

“Bangladesh ‘mapped and served’ on a plate”

Important takeaways from Kishwar Chowdhury’s journey for all young and emerging South Asian chefs

What do you get when you cross a smart-talented-Bengali-mother and a home chef with a competitive yet rewarding cooking reality TV show? A revolutionary figure in the culinary world!

The majority of chefs around the world, when documenting their culinary journey, start with how they first learned the culinary arts. It always starts with something like, “When I was young, my mother taught me how to operate around the kitchen” or “I learned cooking from my mother and grandmother by looking over their shoulder every time and practised recipes that were passed down.” All of these answers are true.

One of the most profound entertainment experiences for me this year was watching Kishwar Chowdhury compete on MasterChef Australia. This 38-year-old talented “home chef” had pushed through the patriarchal barrier that most Bengali aspiring cooks and chefs struggle with to this day. My eyes teared up the minute MasterChef 2012 winner/judge, Andy Allen announced that she along with other home cooks were selected to the next rounds of cooking. And then the next round... and the next! Watching Kishwar cook throughout all 62 episodes, reminded me of some ‘key takeaways’ that are vital for every aspiring Bangladeshi woman around the world, who are hiding under the radar because of the strong misogynistic culture that permeates their lives.



NEVER DOUBT YOURSELF (Especially in today’s world)

Half the time, people are not sure of what they are doing. But if something that you are pursuing is for your own betterment (without intentionally hurting anyone) despite what people say — you must definitely dive in.

In the third episode of MasterChef Australia, Kishwar started off with making a Pan-fried Barramundi with quail broth, and silver beet. Almost every time she spoke at the camera, she referred to her family, which was emotional to watch but also carried a great deal of expectations with it.

Kishwar states as she sears her barramundi that, “Being a home cook, what I understand is flavours.”

It is conceivable that she understands the balance of spice that cooks up a delicate Bengali dish. As the show progressed, she began to feel more pressure over her shoulders. And she knew that her whole



family was counting on her.

Kishwar felt nervous around the other amazing and skilled home chefs and stated saying that “I am very happy with my home style dish, but I wonder if this is enough for a competition.”

This type of doubt often comes with long generations of families that did not believe that women had every superpower it took to be a champion. As the clock ticked and the episode progressed, Kishwar began to feel that her dish was inadequate. Starting off confidently but started to undermine herself. She stated that “she’s just a home cook and she doesn’t understand how to make things look as good as they should be when you’re eating it.”

She started to doubt herself but she also did not stop working on what she initially had started. MasterChef Judge Melissa Leong visited her bench and reassured her that she needed to believe in herself and let the creativity flow freely.

As each episode progressed, Kishwar’s self-confidence shone through exponentially.

Please never doubt yourself, especially when people around you are also making you feel that way. Self-controlling the bad



thoughts often banishes the feeling of doubt from one’s mind. When you practise it, it feels good.

FOLLOW YOUR PASSION (Even if it is not picture-perfect)

Bringing a homemade favourite dish to the MasterChef Australia kitchen is challenging. In episode 3, MasterChef Australia judge Jock Zonfrillo comments on Kishwar’s remark about “how she looks like she’s carrying the weight of the world on her shoulder.”

Kishwar’s voice cracked as she explained that she was not a trained chef and has made something that she “eats at home to nourish herself.”

Instead of thinking of making something that belonged in “fine dining” and was aesthetically pleasing, Kishwar had made something that was well-rendered, balanced, and familiar — something that she has experimented with consistently at home, and perfected.

This does not mean that the dish doesn’t have a place in the MasterChef Australia Kitchen, I write agreeing with judge Jock Zonfrillo. Judge Melissa Leong also commented about how Kishwar is knowledgeable about her palette of spices, flavour and the substance. Flavour trumps everything else. And so does a dose of self-confidence.

EMBRACE THOSE WHO PRAISE YOU CONSISTENTLY

It is very hard to get honest feedback from people. A majority of the time people will not be honest about what they don’t like about you. In Kishwar’s journey throughout MasterChef Australia, the judges were just as easy-going as they were tough. They praised her work when the execution and the flavours of her dishes were impeccably tasty and presentable but also provided tough constructive criticisms whenever needed for improvements.

This important takeaway is applicable, not only in competitions but in the real world too.

YOU DON’T ALWAYS HAVE TO BE A LEADER IN THE TEAM

In episode 6, Kishwar teamed up with 7 other chefs to prepare a 3-course meal using Yotam Ottolenghi’s 3 flavour bombs (homemade condiments). The dish she was seen marinating was “mishti kumra,” which became a fenugreek pumpkin curry paired with the baked tomato rice.

Kishwar was not the leader of the team but her dish stood out to the judges because of its flavour profile. The team was very meticulous with their directions and menu development, but what stood out was the pumpkin curry being featured as the entrée.

A lot of the times people feel discouraged not to be able to lead the team but sometimes one delivers better results even as a member. The key element of this success? Contributing 100 percent of the effort and confidence in the project that is to be delivered.

TRY SOMETHING NEW... AND DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS

Whether it was making *panta bhat* for the finale or ladling up an oxtail black curry out of a European pantry, or creating inventing dishes out of freshwater crawfish, Kishwar had laid out her creative palette throughout all 62 episodes.

She faced immense pressure when her tart refused to slide off the tart moulds but trusted her gut instincts to deconstruct the entire dish. She felt more pressure when she almost butchered her finger while following Chef Curtis Stone’s cooking methods.

Additionally, Kishwar dared herself to step out of her comfort zone when she prepared the “Persian Vanilla and Roses,” a modernist take on Vanilla Kulfi famously devoured in every corner of Bangladesh. However, what remained consistent was her South Asian heritage palette, even when working with Native Australian ingredients at Uluru, which is not only her strength but also an immense specialty on her magic hands.

“This is powerful food.” Melissa Leong comments on Kishwar’s preparation of the *Panta Bhat Feast* (smoked rice water) along with ‘aloo bharta’, and the sardines accompaniment. This leads me to the final takeaway...

Being a participant in this competitive global cooking show format takes a great deal of courage, creativity, and the willingness to go above and beyond. The majority of the people who made the backlash comment about the ‘Panta Bhat’ did not quite understand the historical element of this staple dish.

Kishwar not only showcased her exceptional culinary skills but also took that native smoked rice dish to secure herself a spot as a finalist.

The final takeaway is that doing something unconventional and different, taking the route less travelled, often yields success when it is driven by self-confidence, positive mind set, and the passion to achieve one’s dream.

For a Bengal Tiger, they are born with these attributes.

Congratulations, Kishwar Chowdhury!

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Photo: MasterChef Australia

The author is a Bangladeshi-Canadian cook and food stylist. Her works focus on cultural institutions, new media culture, and evolving food ways. She has a food styling and digital creation page on Instagram called *YumMoments* (@yummoments), where she inspires modernist food styling concepts, architectural-inspired food photography, and documents gastronomic experience through endless journeys around the city’s best eateries. In her spare time, she spends time developing new recipes.