source of healthy fats that support brain development in babies but should be limited to 12 oz. per week. Avoid fish high in mercury, including bigeye tuna, king mackerel, orange roughy, shark, swordfish, and tilefish. The CDC advises that abstaining from alcohol is the best choice for breastfeeding mothers, which aligns with the Islamic prohibition of alcohol for Muslims.

Dr. Bukola Shukrah Azeez, a nurse practitioner in Houston, Texas, emphasizes the importance of staying hydrated while breastfeeding. “You will notice more breast milk when mom is adequately hydrated. Warm fluids work better for me. I love my tea in the mornings and throughout the day. Most importantly, lots of water!”

The postpartum period is a time for the new mom to nourish and focus on recovery. She needs to focus on self-care in terms of healthy food choices, staying hydrated, and getting lots of rest for as long as she is breastfeeding. According to Dr. Azeez, the breastfeeding mom also needs to get plenty of rest between feeding and caring for the baby. “It is okay to express milk to have another member of the family feed the baby, especially the father, if he is in the picture, to create some bonding time for dad and the baby.”

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Saffron Road's Journey to Better®



Founding Story: Adnan Durrani, founder and CEO of Saffron Road, has been a pioneering figure in the food industry for 30+ years. His journey began in 1991 when he founded Vermont Pure Springs, which became the second-largest bottled water brand in the Northeast. He was also a principal shareholder in Stonyfield Farms and led Delicious Brands, scaling it to become the fifth largest cookie brand in the U.S. Durrani has been recognized as one of the entrepreneurs who engineered “20 Ideas That Changed The Way The World Does Business” and he is also on the *Islamica* 500 select list of “The 500 Who Make the Islamic Economy.”



Founded in 2010 by Durrani, Saffron Road emerged in response to the demand for pure, clean-label BFY (Better For You) halal-certified food, emphasizing health and wellness through wholesome ingredients and minimal additives. Leveraging his entrepreneurial experience and passion for culinary innovation, Durrani created a brand that offers authentic, globally inspired products tailored to the ethical and dietary needs of halal consumers. Saffron Road's commitment to ethical sourcing, humane animal welfare, and sustainability distinguishes it in the market, appealing to conscious consumers who appreciate nutritious and culturally diverse meals.

Under Durrani's leadership, Saffron Road has achieved significant milestones, including becoming the first nationally distributed halal-certified food brand in the U.S. and the first halal food company to receive B Corporation (B-Corp) certification. This achievement reflects its commitment to *tayyib* standards and signifies that Saffron Road meets the highest verified standards for performance, accountability, and transparency in ethical sourcing, environmental sustainability, and social impact. The certification highlights the brand's dedication to sustainable farming practices and adherence to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) as well as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) standards, which evaluate ethical governance and opportunities for a diverse workforce.

Mission Statement: Saffron Road's Journey to Better® mission is to provide delicious, responsibly sourced, Better For You, halal-certified products while promoting ethical food practices and cultural diversity. The Journey to Better® mission aims to provide products that are better tasting, better for the environment, better for farmers, better for animals, and better for your health.

Brand Vision: The brand envisions a world where everyone can enjoy a wide variety of restaurant quality meals made with culinary excellence that align with their dietary preferences, fostering inclusivity and respect for diverse yet authentic global culinary traditions.

Product Range: Saffron Road offers a wide array of delicious halal-certified products, including premium frozen entrees, protein-packed organic crunchy chickpea snacks, non-GMO verified simmer sauces, and hand-held artisan wraps, all made with high-quality ingredients and traditional recipes from around the globe.

Top Seller and New Frozen Dinners: Saffron Road offers a diverse range of frozen dinners that showcase international flavors, including popular options like Chicken Tikka Masala, Chicken Biryani, and Chicken Enchiladas Chipotle. All dishes are free from artificial ingredients, antibiotic-free, halal-certified by IFANCA®, and certified gluten-free. New additions feature Mexican favorites such as Adobo Chicken and Chicken Enchiladas al Chipotle, along with a modern Asian selection that includes Korean Fire Roasted Chicken, Drunken Noodles with Chicken, Chili Crisp Noodles with Chicken, and Korean Spicy Rice Cakes (Tteokbokki).

