

FACE TO FACE

Ambassador of Indian cuisine

ALMAS ZAKIIDDIN

ACTING first, cooking guru second. Madhur Jaffrey makes no bones about her first love, acting.

"That's my main thing," she says. "Whenever I have acting work, I drop everything. Acting, that's what I do."

She began early, with the acclaimed *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965) for which she received the Silver Berlin Bear for Best Actress, went on to star with James Mason in *Autobiography of a Princess* and with Deborah Kerr in *The Assam Garden*, as well as in the more recent, *Cotton Mary*, *The Perfect Murder* and her one Bollywood film, *Saagar*. There have been countless roles on television, as well, over the years.

But somewhere in the middle, she started cooking.

And she's gone places with it. Since she wrote her first best-selling cookery book, to coincide with a pioneering BBC television series, 'Madhur Jaffrey's Indian Cookery' in the early 1980s, she has become a presence, a friend, guide and subcontinental hero in living rooms and kitchens alike, across the world.

She laughs at the accolades. "It's a bit of a joke," she says. "To begin with, I had no idea how to cook," she recalls.

As a student at the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, London, where she was soon to be awarded the rare distinction of a diploma with Honours, the 20 year-old English graduate from Delhi, acutely missed her home food.

"But I could not cook. I longed for home-cooked meals, not the cheap curry and lager fare one used to get in England in those days. So I wrote to my mother," she recalls.

Yearning for specialities of her Kayastha, old-Delhi heritage, like 'hing zeere ke aloo' or 'hare masale ke gosht', she began a quest for personal satisfaction, not fully realising that it would eventually become such an integral part of her life or, indeed, catapult her to the status of an unofficial ambassador of Indian cuisine.

"My mother's notes were in Hindi, handwritten recipes of family fare that had been handed down since my ancestors were present at the Mughal court, way back in Akbar's times. I tried them out, day after day, perfecting them in a maniacal way until I knew they were right."

With three small children from her marriage to actor Saeed Jaffrey -- daughters Zia, Meera and Sakina -- growing up, their household in New York made tremendous demands on her. She did freelance writing, acting roles were beginning to emerge slowly, and then came a chance to work on an educational series on Indian cooking for BBC television.

"At the time, there was little interest in and virtually no knowledge of what Indian food meant, not in the west. The BBC's series was meant as an introduction to the food of the large Indian community in the UK. There were auditions and eventually, I got the job," she relates.

She not only got the job, but did so well that she has virtually never looked back.

Although she is modest in her assessment of the qualities that made her successful, her television 'presence' was most effective, and she was a writer already.

"The books and the shows required someone who could communicate well, confidently on television and write well too," she agrees. "But what also made a big difference, I think was that my approach was based on my own discovery of cooking. It was like I would say to the audience, you don't know anything about this dish and until yesterday, I had no idea either. And I would then explain each recipe, step by step, as one 'ignorant' person to another, almost."

A perfectionist to the core, Jaffrey's attention to detail and adherence to a logical sequence of steps lent her recipes substance and applicability,

In the last 30 years, with 13 best-selling cookery books and countless television appearances to her credit, Madhur Jaffrey has become the unchallenged ambassador of South Asian cuisine. Through her books and appearances, not only has she produced comprehensive collections of recipes and guidelines, but also she has woven into the tapestry of cooking, countless narratives of South Asian culture, history, tradition and diversity.



powerful reasons for audiences to watch her shows and rush out to buy her books.

Cookery shows in general had become a recent trend in the west in the 1980s, and of course, there was the significant climatic change in the UK in particular, of really looking at foreigners, immigrants and people from the 'east' in a more realistic light.

"I think the country was ready for it, to go into Indian food," she reflects. It took her publishers by surprise when the first 35,000 copies of her cookery book were sold out. The BBC's first series developed into yet another, and then another. Indian cuisine began to move out of the backroom curry bars into restaurants offering more selective menus and, more significantly, it began to make inroads into British homes.

"I think the time was ripe and there were lots of other reasons for it to happen, but I feel I am partly responsible for making curry and rice, as it were, the top food in England," she says with a smile.

