

Nisha's recipe for curry success

KATONA ON MAKING INDIAN FOOD ACCESSIBLE

by ASJAD NAZIR

AN ATTRACTIVE barrister-turned-cookery expert is on a one-woman crusade to make the curry an easy dish that is accessible to all.

Nisha Katona wants to make the spicy dish something that people who aren't confident about cooking can master. She started things off with the delicious book *Curry In A Hurry* and has followed this up with TV appearances, demonstrations at cookery schools nationwide and being a guest presenter at various food festivals.

"I first got interested in cooking when I started having dinner parties at home. I realised that Indian food is the most spectacular, kaleidoscopic way to wow friends with very little effort," said Nisha.

The Wirral-based kitchen queen speaks with a genuine passion for cooking and definitely knows what she is talking about. Even though it seems like she has been chopping and slicing her way through food her entire life, Nisha only started her spicy journey towards creating culinary delights after she conquered the legal profession.

"The barrister came before the cook," she says. "Through my youth, the aim was to study hard and get a good job. Creating food was not my primary concern and very typical of many Asian parents, my mother was more interested in me doing my homework than learning the ropes of the

who is not a confident Indian cook, the greatest response to the 'curry formula' has come from second and third-generation south Asians desperate to recreate the food of their parents without having a phone pressed to their ear.

The success of the book led to television work, which subsequently generated further interest from production companies and channels keen to develop a series with Nisha. She is also in negotiations with publishers to write another book and is in talks to do TV shows in America. When Nisha gets time, she also runs a Twitter 'curry clinic' twice a week that enables her to answer queries from around the world. So how does she balance all the cookery related work with a full time career in law?

"The law is a pleasure for me so it is not mentally too onerous – and it gives me a lot of energy for the food side of things. I often finish early in court and paperwork can be done late at night, leaving a lot of time in the day for curry creativity," she says, smiling.

Unlike many authors who are more at one with words and generally prefer writing or the relative safety of a TV studio, Nisha is definitely a people's person and that is why she regularly runs cookery classes. Her aim is to teach a formula that allows people to be totally confident in creating an authentic curry from any ingredient.

"No curry in my view should take more than three spices and 20 minutes. Meat on the bone simmers for a while but creating it is quick."

People from all cultures, ages and abilities come to her cookery classes, and interestingly, she says more women than men attend the classes.

"I find that a lot of women are seeking to regain their kitchens by learning a genre their husbands know nothing about. It's strange but curry phobia is more prevalent in women than in men. Men feel they own the curry genre –

it's seen as a matey, glory dish and men say things like they cook 'my curry'. Women now want to share the experience."

Talking of curry phobia, the main reasons people often shy away from making Indian food are the exotic ingredients and number of cooking processes involved. Nisha agrees, partly blaming the many complicated cookbooks that are on the market.

"All curry cookbooks list hundreds of ingredients and involve long marinades, roasting, grinding, blending and crushing. You need to have nothing else to do to be able to do these things and that also involves shopping for ingredients."

"I want people to come in from a day's work and create amazing curry with just three spices and no time at all!"

The growing number of people being converted to Nisha's way of cooking shows she is definitely succeeding in her endeavour. This has made the once complicated curry a lot simpler to make which, of course, is a good thing. Converting people to making quick curries has earned Nisha the nickname the 'curry evangelist'.

"The aim is to make curry as easy as dishes like spaghetti bolognese. Curry is the most popular dish in Britain and yet only 10 per cent of the population can cook it. I want to lift the veil on my simple curry-making formula, freeing people from the lists and chores that surround curry."

She says it is important to have great taste buds as a cook and thinks that only elevates the appreciation for food. In fact, she thinks having terrific taste buds equates to having a love for food.

"The truth is, if you love food, you must have live, interested, expectant, demanding taste buds and that makes them great in my eyes."

Not surprisingly, she is always under pressure to entertain friends on a regular basis. Although Nisha loves cooking for others, she jokingly admits that close friends rarely cook for her nowadays because she is too particular.

So what is she like in a restaurant? She smiles and says, "In restaurants, much is demanded by me. In other people's houses, the only thing I care about is no sauces from jars. It could be egg and chips, but if they are hand cracked and fried, then to me that is heaven."

