

**Nigella Lawson will soon teach Adele how to cook** – a present from one of Adele's close friends. 'One of her close circle thought to give her the Nigella present this Christmas because she's become so keen on cooking,' reported the Daily Star



**'We [maids] are the real moral compass of the show.** We're not patsies. We don't get walked over. We're running it. So it's a really wonderful perspective' – the actress Ana Ortiz of *Devious Maids*



# Arabian comfort food

For many Arab students in the Indian city of Bangalore, Mahajabeen Sheikh's house is the place to go for a taste of home. **Priti Salian** finds out more

Every afternoon, the doorbell starts ringing at 1pm at Umm Omar's Kamanahalli residence in Bangalore. Noisy young men barge in, only to be greeted with a smile and the words "kaif halak?"

The question comes from the 52-year-old Mahajabeen Sheikh, affectionately known as Umm Omar by the boys who make a beeline for her home for a taste of Arabian food. Sheikh, who runs her catering business Zawaqa, is quite a celebrity in the city's Kamanahalli area, which is home to a large number of Arab students who choose Bangalore for higher studies.

Sheikh grew up in Bangalore, but lived in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for 26 years with her husband and two children. She returned to India three years ago, all the while searching for a connection with the Middle East.

She found it in four students who were looking to satisfy their taste buds with traditional Arabian food.

Sheikh was more than happy to cook for them for a small payment. Thanks to word of mouth, the number of her customers has increased and today she serves no less than 60 students on an ordinary day. That number doubles during Ramadan – for iftar and suhoor.

"Umm Omar serves her food with so much affection that it reminds me of my mother," says Saeed Salm, 20, from Hadhramaut, Yemen. Majad Hassan, 18, also from Yemen, agrees. "The best thing about the food is the hygiene and the touch of home."

At 2,800 rupees (Dh165) a month for one meal a day and 4,500 rupees (Dh265) a month for two meals a day, it doesn't hurt their pockets either. Despite being close to some of the best Arab restaurants, no one is ready to give up the kapsa, madghut, mutabbaq,



Mahajabeen Sheikh serves Arabian food to about 60 students a day in her home in Bangalore. Subhash Sharma for The National

hummus, fattoush and basbousa that Sheikh serves.

"My kitchen is open all day," Sheikh explains. "Lunch is done by 5pm and prep for dinner starts by 6.30pm." During Ramadan, she begins preparing suhoor by midnight because "a lot of boys like to come and collect their morning meal by 2am".

The students, mostly male, seem to rely on Sheikh for more than just food. She lends them an ear whenever they need, is their counsellor and mentor – and sometimes even a mediator between them and their parents.

Most of the students who eat at Sheikh's are in India primarily to learn English for a year. Once there and familiar with the country, some decided to enrol in university courses.

"In Saudi Arabia, most government schools start teaching English from grade 6," explains Ammar Alesayl, a 23-year-old from Dammam, Saudi Arabia.

"I have no one to converse with in English back home," says Abdul

Rahman, a 25-year-old from Jeddah. "There are many institutes in Saudi Arabia that offer spoken English classes, but once out of the class, everyone reverts to speaking Arabic," adds Rahman.

Bangalore, Mysore, Pune and Hyderabad have a cosmopolitan appeal and students of several Arab nationalities flock to colleges in these cities, where English is the preferred medium of conversation.

"With better linguistic skills, our chances of bagging a good job back home are greater," adds Yaseen Sayeed, a 20-year-old from Aden, Yemen. "One reason why India is chosen over western countries like the US and the UK is for the quality of education and affordable fees," says Mohemmed Hashim Matori, who came to Bangalore from Abu Dhabi in 2012 to pursue a bachelor's degree in business management. "My Indian degree is sure to give me an edge over my contemporaries in the UAE," he says.

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**Umm Omar serves her food with so much affection that it reminds me of my mother**

Saeed Salm student

## Arab students in India

● According to India's ministry of human resource development, the number of foreign students enrolled in Indian universities in 2012 was 76,753, of which 76 were from the UAE, compared with 17 in 2011.

● Fully funded scholarships for foreign students are run by the Indian ministry of external affairs through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).

● With 21 scholarship schemes, the ICCR attracts 2,325 foreign students every year. More than 150 slots are available for Arab countries, with three reserved for the UAE.

