***Library Report***

*By: Jangoo Mistry*

## FIRES 26th Annual Speaker Series

The Flavors of Faith, Food, & Community

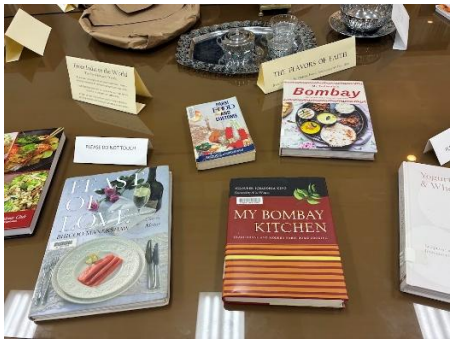
Over the last quarter-century, the annual two-day event hosted by the ZAH Library Committee, home of FIRES, has brought global experts together to share their captivating talks on our religion, history, and culture. For this year's event, held on the weekend of October 9 and 10, we broke tradition and chose a more offbeat theme of universal appeal – ***FOOD***!

The three notable speakers were:

- Chef Zal Taleyarkhan, Corporate R&D Chef at Charlie Baggs Culinary Innovations
- Chef Jehangir Mehta, world-famous chef who starred prominently in Iron Chef competitions on TV, and
- Dr. Mariano Errichiello, Executive Director of the Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies at SOAS University of London

***Friday, October 9***






**COOK BOOKS IN ZAH LIBRARY**

The evening began with a display of more than 20 cookbooks from the Library collection, arranged on a table. As the people gatheredround, Mahtab Dastur, with her customary thoughtful and informative approach, explored the history of each publication, starting with the iconic 1867 edition of *Vividh Vani* and ending in Meherwan Irani's recently released volume, *No. 1 Best Indian Cookbook in the World.* Beyond a simple compilation of recipes, these volumes serve as a repository of "time capsules" capturing various periods of our fascinating culinary history.

**ABAN RUSTOMJI RECOGNIZING LOCAL CHEFS**



Delna Minwalla



Naushad Mehta



Natasha Thunthi



We moved on to the Purvez Rustomji Room to hear Aban Rustomji recognize eight local Parsi chefs who have worked hard to satisfy our Parsi food cravings at home, and at parties and public events. Aban's PowerPoint presentation honored Shireen "Cillie" Mehta, Naushad Mehta, Gulmohar Bharucha, Natasha Thunthi, Persis Buchia, Minoo Baria, Delna Minwalla, and Kairasp Lashkari. All the chefs present were invited to say a few words, much to the delight of

the crowd, who were beginning to get ready for a sumptuous meal of the traditional Parsi dinner of Chicken Pulao Dal (by Natasha) and Cutlets (by Gulmohar).

ZAH Chairman



Aderbad Tamboli

FEZANA President



Kayomarz Sidhwa

Parsi Palao, Masala Daar and Raita by Natasha Thunthi
Cutlets by Gulmohar Bharucha



***Saturday, October 10***

The packed Saturday program began at 10:30 am and started with Meheryar Rivetna introducing the first speaker of the day, Zal Taleyarkhan.

**Zal Taleyarkhan**



**Zal Taleyarkhan**

When we are fawning over a plate of Dhansak, have we ever thought about how the dish evolved through the centuries from what our forefathers ate? Well, Talyerkhan provided the links for us.

Zal is a culinologist, a professional who applies scientific knowledge to culinary arts, specifically in the development, creation, and improvement of food products. Taking the road less traveled, Zal gave up on plans to join the Merchant Navy, and instead, went into food sciences and culinary arts. After working with some recognized chefs in Chicago. Zal concentrated on developing new food-based technologies. Besides his passion for the culinary arts, Zal is an enthusiast of Zoroastrian history and culture, and is currently President of the Society of Scholars of Zoroastrianism. His talk blended in a unique way, like only he can, both the culinary and religious history of Zoroastrian food and culture. Zal has spent some time researching the evolution of Persian and Parsi cuisine, tracing its journey from the ancient Achaemenid Empire through the Sasanian period, into India, and across the global diaspora. His presentations combined historical research, food science, and storytelling to explore how cuisine preserves identity across generations.

His topic: “From Persepolis to Patra ni Machhi: 2,500 Years of Zoroastrian Cuisine, Ritual, and Migration” held the audience spellbound and fascinated.

