



THE LONG READ

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Online inventory and the kitchen challenge



SUSHMITA BOSE

FIRST PERSON

There was a time, not so long ago, when recipes were heirlooms. They were passed on from generation to generation. Most times, they were oral or experiential: you quizzed your mother or grandmother how a particular family favourite was rustled up; or you got even more invested, and hovered around the kitchen while they cooked, picking up cues, putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle being chopped on granite slabs and assembled on the stove.

It was not uncommon for 'secret' recipes to be written out on pieces of paper. In beautiful handwriting. Stored inside a cabinet drawer. Or inside a jar atop a pantry shelf. At times, left to roost. A friend was telling me the other day how she chanced upon a bunch of her (late) great-aunt's (a phenomenal cook) 'culinary notes' in one of the recesses at her ancestral place; she's now planning to digitise the archive.

I was never one for taking down notes or storing nuggets in my head. Never bothered about kitchen craft — although I could whip up a mean omelette with 'fancy trappings' (read: mashed potatoes and Amul cheese) at a rather young age. In my state of adulthood, the few times I fixed myself chicken curry or *masoor dal* (with ghee) or some trite form of pasta, they were by usually strung together by instinct. They turned out well enough, but I never had time (and inclination) to pursue cooking as a passion — or even a necessity. And yes, I purchased a few cookbooks along life's journey — again, impulsively — all of which gathered dust.

All that changed when the lockdown happened. I realised my time in the kitchen — that started out as whimsical structures — was giving me a sense of structure at a time when each and every other timeline had started getting blurred. I needed to expand my repertoire, making an omelette or a chicken curry with Shan masala mix and yoghurt would not give me the frame I so desperately needed. So, I turned to that thing called the Internet.

The first thing I'd do in the morning, while I was still lying supine in bed, would be to check out "easy and simple" recipes. Blogs — gosh, I had no idea there were so many home cooks writing out formulas for fantastic food alongside clicking real-time photos and videos — and YouTube tutorials became my go-to haven for vicarious inventiveness.

In the process, I discovered something about myself. Whenever I was searching for a recipe, I was invariably tempted to try in "Bengali" after "easy" and "simple". I've never been an enthusiastic parochialist about Bengali culinary leanings, but I now — when push was coming to shove at a juncture that had become existentially epiphanic — I was seeking comfort in food I had an intrinsic connect with. There is this vegetable called *chichingy* which can evolve into a dish slow-fried *piece de resistance* with the aid of mustard oil and nigella seeds. In the Queen's language, it translates into 'snake gourd' (a Bengali expat friend's fussy daughter doesn't eat it only because it reminds her of snakes, even though *chichingy* doesn't really look ophidian); you get it selectively in Delhi — where I was domiciled during the duration of the lockdown, and the semi one that followed, in India. But, with mask on and steady determination, I scrounged around Delhi's Bengali ghetto in an attempt to find *chichingy*, and finally had my way.

I started ordering fresh fish online, even though I never cared much for seafood while growing up, and laid Bengali touches on them. I learnt how to make mustard paste the hard way: not in a mixer-grinder but in a pestle-and-mortar (I finally made use of the lovely pink-hued marble one a friend had gifted me ages ago, and used it to cook *ralu* and *bhuchi*). And I went through the long-drawn-out rite of making *kosha mangsho*, after "consulting" a number of videos, and going with the one that "looked" like what our cook, back in the day, in Calcutta, would pull out like a rabbit from under the magician's hat.

sushmita@khaalejtimes.com

DURING LOCKDOWN, AND THROUGH THE PANDEMIC, BLOGS AND YOUTUBE TUTORIALS TURNED OUT TO BE EXCELLENT TEACHERS FOR ME... THEY EVEN INDULGED MY PAROCHIAL CULINARY INSTINCTS

FOR NEW 'HOME' CHEFS, IDENTITY = INVENTIVENESS



NEENA BHANDARI

MASTERCHEF AUSTRALIA TRAINS THE SPOTLIGHT ON 'HERITAGE' AND 'ORIGIN': FOUR ASIAN PARTICIPANTS SPEAK ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING CLUED INTO THE FAMILY KITCHEN WHILE BEING A GLOBAL CITIZEN

As Covid 19 lockdowns confined people to their homes, many sought comfort in home cooking. The 13th season of *MasterChef Australia* showcased contestants from varied professions, inspired by their culture and heritage, improvising traditional recipes to incorporate local produce and ingredients. They created dishes that attracted a huge following, including from second- and third-generation migrants from around the world.

The Australian food landscape, today, is a cultural melting pot. The penchant is growing to discover and savour the culinary diversity immigration has brought to the country. In recent years, it has been the subtleties and complexities of Asian flavours that is gaining popularity.