Looking ahead, Nisha will continue to balance working in the legal profession with cooking up a storm in the curry world. She ultimately wants to teach people who love curry how to make a really good one. Although the idea of opening a restaurant is an appealing one, she admits it's unlikely to happen because it involves a lot of work, whereas her philosophy is curry in a hurry.

"The plans of men are many as they say. I have a strong faith and do believe I just have to throw my energy into an honest, integrity filled mission and if it's meant to take wings, it will. If not, I can always stick to being a barrister and continue to live the happy blessed life I have now."

The curry wonder woman finishes off by telling us why she loves cooking. "It is a great way of showing love, gratitude, warmth and consideration to those around you. I come from a family of feeders – if you like them, you feed them whether they like it or not. This is such a demonstration of maternal love to me. Its tantamount to combing their hair, straightening their scarf and holding their hands on their way in life."

Log onto www.nishakatona.com to find out more.

A QUICK Q&A

WITH NISHA KATONA

What types of dishes do you enjoy cooking the most?

Humble, dull winter vegetables are the most magnificent ingredients in Indian dishes – they have a really spectacular before and after. It's a magical transformation.

Do you have a signature dish?

Mango daal is the only recipe that my mother actually asked me for. I nearly died of shock when she did!

Do you have any secret tricks you use when you are cooking?

I add a touch of sugar in most dishes and it quietly satisfies all the areas of the tongue. It brings a smile to any curry.

Tell us something not many people know about you?

I speak Hungarian as I am married to a classical guitarist who is a Hungarian

identical twin. This has got to be weird fact number one.

What are your biggest interests away from cooking?

I have a keen interest in the classical arts-music, art, theatre and opera. I am a trustee for the National Museums Liverpool and keen to make the arts more accessible to the people. Similar to my passion for curry evangelism, I am keen on the idea of helping people feel like they can understand and enjoy the classical art forms instead of them being in an ivory tower. I am also a keen horse rider and do street dancing (I kid you not) once a week.

Who are your cooking heroes?

Fanny Craddock, you can't beat her high camp style and Jamie Oliver has a good heart. My mum has a great curry brain and my aunt has the culinary patience of a saint.

Priya Mulji

Follow Priya Mulji on www.twitter.com/priyamulji or log onto <http://priyamulji.wordpress.com>

Going the distance for love



DISTANCE in a relationship can be defined in many ways. Being married and not understanding each other is one way. Being in a relationship and falling out of love is another thing that can create a distance. But nothing is worse than someone you love being in a far-away city or even a different country; you don't see each other every day and don't have them in your immediate space.

Many people do make the distance seem like a small obstacle, but this only comes with hard work and most importantly, trust. You may be a girl living in Leeds and your boyfriend lives in London – if there is trust, you will be happy for him to go out after work for drinks with friends and know that he will not be sleeping around. If you are the guy in this relationship you should trust that she isn't taking up date offers from other men. If there is an event she wants to go to and you can't accompany her, and she is going to go with a male friend, you must trust her. It works the other way too. Just because your other half lives three hours away doesn't mean you can play around.

A lot of people say a long-distance relationship can't work – the person is at the end of the phone and not in front of you; it causes too many arguments and you end up fancying someone else; but I don't believe that. As a hopeless romantic, I think every relationship, regardless of distance, can work if there is an end goal. This is usually marriage, someone moving to the other city or moving half way to be together.

I have been in a long-distance relationship myself where the guy lived two hours away and we had a few things that we did on a regular basis to ensure the relationship was successful. No matter how busy we were, we made a point to speak on the phone every day, usually a wake-up call, talking on our commute back home or before bed.

So if you are in such a situation, plan meetings in advance and on these occasions, make sure you enjoy your time with each other. It's great going to see a movie or a concert but rather than sitting in silence for two hours, do something where you can actually talk to each other.

Another great way to communicate is via email. A few messages a day are a great way to bring a smile to your partner's face and be reminded that you are thinking about each other.

A long-distance relationship can be hard work but think of it as a test. Both need to be as committed as the other and work towards an end goal. If you both want it to work, love will prevail and your relationship will have a happy ever after ending.