



QUEENS, NEW YORK

# Bukharian Flavor Enlivens Queens



Most often associated with Indian and Pakistani food, tandoor ovens are also used in Bukharian cooking. Bakers at Rohkat Kosher Bakery in Rego Park, Queens, make bread in a tandoor oven. It takes between ten and fifteen minutes to bake a loaf. The breads are used as part of weekly Shabbat celebrations. © 2012 David Finkelstein

**T**ake the “E” subway line east from Times Square in New York City and within 30 minutes you’ll find yourself in Forest Hills, Queens, a neighborhood known for its thriving community of Bukharian Jews. Forest Hills and the nearby neighborhoods of Rego Park and Kew Gardens have a population of Bukharian Jews that numbers well over 40,000.

Far from living in an isolated and homogeneous enclave, the Bukharians engage with their Queens neighbors, who include Asians, Hispanics and African Americans. Central Asians from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are part of the mix. Bukharians embrace their American urban home while maintaining strong

ties to their Central Asian culture and traditions.

Positive relations with local Muslims, many of them immigrants from Central Asia, are a source of pride for members of Queens’ Bukharian community. Interfaith events include a Muslim-Jewish health fair where doctors offer free basic tests. “We don’t keep anger inside,” says

### DR. ZOYA MAKSUMOVA: Helping Women and Loving Life

In her bustling office just above Manhattan's Union Square Park, Dr. Zoya Maksumova helps women from all over New York through her medical expertise in mammography, body imaging and general radiology. She earned her medical degree in 1971, her doctorate in 1979 and has actively contributed to the field of medicine through numerous scientific articles published in the US and former Soviet Union.

Outside her medical practice, Maksumova helps women in another way — by serving as president of Esther-ha-Malka, a nonprofit organization of the Bukharian Jewish Congress that seeks to unite, educate and empower Jewish women from different ethnic backgrounds. To that end, Maksumova helps publish what she describes as the United States' first monthly magazine for Russian-speaking women, called *Ladies' World*. With nearly 150 issues to date, *Ladies' World* is read by Russian-speaking communities throughout the boroughs of New York City and beyond. The magazine hosts an annual "woman of the year" competition. A specially chosen board nominates Jewish candidates from around the world, each of whom is outstanding in her field. California teacher Nina Gulkarova was woman of the year in 2012 and featured on a *Ladies' World* cover.

"In America, I see my community reaching for greater education and opportunities," Maksumova says. "This is the country where you can achieve whatever you want — just work hard, study and be a good and honest person, and you will receive everything you want. I am very grateful for the opportunities this country has given to me, my children and my husband."

A mother of two, the doctor has a radiant smile and a rollicking laugh. "I am a great lover of fun," she says. Maksumova enjoys sharing New York culture with her family, frequently visiting museums around the city, Russian theater performances and live shows at the Metropolitan Opera, the New York City Ballet and other venues.

Even when helping patients in distress, Maksumova shares her optimistic outlook on life, encouraging them to smile and think positively. "We all can choose how we see things for ourselves," she says. "To me, life is beautiful, and that's something I always want to share."

Dr. Zoya Maksumova, referring to past anti-Semitism in Central Asia. "Jews and Muslims are nice people who want to work hard and live good lives. We have good relationships here, and we are very proud of this."

### From Central Asia to New York City

The Bukharian Jews of Queens hail mostly from two former Soviet republics, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, but they value their shared cultural traditions and identity more than their national origins. In ancient times, Jews settled around the Central Asian trading hub of Bukhara, a stop on the Silk Road. Some traditions hold that a community of Jews arrived there from west Asia as early as the 10th century B.C. Large numbers of Jews lived and worked in Tashkent, Bukhara and Samarkand, cities that are today part of Uzbekistan.

For many years, Jewish communities enjoyed notable acceptance and success in Central Asia. However, they later suffered recurrent

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Dr. Zoya Maksumova works with women in her medical practice and her volunteer efforts. © 2012 David Finkelstein



## American Bukharian Jews

persecution and anti-Semitism, especially under Soviet rule. Consequently, in the 20th century, many Jews migrated from Central Asia to settle in the United States, Canada, Israel, Australia and Europe.

Many Bukharian Jews living in Queens return to visit their countries of origin. “I’m very proud of Uzbekistan because of its good people,” says Rafael Nektalov, editor-in-chief of the first Bukharian Jewish weekly newspaper, *Bukharian Times*, and coordinator of the Bukharian Jewish Congress of the United States and Canada. He points out that Uzbekistan, a largely Muslim country, has done an admirable job of protecting Jewish cemeteries located within its borders.