I spoke to four contestants with Indian, Bengali, Sri Lankan and Vietnamese heritage about what makes them passionate about food. When did they transition to cooking good food from enjoying eating it? Would they have been as passionate about their heritage and cuisine if they hadn't migrated? The importance of reducing food waste? Their connection to the Middle East. And the doors that this competition has opened for them.

'My dream is to write a Bengali cookbook'

Kishwar Chowdhury was born and brought up in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne in a Bangladeshi-Indian family. The kitchen was the pulsating heart of their home, where the family had their nightly Bengali meal together. Her parents grew their own produce, reared chicken and goats on the farm, milled flour and took the family fishing. "We would be quite involved, not just in cooking, but in the process of sourcing our food and ingredients. Our farm is a big part of our life and what we eat." While farm-to-fork and nose-to-tail eating is trendy now, it was while briefly living in Bangladesh and traveling across India and Asia for her printing and packaging work that Kishwar realised how sustainable the food culture was there.

"Sadly, that is getting lost with these countries moving towards the supermarket culture — whereas in Australia and America we are coming a full circle to our traditional roots," says Kishwar, whose father is from Dhaka and mother is from Kolkata. She can distinctly differentiate the tastes and flavours between Bangladeshi food and Bengali food from Kolkata. Her food dream is to write a Bengali cookbook.

She also loves making handmade pasta. Her favourite meal is a big bowl of pasta or ramen noodles. She also has a strong connection with the Middle East and the family has a house in Dubai. Her knowledge of mixing spices and understanding ingredients comes from buying and learning about them while browsing the souks. Some of her dishes on the show have been inspired by her travels to Mecca, Medina, Jeddah and Abu Dhabi.

Basically shy, she says being on a food show, from living on our farm, home schooling my children and working to make ends meet as a small business owner during the lockdown, it was like chalk and cheese. I really had to be brave to share myself [in a public space]. I am glad, I did, because it has struck a chord with not just Bengalis in different countries, but children of migrants like me.

Kishwar has been overwhelmed with messages. "People are really taking ownership [of food from countries of their origin], especially third culture people like me. I'm an Australian with a Bengali heritage and that

Indian cooking allows us to use certain parts of the vegetables, which we might otherwise throw out

Depinder Chhibber



is what my parents taught me, and I want to impart that to my children."

MasterChef this year gives importance to home-cooked food. "Whether we came into the competition with years of experience or little experience cooking, the mentoring and feedback from the judges on the show and guest judges, has been a huge learning experience. It has helped us find our identity and voice in food," she adds.

'Be open to different cultures and cuisines'

Minoli De Silva was born in Sri Lanka and her family migrated to Melbourne when she was six years old. The eldest of three sisters, the joy of food was instilled in her early. She watched her mom cook with passion, using every part of every vegetable and meat. She recalls sneaking out of the house to get food from the bakery next door, when she was five years old. At seven, her mother gifted her the *Family Circle Kids' Cookbook*.

"I learned a lot from that cookbook — making fun meals. In high school, food technology classes were my favourite because we got to eat something delicious at the end of it. I loved eating. I realised that the fastest way to eat, what I wanted, was to learn to cook it."

Her mother encouraged her to trust her palate and cook from the heart. She loves food with a lot of flavour — it could be Italian or a hearty meal with pita bread, stews and tagines. Middle Eastern cuisine is one of her favourite cuisines to cook outside of South Asian cuisines. "My uncles live in Dubai and Sharjah. I have really enjoyed the food there during my travels. A lot of my friends have friends from Israel, Lebanon, the UAE and they have had a really big influence too."

Growing up in Australia, visiting family and friends around the world, and travelling influenced her cooking style. She enjoys cooking Sri Lankan food because it reminds her of home, being with her family and grandmother. "But I don't just cook traditional Sri Lankan food, I use different types of Australian produce, herbs and spices that are available here."

She gained perspective on food and flavours after she lost her sense of taste for over a year following chemotherapy treatment. "When the sense of taste started to return, I realised that I could never take this for granted. It is then that I really wanted to have a life in food." Minoli feels education around food is very important. "Different types of foods hold a special place in different people's hearts. So being open to learn about different cultures and cuisines and sharing it is very important to me."

Being on *MasterChef* has given her the confidence to believe in herself, think outside the box and always stay authentic with whatever she does. "It's really humbling and exciting to see that Sri Lankan food and my type of cooking was exposed to so many different people globally," says Minoli. In Darwin, where she works as an engineering portfolio manager, she will be doing a series of pop-up events highlighting a revolving seasonal menu of south-east Asian style foods.