Retail & Distribution: The brand is carried in over 25,000 stores nationally in all 50 states, in major grocery chains and specialty stores across the United States, including Whole Foods Market, Kroger, Safeway, Albertsons, Publix, Wegmans, Shoprite and Target, making halal options more accessible to consumers.

In fact, Saffron Road is now the second largest frozen entrée brand in the U.S. and the largest in the category of BFY animal protein entrées nationally. However, their



competition isn't solely other halal brands; instead, they are up against multi-billion-dollar food conglomerates, with a growth rate above the category and surpassing the growth of those consumer-packaged goods (CPG) entrée brands in the market.

On Trend: Saffron Road resonates deeply with the trends of authentic global cuisine, particularly among millennials and modern consumers, reflecting the evolving ethnic demographics in the U.S. As this generation seeks diverse culinary experiences, Saffron Road products showcase a rich tapestry of flavors inspired by various cultures, fostering a greater appreciation for cultural diversity. The brand captures the interest of consumers eager to explore new cuisines while adhering to dietary preferences—halal, gluten-free, antibiotic-free, and non-GMO—without sacrificing taste or quality.

Additionally, Saffron Road's single-serve meals align with the growing GLP-1 trends that prioritize portion control and nutrient-dense foods. As consumers become increasingly health-conscious, these meals offer a convenient solution packed with high-quality ingredients, allowing for satisfying, flavorful dining experiences. Saffron Road's frozen dinners enable consumers to enjoy wholesome meals that fit seamlessly into busy lifestyles, making it easier to manage portion sizes while savoring authentic global flavors.

Sustainability Initiatives / Certifications: Saffron Road is committed to sustainability, sourcing ingredients from suppliers who uphold ethical, sustainable farming practices. All of its products are certified by third parties as either Non-GMO Verified ([by the Project](#)), Halal ([IFANCA](#)), Humanely Raised Livestock (USDA), Never Use Antibiotics (USDA), and Gluten-Free ([GFCO](#)). Additionally, Saffron Road is a mission-based brand and holds the B-Corp. Certification. As Durrani puts it, "At Saffron Road, we sell values for a value."

Philanthropic and Community Engagement: Giving back has been integral to Saffron Road since its inception. As part of its Journey to Better® mission, they strive to positively impact communities through partnerships, spon-

sorships, and donations. As a certified B-Corp, Saffron Road is committed to uplifting underserved communities. They actively support initiatives with organizations such as [Frontline Impact Project](#), [LaunchGood](#), and [City Harvest](#), ensuring access to nutritious food. In celebration of Ramadan, they offer special promotions at retailers and collaborate with influencers on social media to provide engaging recipe content, all while emphasizing the importance of unity through shared meals, as highlighted in their guest blog by Columbia University Imam Dr. Ebad Rahman, "Building Community Over Iftar."

Recent Achievements and Success Stories: Saffron Road's innovative success is rooted in the team's commitment to modern food trends and respect for traditional cooking methods. Last year, [Consumer Reports](#) recognized three of their entrées—Chicken Enchiladas, Sweet & Sour Chicken, and Vegetable Biryani—as top choices for taste and nutritional quality. By drawing inspiration from renowned chef menus and popular international cuisines, Saffron Road's chefs develop products with ethnic authenticity, bringing new items to grocery shelves in just four weeks to six months—much faster than competitors, who may take up to two years.

In 2023, Saffron Road became the first halal food brand to achieve B Corporation (B-Corp) certification, highlighting its dedication to social and environmental responsibility. This certification validates the brand's mission to offer high-quality, halal-certified foods while positively impacting communities and the planet. Joining the B-Corp community further reinforces Saffron Road's commitment to ethical business practices and its purpose-driven approach, solidifying its position as a leader in the halal food industry.