# Devilishly funny way to dish the dirt

In *Devious Maids*, the creator of *Desperate Housewives* turns the upstairs-downstairs class warfare of Beverly Hills into dirt-slinging fun, writes **Greg Kennedy**

When you pay someone to pick up your dirt – beware – you may find yourself horrified at just how much of the incriminating kind they dig up.

It soon becomes abundantly clear in *Devious Maids* – the new comedy-drama with a twist of murder-mystery from the *Desperate Housewives* creator Marc Cherry – that whoever holds the dirt holds the power. Helping Cherry as a co-executive-producer is Eva Longoria, who found stardom in his first series.

"People within the Latino community have had their lives touched by nannies, housekeepers, gardeners, valets – whatever occupations we have occupied as Latinos – it's a reality," says Longoria, "so why not tell their story and their point of view? I commend and applaud Marc Cherry for doing that. He's not Latino – and he has no obligation to do it. And he is one of the greatest show-runners of the past decade."

Five of US's most recognisable American-Latina actresses – Ana Ortiz (*Ugly Betty*), Dania Ramirez (*Entourage*), Roselyn Sánchez (*Without a Trace*), Edy Ganem (*Latin Loud*) and Judy Reyes (*Scrubs*) – create the ensemble cast who portray five maids on fire with ambition as they clean up after the rich and famous.

But in less time than it takes to fire up a steam mop, murder and mayhem collide in the mansions of Beverly Hills, where class warfare pits wealthy families against their staff – who turn out to be as smart, funny

and downright devilish as they are. "It's *Desperate Housewives* meets *Upstairs Downstairs*," says Ortiz, who portrays the newcomer Marisol, who bonds the other four maids. "I'm definitely a devious maid because I'm not a maid; I'm sort of undercover as a maid. I'm trying to right a wrong that has been done to my family. It's a little bit like *Revenge*."

In the course of 13 episodes, expect this close-knit crew of maids to tidy up illicit affairs and lay bare deep, dark secrets as they seek the details behind the murder of a fellow maid, Flora (Paula Garcés). The dastardly deed happens at the home of her employers, Evelyn and Adrian Powell (Rebecca Wisocky and Tom Irwin), at one of the largest society events of the year.

Apparently, dirt-slinging is a growth industry. While a series typically sees audience numbers soften after the pilot is broadcast, *Devious Maids* not only swept up 1.99 million viewers upon its US premiere on the Lifetime network last June, but thanks to word of mouth, went on to clean up with three million viewers for its season finale. Lifetime has already given the green light for a second season of 13 episodes.

Also on board and deliciously cast is Susan Lucci, the daytime soap queen who held audiences spellbound for 41 years as the sassy, stunning woman we love to hate, Erica Kane, on *All My Children*.

Still smouldering at 67, in *Devious Maids* she plays a woman we'll learn to love – the affectionate and generous Genevieve Dela-

**Above, from left, Judy Reyes, Edy Ganem, Dania Ramirez and Roselyn Sanchez in *Devious Maids*. Eva Longoria, below, says stories about Latina maids, told from their point of view, need an outlet.** ABC Studios; Dan Hallman / Invision / AP Photo



tour, a wealthy divorcee and fizzy socialite who has danced in the lap of luxury all her life. She's also a hopeless romantic searching for a true love – and her next husband.

On the political-correctness front, one might well wonder whether it's perpetuating a stereotype to ask accomplished American-Latina actresses to portray maids.

"I resisted when I first heard about this show," says Judy Reyes, who plays Delatour's long-serving senior maid, Zoila. "My first instinctual reaction was, 'Why does the first show about Latinas have to be about maids?'"

"Then I read the script and I instinctively reacted positively. It made me laugh. I thought it was well-written. I was intrigued ... and my mum was a housekeeper and a nanny for many years. I understood that relationship."

In defending her show, Longoria adds: "Most of the Latino community is proud that there's a show employing dynamic Latinas. They're the leads of a show – they're not the guest star, not the co-star, not sub-characters. And they are playing maids, which is a realistic reflection of our society today in America."

"My immediate response when we get backlash is this: so you're telling me those stories aren't worth telling? That these people are lesser-thans? That their stories aren't worth exploring ... because they're a maid? That's what angers me."

**Devious Maids premieres at 11pm on Thursday on OSN First HD**

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Eva Longoria co-executive producer of *Devious Maids*