Livin' on a prayer: Champion Pakistan Quran reader in full voice

Hassan Ali Kasi was recently named champion of an international online gari competition hosted by Afghanistan

Ali Kasi was tutored in the Quran by his father, and his recitation skills quickly earned him recognition at national level

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AFP | Islamabad

o master the art of Quran recitation, 21-year-old - Hassan Ali Kasi had to follow a strict regime of yoga, hours of rehearsing vocal scales -- and a total ban on biryani.

His dedication is paying off, and he was recently named champion of an international online qari competition hosted by Afghanistan, where he was up against men from 25 other countries.

Revered in Pakistan, qathe Quran, called upon to lead times a day. prayers at mosques and also to teach the Muslim holy book to students.

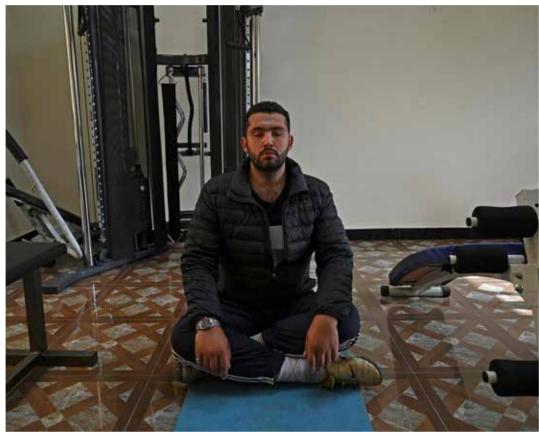
They are in particularly high demand during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting currently being observed around the world.

"It was a job of the prophets," Ali Kasi told AFP in the capital, Islamabad.

"One of the very first elements of preaching was recitation. It is as old as Islam.'

Qaris require perfect Arabic pronunciation, a difficult feat in Pakistan where Urdu is the national language.

A finesse of rhythm and intonation produces the slow, melodic sound similar to the distinctive adhan, or call to prayer, Hassan Ali Kasi, a gari or professional reciter of the Quran, recites verses from delivered through loudspeakers



x Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, practices yoga as part of his training regime in Islamabad

Recitations during competi-

ris are professional reciters of from the top of mosques five with breath control, and vocal Kasi, an Islamic Studies student

tions can last for 15 minutes, so for a minimum of 50 seconds a qari should avoid cold water

exercises to strengthen his voice. at a university in the capital. "A gari should be able to recite

"The throat is very sensitive, Ali Kasi practises yoga to help without taking a breath," said Ali and fatty food as it produces too much mucus, which causes young boys are taught to memabrasion when you touch high notes," he cautioned.



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Hassan Ali Kasi, a qari or professional reciter of the Quran, practices yoga as part of his training regime in Islamabad

He was tutored in the Quran by his father, and his recitation skills quickly earned him recognition at national level where he won numerous awards before making it onto the international

'The voice is a gift from God'

Many qaris emerge after being taught at religious schools known as madrassas, where orise the Quran -- often with little understanding of the Arabic language and also at the expense of other subjects.

Boys who complete their studies can go on to become teachers or lead prayers at mosques around the world -- even if they earn little money from it.

ly hardworking," said Abdul seas in Europe or America. Qudus, from the Wafaq-ul-Madaris al-Arabia, the country's largest group of madrassas.

but one has to polish it."

He said hundreds of prayer leaders in the Middle East are you can spread your voice across madrassa graduates, while oth- the world," he said.

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Ali Kasi, who spends hours practising verses ahead of competitions, said quality teachers "The voice is a gift from God, were the key to his winning

"When you follow a good qari,

Ramadan cooking

Ingredients

For the garlic starter 2/3 cup (104 grams) plus 1/2 cup (70 grams) regular semolina flour

(pasta flour) 3/4 cup (85 grams) all-purpose flour 2 garlic cloves, peeled For the bread

2 2/3 cups (400 grams) extra-fine semolina flour

1/2 teaspoon (1 1/2 grams) dry yeast 2 1/2 teaspoons (15 grams) fine salt 1/3 cup (52 grams) regular semolina flour or all-purpose flour, for handling the dough

Moroccan Almond-Argan Butter, for

Method

For the garlic starter

the Muslim holy book in Islamabad

Make the starter: In a glass or ceramic bowl, comwarm place, like an unheated oven, for a day.

Berber Skillet Bread

maining 1/2 cup semolina flour, and mix. Cover, wrap and let rise 1 hour. in a towel, and leave for 12 to 24 hours. The starter will get a crusty top and blossom underneath. Scoop out For the bread 1/2 cup starter and discard the rest, including garlic cloves (otherwise, as it continues to ferment, the smell would drive you out of your home).

metal blade, combine extra-fine semolina flour, the surface with flour, then pick up a dough round and warm while you cook the remaining breads. Serve

twice. Add 1 cup warm water and process for 15 to 20 seconds to knead. Let rest 10 minutes. Pulsing food processor, trickle in another 1/4 cup water. Sprinkle a work surface with flour and turn dough onto it. Cover bine 2/3 cup semolina flour with the all-purpose flour. with an upside-down bowl for 10 minutes. Cut 41-foot Gradually stir in 3/4 cup water to make a wet dough. squares of waxed or parchment paper and sprinkle Mix in garlic, cover, wrap in a towel and leave in a with flour. Divide dough in four and put each piece on a piece of a floured paper, turning to coat. Press Uncover the starter, add 1/4 cup water and the re- each into an 8-inch circle. Cover with kitchen towels

When ready to cook, gently flatten each disk, then prick the tops all over with a fork. Heat an 8- or 10- minutes, shaking the skillet often to prevent sticking. Make the bread: In a food processor fitted with the them) over medium-high heat. Sprinkle the pan's and serve immediately, or cover with a towel to keep 1/2 cup of starter, the yeast and salt. Pulse once or flip it into the pan, paper side up. Peel off the paper with Moroccan almond-argan butter.



and adjust the heat so that the bread sizzles gently. When it is browned and blistered on the bottom, about 5 minutes, flip the bread out onto a plate, then slide it back into the pan to cook the other side. Cook about 2 inch nonstick skillet or griddle (or two, if you have When browned, firm and fragrant, slide onto a platter