Where & How to Purchase: If you are eager to try any of Saffron Road's many halal-certified products, you can order directly from [saffronroad.com](#) or you can find your nearest retailer using their store locator. 📍





Tikka Masala-Spiced Roasted Turkey


By Saffron Road

Servings: 8-12 | Time: 2 – 2 ½ hours (marinate overnight)

INGREDIENTS

- 1 (12-14 lbs) halal turkey
- 1 7 oz. pouch Saffron Road Tikka Masala Simmer Sauce
- 1 cup plain whole milk Greek yogurt
- 1 onion, peeled and halved
- 3 heads of garlic, peeled and halved
- 1 lemon, halved
- kitchen twine
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 cups chicken stock
- salt and pepper to taste
- Garnishes: orange wedges, fresh bay leaves, fresh parsley

DIRECTIONS

1. Remove the giblets and neck from the turkey. Carefully loosen the skin under the breast and thighs. Place the turkey in an extra-large zip-plastic plastic bag or oven bag. Stir together the simmer sauce and yogurt. Pour mixture over the turkey in the bag between the skin and flesh and on top of the turkey. Seal the bag and place in a large roasting pan. Refrigerate overnight.
2. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Remove the turkey from the bag and place on a rack in a roasting pan. Pour any marinade over the top of the turkey. Place the onion, garlic, and lemons inside the turkey cavity. Tie the legs together with kitchen twine. Bring the wing tips back up and over the turkey.
3. Bake the turkey at 400°F for 30 minutes. Reduce the oven temperature to 350°F and continue baking 1 ½ to 2 hours longer, or until a thermometer inserted in the meaty part of the thigh registers 170°F. (Tent with aluminum foil during the last hour if the turkey begins to brown too much.) Remove the turkey from the roasting pan and let rest 30 minutes before carving.
4. Place the roasting pan with drippings over medium heat. Whisk flour into the drippings until smooth. Slowly whisk in chicken stock and bring mixture to a simmer. Simmer 5 minutes or until gravy is thickened. Season with salt and pepper to taste.
5. Garnish the turkey with desired garnishes and serve with gravy. 





Coconut Curry Butternut Squash Soup

By Ashley Strickland Freeman  /@littleblackskillet

Servings: 12 | Time: 30 minutes – 6 hours


INGREDIENTS

- 2 32 oz. packages cubed butternut squash
- 1 onion chopped
- 2 cloves garlic minced
- 1½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 7 oz. pouches Saffron Road Coconut Curry Korma Sauce
- 1 32 oz. carton vegetable broth
- Toppings: Saffron Road Bombay Spice Crunchy Chickpeas, fresh cilantro, plain yogurt

DIRECTIONS

1. Combine butternut squash, onion, garlic, salt, and pepper in a 6-quart Instant Pot. Whisk together Korma Sauce and broth. Pour over the butternut squash mixture.
2. Program the cooker to the Manual setting at High Pressure. Set the timer for 15 minutes. Use the Quick Release method after the soup is done. Use an immersion blender to puree the soup. Or puree in batches in a blender.
3. Divide the soup between serving bowls. Top with Crunchy Chickpeas, cilantro, and yogurt. Freeze any leftovers for up to 3 months.

To Make in a Slow Cooker:

Follow the instructions in Step 1, placing ingredients in a 6-quart slow cooker. Cover and cook on Low setting for 6 hours or until squash is tender. Follow the instructions in Step 3. 





Spicy Honey-Glazed Jalapeño Cornbread

By Salman Chaudry

Servings: 10 | Time: 40 minutes

INGREDIENTS


- 1 cup (140g) yellow cornmeal
- 1 cup (120g) all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 2 large eggs, at room temperature
- ¼ cup melted butter, plus extra for greasing
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 2 fresh jalapeños, seeded and finely chopped
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- ½ cup corn kernels
- 2 tablespoons honey

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat your oven to 400°F (200°C).
2. Grease a 9-inch cast-iron skillet or an 8x8-inch square baking dish or muffin tin with butter.
3. In a large mixing bowl, combine all the dry ingredients. Whisk together the cornmeal, flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt.
4. In a separate bowl, mix all the wet ingredients. Combine buttermilk, eggs, melted butter, and vegetable oil. Whisk until well blended.
5. Pour the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients. Gently stir until just combined; avoid overmixing.
6. Fold in the chopped jalapeños, shredded cheddar cheese, and corn kernels until evenly mixed.
7. Pour the batter into the greased baking dish, muffin tin, or cast-iron skillet.
8. Bake for 20-25 minutes, or until the top is golden and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.
9. While the cornbread is baking, warm the honey in a small saucepan or microwave.
10. Once the cornbread is out of the oven, brush the top with the warm honey.
11. Let the cornbread cool for 5-10 minutes in the pan.
12. Slice and serve warm, with a pat of butter or extra honey if desired.