"It is colonialism in reverse and that makes me very happy," she chuckles.

Colonialism gave birth to the South Asian Diaspora, a term that best defines migrations of millions of people from the sub-continent, to countries of the former British Empire and

beyond. Although immigrants have assimilated in many ways into their new cultures, they have often retained several distinct characteristics, one of which has been their food.

Madhur Jaffrey's current quest, the subject of her next book and the reason for her visit to Dhaka this week, is to document and collate the food of the diaspora, as well as of other culinary specialties and variations in the sub-continent.

She is looking especially at the cuisine of people in the former colonies such as the West Indies, South Africa, Mauritius, which received a huge body of indentured labour transported mainly from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in India by the British.

"Looking at their food has been simply fascinating," she comments. Earlier this month, she ended a two-week stay in South Africa where she charted the different adaptations and changes of Indian foods, often with a sense of sadness.

"When they were taken away as bonded slaves, they were not allowed to carry any personal belongings and therefore, they often tried to re-create what they remembered of their own food by memory," she relates. There was a sense, she says, of acute deprivation in the early days. "It was so intense, obviously, that they virtually

forget that they ever ate meat or fish. It was only when they became free eventually, that they could begin to look around and try and find out more about their roots. Many in the present generation for instance have returned to India since then and have tried to identify their villages and homes, sometimes unsuccessfully."

What happened to the cuisine of South Asians in these lands has left an enormous impression on the writer. "There is a fusion of ideas and often, a surprising blend of food groups," she comments. She has found biryani, for instance, being flavoured layer-by-layer with daal, or lentils, quite an interesting innovation. And the popular corn being spiced up with typical Indian flavours.

She relates an evening with Nelson Mandela at the home of a common contact, Amina Cachaliya. "One of the dishes they were cooking for me happened to be his favourite and he turned up and stayed for quite some time with us. We talked about different dishes, and I could see the influence of the Indian community in bringing different spices and ways of cooking to the indigenous foods and also, itself, changing a great deal in the process. It has become another Indian food, almost," she says.

Fusion and change are inevitable, she agrees, though the mingling of cultural traits and influences has been manifested more in the South Asian region, perhaps, than in many other parts of the world.

"There are so many interesting examples and references that show us how different foods and vegetables or grains, spices and so on, came to India," she remarks. "We know the tomato, the potatoe, the chilly for instance, came to India through trade from the west, and the daal, the lentil from the Arab world, while there were so many influences and imports from China and lands to the east. Even 'the chick pea, which is mentioned in Indian texts as far back as 2,500 BC came from the Caucuses, originally. The exchanges happened slowly, not as fast as things happen today, with television and travel accelerating the pace of change. There were and still are local traditions, but from what I have seen and experienced there is no such thing as a 'pure' cuisine."

How far has she influenced South Asian cuisine?

"Well, there is a sense of identity that food provides, but no, I don't think I have done anything to influence the tradition of South Asian cooking they don't need to be taught," she comments adding that she has not even aimed in that direction.

"I did not look at restaurant food as such because what interested me, and still interests me, are the rich traditions of South Asians at home. I want to learn everything about the background of food, where it comes from, what it is called, but then I will visit people at home, look at their everyday meals, their special dishes, how they cook each item and then try and reproduce these recipes authentically in my book," she explains.

Her expeditions in Dhaka have been true to character. Several homes have welcomed her on this visit, arranging demonstrations of speciality dishes and happily trading tips and ideas with her. Specialities of the city, such as Dhaka cheese which she sampled freshly sliced and slightly grilled, and arrays of Bangladeshi bhortas, also made an impression on her.

"Most remarkable of all, of course, has been the way you cook fish. I know of West Bengal cooking, but the flavours here are different. The dishes are richer, one can see the Muslim influence," she says, tasting the delicacies prepared for her at the Bangladeshi restaurant Kasturi in Motijheel.