Summary:
Zoroastrian cuisine is not one ancient menu kept perfectly unchanged. Its flavors can be traced back over centuries. It is a living breathing food chain – carried, translated, and rebuilt without losing its core purpose, that of feeding a community, and carrying a memory. Starting the culinary history from the Achaemenid Empire, the same basic questions of food had to be addressed: how much food do we have, who gets it, and how do we get it to them? This management of food required several disciplines to execute properly. From that ancient period, only the ingredients used have survived, not the recipes for how food was made. Achaemenid food is not an ancient Zoroastrian menu. It is part of the ancient Iranian world handed down through the generations.

Moving into the Sasanian period, food became more balanced, sophisticated and refined in taste. Later, Arabic and Persian food modified and adapted the culinary memory from the Sasanians, further influencing ingredients and preparation. Culinary memory survives the way many family recipes survive. Someone translated it, someone changed it, and several people claimed originality. Continuity into modern Iranian food relies on pickles and sweets, nuts and dairy, herbs, fruits and vegetables, and slow cooking. Practices rooted in Yazd and Kerman continued in Tehran, but the ingredients changed, preparations changed, eventually providing a foodway into Zoroastrian cuisine. Parsi cuisine developed in the coastal cities of Sanjan, Bharuch, Surat, Navsari, and eventually, Bombay. The genius of Parsi cuisine is not in purity; it is strength through adaptation.

Gahanbar's consecrated food is prepared and shared equally by the community. It serves several functions: seasonal observance, religious service, hospitality, charity, fellowship, and strengthening of the community's infrastructure.

Today's Haft-Sin table arrangement during Nowruz is relatively recent – ancient in meaning but modern in form. Older spring-table elements included sabzeh, eggs, water, bread, dried fruit, and candles.

Zal concluded his talk by telling the audience that he had brought with him three different samples of Malido. The first, coarser, darker, and grainier, was based on an old recipe of the Goti Agiary in Surat, a recipe passed down in his family since the ***1700s***. The second, orange in color and sweeter, was the recipe of the Dadyseth Agiary in Bombay, and the third is the way malido is often made today – with milk and eggs, smoother, more velvety, richer. Everyone was urged to try out the different samples and vote on the one they liked best. If you were not there, you will never know the result of the voting!

**Jehangir Mehta**



Born and raised in Mumbai and a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, he cut his teeth in New York's most legendary kitchens before launching trailblazing restaurants of his own. Many across the country watched him electrify national television as a finalist on Food Network's *The Next Iron Chef*, and a competitor on *Iron Chef America*, where his daring flavor combinations turned heads nationwide.

Drawing rich inspiration from his Zoroastrian roots, Jehangir views the culinary arts as a meaningful bridge uniting our heritage, fellowship, and well-being. His passion spotlights thoughtful innovation, zero-waste principles, and conscious living in the kitchen. Mehta shared stories and memories of his family, their love for food, and coming together through food.

He said, *"Don't be afraid of taking chances. Don't feel compelled to take the beaten-down path. Food is about change. Food is about making that recipe that you feel works for you. Take your recipe books and use them as a guide; then throw them away. Food should bring you happiness. If it doesn't make you happy, it's not food."*

Lots of adaptations of Persian foods were made when we came over to India and lived in Gujerat. Then the British gave us the option to use eggs – ***in*** our food and ***on*** our food. And now, aspects of American food are coming in (he joked about eggs on brisket). But we have to make sure that food is creating enjoyment and not tension. Don't turn Thanksgiving Day, for example, that is supposed to be an enjoyable family reunion, into tension or a competition to prove your culinary ability.

Cookbook authors put their own life experiences into the recipes, with memories underlying their creation. Food consumption should not just nourish your body; it should also nourish your brain.

Mehta recalled the time when he was ten, and his grandmother passed away. He hated dodhi, but on that day he cherished the dodhi he ate because it brought him happy memories of his grandmother. Happiness from food comes from something inside you that you enjoy. It could simply be the color of the food you are eating, or listening to your favorite music when eating, which brings you happiness and brings meaning to your food. How do you view food? Do you guard your recipes so well that even at the risk of death you would not divulge them? Mehta's unconventional to food was received with interest and prodded many questions.

During Q&A:

Is it important not to eat meat on certain days as our religion recommends?

> *If observing that rule makes you happy or gives you a feeling of satisfaction, then go ahead and do it. Otherwise, what's the point?*

How do we get the younger generation interested in our culture of food? Migration and a very different culture of other foods make it difficult.