Notes:

Measuring the cornmeal and flour on a scale will yield better results.

Adjust the number of jalapeños to your spice preference, keeping some seeds for an extra kick if desired. 



Pumpkin Pie Baklava

By Salman Chaudry

Servings: 24 | Time: 1 hour 30 minutes

INGREDIENTS

- 1 16 oz. package phyllo dough sheets
- 1 cup melted butter
- 1½ cups chopped nuts (a mix of walnuts, pecans, and pistachios)
- 1 cup pumpkin puree
- ½ cup light brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
- ½ cup mascarpone

Spiced Simple Syrup:

- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup water
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 4 whole cloves
- 1 star anise
- zest of 1 orange
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

DIRECTIONS

1. In a bowl, mix the pumpkin puree with sugar, pumpkin pie spices (cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, and cloves), and mascarpone until smooth.
2. Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C).
3. Brush a 9" x 13" baking dish with melted butter.
4. Place a sheet of phyllo dough in the baking dish and brush it with melted butter. Repeat this step, layering and buttering 5-6 sheets of phyllo dough.
5. Spread a thin, even layer of the pumpkin filling over the buttered phyllo sheets.
6. Sprinkle a layer of the chopped nuts on top of the pumpkin filling.
7. Place another phyllo sheet on top of the pumpkin filling and nuts, brush with melted butter, and repeat the process of layering and buttering 5-6 sheets of phyllo dough.
8. Add another layer of pumpkin filling and nuts.
9. For the final layers, use 5-6 sheets of phyllo dough, each brushed with melted butter.
10. Before baking, cut the layered baklava into diamond or square shapes to make it easier to serve after baking.
11. Bake for 45 to 60 minutes, or until the baklava is golden brown and crispy.
12. While the baklava is baking, combine sugar, water, cinnamon sticks, whole cloves, star anise, and orange zest in a saucepan.
13. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for about 10 minutes, until it has a syrupy consistency.
14. Remove from heat, strain, and then stir in the vanilla extract.
15. Let the syrup cool slightly.
16. As soon as the baklava is out of the oven, pour the warm syrup evenly over the hot baklava. Ensure the syrup penetrates through all the layers.
17. Allow the baklava to cool completely before serving.

Notes:

Add additional layers of puree and nuts if you prefer.

Optional: garnish the top of the baklava with chopped pistachios. ©



Pumpkin Spice Apple Cider

By Zainab Razavi
 / @Bismillahbros


Servings: 8-10

Time: 15 minutes, plus 1-2 hours refrigeration

INGREDIENTS

- ½ gallon apple cider
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon powder
- ¼ teaspoon ginger powder
- ⅛ teaspoon nutmeg
- dash of ground cloves
- 2 12 oz. cans of ginger ale
- 1 Honeycrisp apple sliced
- 1 Navel orange sliced
- 1 medium pomegranate
- 3 star anise
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 5-6 medium strawberries sliced
- sugar (optional)


DIRECTIONS

1. Slice the apple, orange, and strawberries. Gently extract the seeds from the pomegranate.
2. Fill a large jug with the apple cider, star anise, and cinnamon sticks. Stir and then add the fruits. Stir again and keep in the refrigerator until chilled.
3. When ready to serve, add the ginger ale and pour over a glass of ice.
4. Optional: garnish drinks with a few pieces of sliced fruit and whole spices. 

LOW-IMPACT FOR A LIFETIME

By Ali Othman, NSCA-CPT®





WHEN THINKING OF EXERCISE, IT IS EASY TO picture high-intensity, high-impact workouts such as running, weightlifting, jumping rope, and plyometrics. However, exercise does not have to be high-impact to be highly effective. Low-impact exercise is a gentle and sustainable alternative that people of all fitness levels, and all ages can utilize to improve their health without excessively straining the joints, muscles, and body. Low-impact exercise offers numerous benefits such as muscular, cardiovascular, and mental well-being making it the ideal option for beginners, those recovering from injury, seniors, and all others who want to benefit from exercise with minimal risk of injury.