"I have a big cry against Bangladeshi restaurants in the west. I go to them and I ask, where is your fish, where are your Bengali cur-

ries? And they say, come to our homes and we will give you a typical Bangladeshi meal. Why? Even a Bangladeshi chef who gets off a ship and starts cooking, having known nothing else except his own fare, will adapt to producing Indian specialities like Madras curry and north Indian korma. They are afraid that their food won't have any takers -- but I think they are wrong" she exclaims.

"I would like to see that change," she says emphatically. As a consultant to a New York restaurant called 'Dawat' on 58th Street, Jaffrey says one of her personal contributions has been to recommend to this restaurant that they introduce typical Bengali fish dishes on the menu and she has noticed that other eating places have been following this trend.

In Dhaka, a major aim was to explore several 'katcha' bazaars, including Karwan Bazaar in the heart of the city. Here she was particularly fascinated by the variety of fish available, including one she says reminded her of a sting ray, probably the Bengali 'koral' fish, which to her knowledge has never been seen in a river.

Although she carries a notebook and pen wherever she goes, even to Karwan Bazaar, where she was scribbling and drawing as much as she was looking and asking questions, she says taking notes and following the cooking demonstrations is not hard work.

"All this is the 'fun' part, much like acting, which I love. When you're acting, you are part of a clan -- it is very different from working on a book," she remarks.

The daunting part of writing a cookery book, she explains, is when the recipes have to be tested, one by one and over and over again. She

spends a huge amount of time testing and re-testing until she is absolutely confident that she has captured the essence of a dish and has given her readers enough information, in a logical format, to be able to replicate it.

Cooking for herself, though, is fun. It is a daily relaxation to cook with her husband, American violinist Sanford Allen, she relates. "We both work on our own all day, I am writing and he is playing and then, when the time comes, we sort of meet in the corridor and decide what to have for dinner. We shop every day and cook every day, it relaxes both of us."

So is she herself a good cook? "I think I am. It isn't innate because I had to learn, painstakingly, but I was fortunate to have had a certain palette for taste. When I began to cook, it was because I had the memory of what my home food tasted like and when I cooked, I touched that memory and soon I knew where I was falling short. I enjoy good food, even if there is one thing to have for breakfast, it has to be, well, something you enjoy. So if you have that sort of palette, you have a good start."

Obviously, it has taken more than just a palette to have achieved this success. There has been persistence, hard work and a sense of curiosity. As she wanders around a Dhaka kitchen and talks to her hostess, examining spices and taking down notes, as she converses with friends during various meals in Dhaka and as she talks about her own life and interests, it is obvious that Madhur Jaffrey is one of those individuals who mingle exceedingly well, and yet remain quite special. In many ways, she is the perfect ambassador of cuisine this region could ever have.



A crusader's café

STEPHANIE AKIN

ON your first visit to Jamal Anwar's café, you might not notice anything extraordinary, other than its particular comfort.

Dr. Jamal Anwar leans across the carved alligator bar to warmly greet his customers many of whom he has been serving for the last ten years. Behind him a few steaming pots and a pile of vegetables on a cutting board designate the kitchen area. The rest of the room is lit by flickering candles atop tables where friends and strangers sit together, enjoying a mango cocktail or a cup of tea before they order one of Anwar's traditional South Asian dishes.

Anwar's kitchen is part of Berlin's 'Volksküche' subculture. These have been inspired by the informal squatter kitchens of the 1980's, which served communal dinners to everyone who came along, in return for small donations.

In the Volksküche tradition, Anwar has always been concerned about his guests. "The most important thing is the people who come here. I like them very much. This is like a family meeting," he remarks.

Every Saturday, Anwar starts cooking at one in the afternoon so he'll be ready when doors open at 7:00. The tasty Indian dishes cost around six marks apiece, and Anwar cooks them with his heart. "The vegetarians here, they don't know how to make vegetarian food that is good for them," he explains. "If you want to be a vegetarian, you have to eat a lot of lentils."

Although it's a nice place to spend a Saturday evening, many of Anwar's visitors don't come just to share his food. They also know that Anwar's place is part of a bigger project that connects Berlin to a completely different part of the world. And when they go to his kitchen, they're a part of it too.