> *Try to manipulate the recipes to introduce more spices, or use unusual ingredients that tickle their taste buds and make them more receptive to varying tastes. If all this doesn't work for you, just let it go.*

What is the most basic ingredient of Parsi cooking?

> *Eggs!*

How does one control stressful eating?

> *If you don't "possess" food but food "possesses" you, then you have a problem. Try delayed gratification. Delay your urge for 2 minutes, then the next time by 4 minutes, etc. Increase your sense of self-worth. Tell yourself, "That cookie is not important; I am more important".*

Tell us something about your career path and how you happened to open restaurants, and write a book.

> *None of that was preplanned. It just happened. The book deal came out of a meeting with a publisher who liked a chocolate box he had designed and invited me for a meeting. The idea of opening a restaurant came about just from a "For Sale" sign I saw walking in Manhattan. Moral: sometimes things just fall into your lap. You cannot plan every aspect of your life in advance.*

**Dr. Mariano Errichiello**
**Executive Director SOAS**
**University of London**



The third and last speaker was Mariano Errichiello, Shapoorji Pallonji Senior Lecturer in Zoroastrianism and Executive Director of the Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies at SOAS University of London.

SOAS University of London is a specialist public research university focused on the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Founded in 1916. SOAS brings together scholars, students, and practitioners from around the world to address global challenges through research, teaching and public engagement. Mariano's work started with the Parsis of India, documenting different religious thoughts and streams. He has researched competition and rituals among these groups in British India and beyond. He currently works with the Zoroastrian diaspora across the USA, UK, and other countries.

His talk was titled: *"Zoroastrian Studies Today: From Research to Community"*. Mariano, an Italian, learned Gujerati while in India and got interested in Zoroastrian history and culture. His soon-to-be-published book, *"The Teachings of the Masters - Hearts"* is an interdisciplinary perspective linking religion, language, South Asia and the Persian wall. Mariano believes that our interest in culture and history is aimd primarily at Avesta, Pahelvi, Persian history, etc. We are missing out on a lot of the recent history of our forefathers in Navsari, Surat, Bombay, etc. where we had a strong connection with the Gujeratis and interacted with them on a daily basis.

He also shared his encounter with the last Parsis in Zanzibar and Mombasa. He outlined other ongoing Zoroastrian studies initiatives at SOAS, emphasizing that this proud culture and heritage are in safe hands.

Mariano highlighted how community partners, Zarathusti artists-in-residence, and musicians, have collaborated on events, exhibitions and projects to introduce our culture and heritage to a wider audience in London. One such example that truly captivated the audience was a clip from

Manashni, Gavashni, Kunashni: A Musical Journey into Zoroastrian Identity of an original operatic composition performed at Kings Place. Mariano also talked about the artist Hormazd Narielwalla who is researching the role that the Hormuz Strait played in the migration of Iranians and its importance in trade routes. His exhibits are to be shown early next year in Naples and London.

Through the generosity of a Parsi philanthropist in London, SOAS has established an initiative to train Zoroastrian priests in leadership, priests who were selected from all over the world.

**Meheryar Rivetna**



After a much-needed lunch, the ZAH library committee member, Meheryar Rivetna, led an interactive quiz, where the attendees answered questions on Zarathusti history, theology, and culture.

As a welcome change from passive listening, members were excited to participate actively and take a crack at how well they know various aspects of being a Zoroastrian. The quiz sparked lively engagement and much humorous comments. After about 20 minutes, Meheryar read out each question and gave short explanations of the correct answers. There was much excitement as the answers were read, and this provided an enjoyable and interesting conclusion to the event. Kaemarz Dotiwalla, Sanober Tamboli, Nazneen Khumbatta were the winners and took home batasas and Rivetna's autographed book.

**Prize Winners Kaemerz Dotiwalla and Sanober Tamboli**





For centuries and across continents, the act of sharing a meal has provided a powerful bond, weaving together the diverse threads of a common cultural heritage. This unusual theme of FOOD for a FIRES/Library event provided that powerful bond in our community as it brought together famous celebrities recognized for their talents and success.

Event Ending with Honorarium & Gifts Given to the Speakers






Library Committee with the Speakers




Look for our annual event next year around the same time. We will have to work hard to top this event which almost everyone felt was the best we have had so far.