Low-impact exercise is physical activity that involves minimal stress on the body, particularly the joints and bones. High-impact exercises like those mentioned above generally involve jumping, pounding, or movements with heavy resistance, while low-impact exercises employ smooth and fluid movements with a high degree of control. Some examples of low-impact exercises include walking, swimming, yoga, cycling, and the elliptical machine.

A common misconception is that low-impact movements must also be low-intensity, but that is not always the case. You can engage in low-impact exercise at a high intensity, and the same is true for high-impact exercises at low intensity. Impact refers to the force exerted on the body while intensity refers to the amount of effort required during exercise. Performing low-impact exercise at a high intensity will increase your heart rate and can provide an intense workout with minimal risk of injury. This fact makes low-impact exercise accessible to nearly everyone, allowing all to enjoy its benefits.

The primary attraction to low-impact exercise is the minimal risk of joint, bone, and soft-tissue injury. These activities do not involve repeated jumping, pounding, or movement with heavy weight, thus are gentler on the body and much less likely to cause pain or injury. This benefit is particularly important to those with arthritis,



Low-impact exercise is physical activity that involves minimal stress on the body, particularly the joints and bones.



prior injuries, or chronic joint pain. It allows individuals suffering from these ailments to be active without exacerbating their conditions and causing further damage.

Low-impact exercises are great for improving cardiovascular health. They typically increase the heart rate slowly and allow people to exercise for extended periods, keeping them in their target heart rate range longer. This effective exercise methodology is perfect for those with a history of heart problems, breathing difficulties, and high blood pressure because it invokes safe and controlled changes in heart rate rather than quick and intense changes.

Consistent, extended activity burns calories making it an excellent weight management tool. Low-impact activities typically burn fewer calories than higher-impact exercises, but they are usually more sustainable both during the activity and in the long run. With reduced muscle and joint soreness, it is easier to stay consistent over time, in many cases leading to better results than higher-impact exercise.

When discussing the benefits of exercise it's important to understand that they extend beyond the physical. Regardless of the impact or intensity, exercise stimulates the brain to release endorphins, or chemicals that provide relief from stress and anxiety, increase focus, and elevate your mood. These endorphins are similarly released when laughing, eating delicious foods, and even when falling in love. Imagine having a healthy way to steadily release these chemicals to control your own well-being. A final note on endorphins is that they are the body's natural painkiller. So those who suffer from chronic pain should turn to exercise as a form of pain management.

The number one low-impact exercise and one that should be part of every able-bodied individual's routine is walking.



The benefits of low-impact exercise are clear for beginners, those recovering from injury, and people suffering from chronic conditions, but the inclusivity of low-impact exercise does not stop there. It is a sustainable way for everyone to exercise for a lifetime. Exercise can be a daunting task, but low-impact exercise may appear less intimidating, less painful and stressful, and typically causes less next-day soreness. If the negative side effects of exercise deter you from starting, then low-impact exercise is a more sustainable way to enjoy the long-term benefits.

The number one low-impact exercise and one that should be part of every able-bodied individual's routine is walking. Brisk walking, or walking with a purpose, requires no equipment and can be done anywhere that it is safe. Start at a comfortable pace, walk for thirty to sixty minutes at a time, and steadily increase your distance and speed as the walk becomes easier. The ability to take a walk outside, in nature, is a blessing. Take advantage of this blessing and use it to your advantage.



Water-based activities such as swimming and water aerobics are among the lowest-impact exercise options. Water's buoyancy serves to reduce joint stress while providing resistance to movement. Its nature's perfect apparatus for cardiovascular and resistance-training, and an extremely low-impact full-body workout, making it a prime choice for those who are pregnant, elderly, or overweight.

Yoga is a form of exercise that places focus on movement, breathing, balance, and core strength. It emphasizes a controlled and deliberate movement pattern, making breath the primary source of energy to connect the mind and body. Yoga promotes mindfulness, induces relaxation, and can improve both physical and mental well-being. It's often incorrectly overlooked as a form of low-impact yet intense exercise and can be done as its own routine or incorporated into other forms of exercise.