'Cooking at home is wholesome'

Tommy Pham's parents migrated to Australia from Ho Chi Minh City, two years before he was born. He grew up in the south-western suburb of Cabramatta, where Sydneysiders go for a roaming feast of authentic Vietnamese cuisine. On weekends, he would accompany his mother to buy tropical fruits and fragrant herbs at affordable prices. In school, he had friends from different immigrant communities: Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, Indian.

"We would visit each other's homes and eat what their mother cooked. It was a privilege to be exposed to so many different cuisines," says Tommy, whose passion for Vietnamese heritage and cuisine stems from eating his mother's home-cooked meals.

"It wasn't the easiest growing up because we didn't have much money, but she always made sure that we had amazing Vietnamese food. She never wasted anything and used different parts of vegetables and meat for flavour or making a good soup. I have always been conscious of reducing food waste as it helps the environment and the pocket," he adds.

The family would visit Vietnam every couple of years and Tommy relished sitting around and eating with his grandparents and extended family, who shared the same love for food. He says, "Cooking at home is wholesome and cheaper than eating out. To share food cooked with love



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Kishwar Chowdhury

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Tommy Pham



with your family is such a beautiful thing."

He is introducing his 14-month-old son to whatever is cooked at home. "The other day, I had made Middle Eastern-style lamp shanks with paprika and spices. I was hesitant at first, but then I gave him a piece and he started licking it and liked it. If they grow up eating everything, they won't be picky and choosy and we won't have to worry about cooking separately for them," says Tommy, a kindergarten teacher, who encourages children to appreciate food and think of kids, who don't have food to eat.

His love for cooking began a few years ago, when he was living alone and working in Japan. "I was really homesick and the easiest way to bring home where I was, I began cooking simple dishes that my mom or my partner's mom would cook for us. It would transport me straight back home."

Besides Vietnamese cuisine, he loves Middle Eastern food. "It is so simple and wholesome. One of my favourite go-to meal is taco chicken with salad and flatbread."

Taking part in *MasterChef* has given him the opportunity to be inventive. "I have to finish a recipe with the ingredients provided, whether I like them or not. If I can use traditional Vietnamese ingredients with Australian regional and native ingredients, it would make my cuisine radically more interesting."

He feels this competition has given him a platform to share his recipes and pop-up events with the world. His dish — Lune's signature croissant baguette filled with rare roast beef, mushroom parfait, nuoc mam gel, pickled carrot and daikon — won the Aerospace-Engineer-turned-pastry-chef Kate Reid's challenge and it is on the Lune Lab menu in Melbourne. He would like to cater Vietnamese food at private dining events or at parties.

'Butter chicken is my ultimate comfort food'

Depinder Chhibber moved to Newcastle (Australia) from New Delhi when she was 11 years old. Her fondest childhood memories were of hanging around in the kitchen, absorbing the aromas, tasting and watching her grandmothers, mother and aunts cook. It helped reinforce her interest in cooking and nurtured her cooking style.

"I have always taken inspiration from our homestyle Indian cooking, especially from my grandmothers, mum and aunts because that is the kind of food, I grew up eating. I don't ever not remember cooking or spending time in the kitchen, it was more than just a hobby for me even when I was a child," says Depinder, who started to cook complex dishes, including desserts, in her early 20s and this solidified her passion for cooking.

She considers her heritage and her cuisine as part of her identity, something she can't live without. Even though she is an Australian and calls Australia home today, her heart is still in India. "I always dream of living in India, even today because I love it so much. I think, my passion for Indian food would've been even greater if I was still living in Delhi because I would've been closer to my family, especially my grandparents, giving me more opportunities to learn from them."

Growing up in a family where almost every part of a vegetable and meats was cooked and used, she is mindful of food wastage. "I am very fortunate with Indian cooking because it allows us to use certain parts of the vegetables, which we might otherwise throw out."

Her favourite dish is butter chicken, with Tandoori roti or a plain butter naan. "I grew up eating this and I loved it as a child, and finally started to cook it myself for my family when we moved to Australia. For me this is ultimate comfort food and something very close to my heart," says Depinder, a pharmacist.

Her husband is her biggest supporter and together they have been on numerous gastronomic trips. She says, "I absolutely love the Middle East, especially the food. We have visited my uncle, who lives in Dubai, several times. There are so many similarities between Middle Eastern cuisine and Indian cuisine in terms of flavours and generosity. It is something I love making for my family."

MasterChef has always been a dream for her. "It has been a life-changing experience and it has given me so much clarity in terms of my food dream and where I would want to go from here." She wants to publish a cookbook, making Indian homestyle cooking more accessible and mainstream in Australia. Her ultimate dream is to have a niche restaurant serving authentic Indian food, inspired by homestyle dishes she grew up eating, using local produce.

Season 13 of *MasterChef Australia* will be available on Fox Life across the Middle East later this year. Season 12 is available now. (Neena is a journalist based in Sydney)

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