Since 1994, Anwar, a geologist,

has been using all the proceeds from his restaurant to help poor people in his native Bangladesh have access to clean water. The idea came to him when he was working at the well-known "Buchhandlung" Volksküche on Tuchosky Str. in 1993.

"At that time we used to spend the money we earned on ourselves. But I started thinking, why don't we spend this money on something else? So I started the project drilling wells in Bangladesh."

Starting in 1994, Anwar went to Bangladesh about once a year with the money that he had raised in Berlin. If he found at least 20 people without access to water, he would drill a well. The methods he used were intentionally cheaphe would put down a bamboo platform and a pulley, and spend about 2000 DM.

"I used the easiest method so the people could do it all by themselves. That meant that if something broke, they could repair it without any help," he says.

In about six years, Anwar has built over 100 wells. No small feat when you consider that more people in Bangladesh die each year from impure water than from any other disease, including AIDS.

But last year Anwar ran into a problem: he found out that most of the water in Bangladesh, including the water in his wells, were contaminated with lethal levels of arsenic. Whereas several organizations say that arsenic occurs naturally in the Himalayas, Anwar's research points to unnatural origin, namely the introduction of chemically controlled agriculture in the 1960s' "Green Revolution." Anwar's research also shows that the arsenic can be filtered out at almost no cost.

Says Anwar: "It's a simple matter, putting the water in clay pots and allowing it to settle. 70 per cent of the arsenic settles down with iron when it oxidizes. Then you filter it out with sand and charcoal."

After the water has been filtered,

Bangladeshi geologist Dr Jamal Anwar, based in Berlin, Germany, has been at the forefront of raising funds for and awareness of arsenic contamination in Bangladesh. Working full time with Integrated Environmental Quality Management in Berlin, he also finds time to run an informal Bangladeshi popular café. Proceeds from the café are now being used in arsenic affected areas in Bangladesh

the arsenic level drops below the legal standard. This is the same method that Bangladeshi people have been using for hundreds of years. Anwar believes that no one is willing to endorse his plan, however, because they can't make any money out of it.

"I wanted to start a programme to teach the villages how to maintain the filters, but most engineers don't want to do this because they want to keep selling new ones." Now Anwar has decided that if he can't get anyone to support his project from Berlin, he's going to go to Bangla-

desh to do it himself. He's also preparing to fight against big companies, the World Bank, and even the UN Health Watch who have all put out reports downplaying the incidence of contaminated water in Bangladesh.

As if his Volksküche and his

projects in Bangladesh aren't enough to keep him busy, Anwar also holds down a full time job in Berlin. At Integrated Environmental Quality Management in Neukölln he works with "a different type of people altogether" than those he sees every week in his Volksküche. Here

he advises small industries about how they can run environmentally conscious businesses. His colleagues, meanwhile, have little to do with Anwar's other life. Some of them have come to see him in the Volksküche, and his secretary has typed his menus. But many of them are unaware of Anwar's 'moonlighting'.

In the kitchen, on the other hand, his guests are learning about new facets of his work all the time. "I've known Jamal for about five years now," says one customer called Mac. "At first I thought he was just a cook in a Volksküche, but then I

started to see this really amazing person standing behind this bar every week." Now, like many of Anwar's visitors, Mac praises Anwar as a big influence in his life. "I want to organize artists and then arrange events/gallery exhibits, concerts, etc. The money that we make will go to project's like Jamal's."

Jamal opens his Volksküche every Saturday at 7:00. To get there, go into the courtyard of Brunnenstr. 183, in Prenzlauerberg. Walk all the way to the last building. On the right you will see some wooden stairs going into a small opening. Go up the stairs -- and remember to duck your head.

Future fantastic



Employees show off the company's new human-shaped robots, C-BOTS, (left) during a Sega Toys press preview at its headquarters in Tokyo on Tuesday. The C-BOT, expected to hit the market in May, can walk, dance and deliver messages from the owner's friends using mobile phones. Japanese toy giant Takara employee Hiromi Iwase gazes at jellyfish (L) and turtle-shaped pet robots, Aquaroids, powered by penlight batteries, in a fish tank in Tokyo.

PHOTO: AFP