The elliptical machine mimics the motion of running and provides similar benefits without the high impact on joints. The motions are smooth and continuous, strengthening the muscles and cardiovascular system in tandem.



Yoga promotes mindfulness, induces relaxation, and can improve both physical and mental well-being.



Most of the work is done by the legs, with arms and core supplementing the movements. If you've never been on an elliptical machine, it's time to saddle up.

Incorporating low-impact exercises into your routine is simple. Start at any pace you feel comfortable, and gradually increase intensity and duration. Create a balance between cardiovascular, resistance, and flexibility training by incorporating different types of low-impact exercises and creating the most well-rounded fitness routine.

Whether you are a beginner, recovering from injury, or looking for a long-term sustainable way to stay fit, low-impact exercise is the answer to providing all the benefits of exercise with a reduced risk of injury. As with any exercise, consult your physician before beginning a low-impact exercise routine. This will ensure you can continue to improve your health and wellness for a lifetime.®

ALI OTHMAN is an NSCA-certified personal trainer with over fifteen years of experience in the health and wellness industry. He is passionate about giving people the tools to live a healthier and better-informed tomorrow.



The Role of Public Policy in Expanding Halal Food Access in Public Institutions

By Muhammad Yahya



Introduction

Public institutions in the U.S. serve a diverse population that increasingly demands services catering to various cultural and religious needs. Among these needs is access to halal-certified meals, a requirement for Muslim communities. Public policy, when properly crafted and implemented, can address these dietary needs to promote equity and inclusivity within public services. However, challenges remain in the consistent and widespread implementation of halal food programs in public institutions. As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, according to the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, the Muslim population living in the US is projected to become the nation's second-largest religious group by 2040 with Muslims expected to double in number by 2050, the demand for culturally appropriate services, including access to halal food in public institutions, is increasing. However, many Muslim students, patients, and inmates have limited or no access to halal-certified meals, forcing them to compromise their dietary needs or be excluded from meal programs. To rectify this situation, public policy must evolve, ensuring that halal food options are widely available in public institutions. The importance of inclusive food policies is crucial. Identifying gaps and proposing frameworks to enhance access to halal meals in public institutions is essential for advancing the mission of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The Need for Inclusive Food Policies

The increasing diversity of the U.S. population has created a greater demand for public institutions to provide culturally appropriate services. Halal food, which adheres to specific Islamic dietary laws, is not just a religious requirement but also a matter of equity and inclusion for Muslim communities. Access to halal meals in public institutions is critical, especially in environments such as public schools, hospitals, and prisons, where individuals may have limited control over their meal options.

One of the most prominent federal meal programs in the U.S. is the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which serves over 29 million students daily (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). Despite its importance, the NSLP and similar federally funded meal programs often fail to provide halal-certified meals, thereby excluding many Muslim students from accessing meals that align with their dietary restrictions. Inclusive food policies that incorporate halal options would ensure that Muslim students are not left out of these essential programs.

Existing Policy Gaps

Despite some progress, there is still no consistent federal policy mandating halal meal options in public institutions. This lack of policy consistency creates an uneven playing



Access to halal meals in public institutions is critical, especially in environments such as public schools, hospitals, and prisons, where individuals may have limited control over their meal options.



field, with some communities having access to halal meals while others do not. Cost is a significant barrier to expanding halal food access, as institutions often cite budgetary constraints. Public policy can address this issue by providing subsidies or financial incentives for institutions that offer culturally appropriate food options. According to the Illinois Muslim Report, 39% of Muslim respondents with school-age children and 32% of students enrolled in college said they didn't have access to halal food at their school, pointing to a need for administrators at grade schools and institutions of higher learning to address the religious dietary needs of their Muslim students.

A primary challenge to expanding halal food programs is cost. Institutions may view the sourcing, certification, and preparation of halal meals as financially prohibitive.

To address these concerns, public policy could provide subsidies or financial incentives to institutions that offer culturally appropriate food options. Furthermore, regulatory frameworks can be updated to require halal meals in any institution receiving public funding, thereby ensuring that Muslim individuals have equal access to meal programs across all public institutions.