### Bukharian Broadway

In Queens, 108th Street is commonly referred to as “Bukharian Broadway,” and with good reason. Bukharian restaurants, many of them named for cities in Uzbekistan and

Boris Nektalov is a lawyer and active in the Bukharian Jewish community.  
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### BORIS NEKTALOV: Connecting with Community

Walking into the Bukharian Jewish Community Center in Forest Hills, Boris Nektalov greets both staff and fellow community members in Russian with a warm handshake or hug. The 28-year-old criminal defense attorney is a devoted member of the vibrant New York Bukharian Jewish community. He organizes events, engages in local politics and helps his father, the *Bukharian Times*’ editor-in-chief, Rafael Nektalov, chase down hot leads for articles.

The young lawyer was born in the city of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, and has been in the United States for nearly 20 years, having immigrated with his parents, brother and grandmother. Like many American Bukharian Jews, he is essentially trilingual, able to comfortably carry on conversations in English, Russian and Bukharian.

“Bukharian is a very separate language,” Nektalov explains. “It’s our equivalent of what Yiddish is for Ashkenazic Jews from Europe. Yiddish is a mix of German and Hebrew, while Bukharian is a Farsi dialect mixed with Hebrew and a little bit of Russian.”

Nektalov studied accounting and finance at Baruch College, City University of New York, before earning his law degree from the State University of New York, Buffalo, in 2012. He spends his days serving clients in Queens. He often drives into Manhattan on nights and weekends to catch a set of live jazz, blues or funk at venues like Arthur’s Tavern in the West Village. A basketball fan, Nektalov also cheers at New York Knicks games.

Nektalov clearly cherishes his Bukharian Jewish roots. His relatives helped build the Bukharian Jewish Community Center in Queens. His parents both trained at a music conservatory in the city of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, he says, while his great-great-grandfather Shlomo Moussaieff was responsible for organizing the first Bukharian Jewish community in Jerusalem. “We are planning a ‘Nektalov Day’ soon,” he says. “It will be a great chance for all of the cousins in the community who have never met to get together and get to know each other.”

With so many connections and interests both within and outside the Bukharian Jewish community, Nektalov has a busy life. “I spend so much time working within the community, I sometimes stop and ask myself what my hobbies are,” he says, laughing. “But a friend from law school told me something that I agree with: If it’s 8 p.m. and you’re not sure if you’re working or just having fun, you’re doing the right things.”

Tajikistan, line the street, attracting Bukharian and non-Bukharian diners alike. Food, family and hospitality are important to the Bukharian Jews of Queens, and on any given night, restaurants such as King David and Da Mikelle are filled with Bukharians celebrating weddings or memorials for departed family members.

Music is vital to Bukharian culture, and some of the greatest performers of Central Asian classical music live, perform and teach young protégés in New York. “In the old days, the emir of Bukhara would have the best singers in his court singing traditional *shashmaqam* music, and most of those singers were Bukharian Jews,” says lawyer Boris Nektalov. *Shashmaqam* melds musical influences from Jewish

Marik Rubinov is a photographer for the *Bukharian Times*, a newspaper that serves the Bukharian Jewish community in Queens, New York, and other Russian-speaking communities. Rubinov works with newspaper editor-in-chief Rafael Nektalov, father of Boris, to produce the newspaper in the same Forest Hills building that houses the Bukharian Jewish Congress. © 2012 David Finkelstein



Solomon Musaev is the owner of Stix, a popular restaurant in Forest Hills, New York, that serves traditional, homemade Bukharian food like *lagman* noodle soup, *samsa* meat pastries, and steamed *mantu* dumplings. Stix also attracts a diverse clientele of non-Bukharians who enjoy the delicious kebabs for which the café is named. © 2012 David Finkelstein

and Muslim cultures, combining distinctive instrumental melodies and poems set to music. The musical style has been performed by Bukharian and Uzbek masters at prestigious New York venues like Carnegie Hall and has been specifically targeted for preservation by UNESCO.

Jewish traditions are important to Bukharians, and the harvest festival of Sukkot is no exception. To mark the holiday, Jews of all ethnic backgrounds build *sukkahs*, small huts with leaf or palm frond roofs and holiday decorations inside. A trip through Forest Hills during the seven-day celebration reveals *sukkahs* constructed in front of temples, in front yards of houses and — given the tight quarters in New York City — even on balconies of high-rise

apartment buildings. A hub of community life in Forest Hills is the Bukharian Jewish Community Center, an ornate, multifloor building that houses an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, meeting rooms, social halls, a center for senior citizens, the headquarters of the *Bukharian Times* newspaper and the Bukharian Jewish Congress, an organization that connects communities throughout the United States and Canada.

Cultural events stretch far beyond the walls of the community center. An annual Bukharian Jewish comedy night features notable comedians from Israel. The Bukharian Jewish Museum in Elmhurst, Queens, boasts an impressive collection of more than 2,000 cultural items.