Policy Solutions and Advocacy

Addressing the gaps in halal food access requires concerted advocacy efforts and policy development. Organizations such as the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America (IFANCA) have taken a leading role in advocating for the inclusion of halal food options in public institutions. By collaborating with policymakers, school administrators, and community leaders, IFANCA and other advocacy groups are working to support equitable food access.

One potential policy solution is to model halal food programs after existing accommodations for other dietary restrictions. For instance, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) already accommodates students with allergies and religious restrictions through its school meal programs. Integrating halal certification into this existing framework could simplify the process for public institutions to source and offer halal meals.

Public-private partnerships also provide opportunities for expanding halal food access. Collaboration between public institutions, halal food suppliers, and certifying organizations can help overcome financial and logistical challenges. These partnerships could ensure that halal

Organizations such as the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America (IFANCA) have taken a leading role in advocating for the inclusion of halal food options in public institutions.



food is not only widely available but also certified according to Islamic dietary laws and compliant with public health and safety standards.

Conclusion

Public policy plays an essential role in ensuring that public institutions meet the diverse needs of their populations. Expanding access to halal food in public institutions is not only a matter of religious accommodation but also a step toward ensuring equity and inclusion for Muslim individuals. As the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse, the demand for halal food in public institutions will continue to rise.

Addressing the challenges in implementing halal food programs requires a comprehensive approach involving policy advocacy, stakeholder engagement, and collaboration with organizations like IFANCA. Public policies that mandate halal food options in schools, hospitals, and other public institutions will ensure that Muslim individuals are not excluded from essential services due to

their dietary needs. Whether through federal mandates, state initiatives, or local pilot programs, public policy must evolve to reflect the changing demographics and needs of the communities it serves.®

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ZCELL: Reviving Our Tradition of Ethical Living & Learning

By Shaykh Hamza Yusuf



ISLAM, AS A LIVING TRADITION, CALLS ON ITS practitioners to commit to a life of virtue and excellence with clear guidance from the Qur'an and the perfect example of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). One may argue that the *shariah*, or corpus of Islamic law, is a manual on ethical living that teaches best practices in all realms of human concern, such as personal worship, familial relations, and commerce. As a concept, ethical living and learning centers around justice, where the end goal remains the capacity and willingness to judiciously transact one's life with God and His creation.

As seen through an Islamic worldview, healthy, functioning communities ought to be based on their capacity to do the mundane with sacred sensibilities, which fuel ethical action in substance. The human being was made for, and tasked with, the responsibility of caretaking (stewarding) and cultivation (betterment) of the creation—not its self-indulgent consumption and destruc-

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tion born from casual indifference or disinterest. Allah Most High tells us in the Qur'an that, "He is the One Who has placed you as successors on earth and elevated some of you in rank over others, so He may test you with what He has given you" (Qur'an 6:165). Thus, our engagement with consumption should be *purposeful* and *measured* within the context of what we have been charged to do by our Creator. As the Qur'an warns us, "Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils, and ever has Satan been to his Lord ungrateful" (Qur'an 7:27).

Today, we witness an inversion of this reality where in the United States alone nearly 38% of food is wasted annually, equivalent to approximately 145 billion meals. Contrast this to the massive food insecurity gripping many countries around the world, most notably Sudan, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and now Palestine. The Malaysian scholar and academic Dr. 'Adi Setia provides commentary to address this crisis:

"...a worldly thing of facility and utility is sought only insofar and to the extent it serves and facilitates some deeper, trans-worldly purpose, and such a purpose for the believer is well-defined in the light of both divine revelation and prophetic practice. Such a positively purposive seeking is prudent and judicious since it preempts excess, waste, and injustice (to oneself or others). We all know that too much of a good thing, even if halal or permissible, is bad and hence, the excessive can be oppressive when the original purpose for which a thing is sought is lost, overlooked, or exceeded. This is the paradox of the fact that when we acquire more and more of something we find less and less meaningful use of it. Because the aim, objective, purpose, and end of any economic activity is well-defined in the light of the guidance of both sound reason and true revelation, anything that exceeds, belies or defeats that purpose will be considered extravagant, wasteful, and meaningless, or even sinful, and thereby, ethically, morally and formally and legally proscribed."



In our efforts to revive the divine mandates of excellence in stewardship and cultivation, Zaytuna College, in partnership with the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of North America (IFANCA), launched the Zaytuna College Center for Ethical Living and Learning (ZCELL) in 2017. IFANCA, with its commitment to halal and tayyib practices, has played an indispensable role in helping to realize a vision that we hope serves as a replicable model for Muslim communities and other faith and ethically-based communities. Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, President of Zaytuna College, says, “The main idea behind ZCELL is for us, as a community, to get back to more natural ways of producing food, especially fresh food. The idea is to reconnect people to food growth and production, so they actually witness the miracle of food.”

This partnership supports the permaculture garden that is now in its fifth year of development with an incredible impact on the College community. Students now have regular opportunities to work in the garden, which allows them to not only understand the permaculture design principles, but more importantly, put into practice what they learn in the classroom: ethics and virtue in action. The upper campus project site has over twenty-five fruit trees and shrubs of a broad diversity including olives, figs, peaches, plums, avocados, citrus, grapes, passionfruit, mulberries, persimmons, pomegranates, loquats, blueberries, currants, and gooseberries among others. The

garden also has over twenty hexagonal raised beds where a variety of vegetables grow. Plans are underway to expand the garden to almost three acres over the next two years, God-willing. The goal is to supply the upper campus kitchen with produce to be prepared into meals for students and staff, and the surplus production serves as gifts to friends and neighbors of the College by way of fresh produce and value-added products.

Zaytuna students spend most of their day in classrooms with rigorous study of both the Western and Muslim canons. During their break periods, they have designated time to spend in the garden and apply what they’re learning in a very direct, hands-on approach. For many, it’s one of the highlights of their day. The acts of planting, nurturing, and harvesting the earth bring a sense of peace and purpose that cannot be found in textbooks alone. “We want to see our students working with their hands, cultivating the land, and producing the food they eat, appreciating this divine sustenance even more. I’m hoping to see most of what the students eat to come directly from the campus,” explains Shaykh Hamza.

This past spring semester, we’ve re-established the presence of honeybees adjacent to the garden. Several swarms of bees—a few of which we’ve been able to capture—have periodically emerged, indicating that they are producing broods of new bees to start additional col-



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onies. A honey harvest has just now begun, producing exquisitely tasting honey that we hope will continue in copious amounts.

IFANCA's contributions have not only been instrumental in the expansion of the garden, but it also supports the biannual Permaculture Design Certificate course (PDC), which allows for the greater community to participate in the project. With almost one hundred graduates from the PDC course, Zaytuna is now viewed as a leader in teaching the concepts of ethical living and learning in the Muslim community.

The recent purchase of a 17-acre ranch located just ten minutes from the upper campus, also supported by IFANCA, provides us the opportunity to expand the permaculture garden project by integrating the husbanding of livestock, which will augment our productive capabilities and help to rapidly recover the ecological good health of the site. This is an aspect of the prophetic example that warrants careful attention and emphasis. The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has indicated that the cultivation and beautification of the earth is a praiseworthy and ethical act:

*"Whoever revives dead land, for him is [to be found] reward in it; and whatever any creature seeking food eats of it shall be reckoned as charity from him."*²

*"There is no Muslim who plants a tree or sows a field, and a human, bird, or animal eats from it, but it shall be reckoned as charity from him."*³

*"The cultivator of land is trading with his Lord."*⁴

The ranch site is also slated to house facilities for a sacred sports program to further the experiential learning opportunities at Zaytuna College.

The American poet and writer, environmental activist, cultural critic, and farmer Wendell Berry once wrote: *"The preserver of abundance is excellence."*⁵ This is an understanding entirely consistent with an Islamic worldview. It is through the demonstration of our ability to exist in the world as ethical stewards of God's great blessings that

"We want to see our students working with their hands, cultivating the land, and producing the food they eat, appreciating this divine sustenance even more. I'm hoping to see most of what the students eat to come directly from the campus," explains Shaykh Hamza.



we may witness the reward of abundance. This is the business, stock, and trade of ZCELL. We invite you to visit our campus and experience the Zaytuna garden, where we strive to revive the spirit of ethical living and learning.

For more information, please visit:

www.zaytuna.edu/zcell 

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(Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America)



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