

Viji Varadarajan went global with a gamut of five cookbooks on South Indian cuisine



OF SAMBHAR, SPICES AND SATTVA

Viji Varadarajan's plethora of cookbooks swept away the Gourmand Awards last year. The books, however, are more than just a collection of recipes. Neeti Jaychander in conversation with the dynamic and versatile lady

"Indian food is hot, spicy and oily."
"Eat Indian cuisine only if you're not thinking about nutrition, health or calories."

These are just some of the myths that surround Indian food abroad. Until Viji Varadarajan went global with a gamut of five cookbooks on South Indian cuisine. Of preconceived notions, she explains, "Initially, we took to the West the idea of strong alluring spices and introduced the foreigner to it. The strong flavour of cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, garlic, red onions with the touch of excess oil added to the magic that came to be known as Indian cuisine. However, what was left out was the old-fashioned, passed down generations of grandmothers' South Indian food using ancient Ayurvedic mild and healthy spices."

THE GERM OF AN IDEA

Initially however, this thought did not really bother Viji when she wrote her first cookbook *Samaya!—The Pleasures of South Indian Vegetarian Cooking* back in 2001. "I just wanted to turn out traditional recipes in a simple format. What astounded me was the sheer variety of vegetables, lentils and what not! Truly, this was a wealth of health in one's hands." As she went on to write her second book *Festival Samaya!* and third *Cooking With Yoghurt*, she realised what a mine of information this cuisine possessed.

South Indian TAMILIAN Brahmin fare is what she dabbles in; mainly vegetarian, the food fosters satvic qualities that control the mind, balance the senses and leads to a peaceful co-existence with nature. Nutrition is especially important to her. "Global obesity among adults and children is alarming and on the rise today," she explains, "The recipes that I am trying to advocate are low in fat and cholesterol, striking the right balance between nutrition, health and taste." >

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FIVE DOWN, MORE TO GO

But given that her five books deal with the same kind of cuisine, how did she manage to make each one different from the other? “One book deals with a range of British and native vegetables and lentils, cooked in their own juices, retaining the original flavour and colour. Yet another deals with festival food. A third comprises dishes with yoghurt, the most important food in Indian kitchens, essentially associated with cultural, social and religious practices. “My fourth cookbook *Classic Tamil Brahmin Cuisine* was a unique approach as it dealt with only native vegetables,” explains Viji. “Padmini Natarajan co-authored this book and we did not use any British vegetables like cabbage, beans, broccoli, peas, carrots, parsley, potato, cauliflower, celery, onions and garlic.” Her last book *Vegetarian Samayal of South India* paid special attention to the balance and nutritive value of the food cooked.

“As of now I have a different cookbook in mind,” she says, almost reading our next question, “Padmini and I have decided to keep it under wraps until it is ready—probably sometime towards the end of this year.”

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

In 2008, *Samayal—The Pleasures of South Indian Vegetarian Cooking* won the World Gourmand Award for the Best Vegetarian Cookbook, *Festival Samayal* won the World Gourmand Award for The Best Local Cookery



Classic Tamil Brahmin Cuisine won the World Gourmand Award in the category of a Special Jury Award

Book, *Cooking With Yoghurt* won two World Gourmand Awards—The Best Single Subject Book and The Best Health and Nutrition Cookbook in the World. This year, *Classic Tamil Brahmin Cuisine* won the World Gourmand Award in the category of a Special Jury Award. “The Gourmand Organisation is the Oscar for cookbooks and wine books of the world,” says Viji. “It is a good thing that India is gaining global recognition. The Gourmand stickers on my books have got a tremendous response.”

However, it isn't just the awards that drive her. It's also small compliments from people she meets. “A Japanese girl Akemi Yoshii was on a temporary assignment in Chennai. She got her friends from Tokyo to try out this cuisine. After a second session, the girls left the same day for Tokyo, and told me that they starved on the flight as they wanted to carry the flavour of Tamil food back with them!” They are in the process of translating the recipes into Japanese. Kurumi Arimoto, whose mother is a celebrity cookbook author, and who is a cookbook author herself, has already evolved a menu plan for kindergarten kids with these recipes! The book is also being translated into French by Sophie Girot. What's more, in June this year, she held a Q&A session in Luxembourg on her cuisine, with the German press in full attendance.

JALDI 5

If not writing cookbooks: “I'd be an investigative journalist. I have a passion to do what Christiane Amanpour does for CNN.

Other than Tamilian vegetarian fare: I enjoy good Punjabi, Maharashtra and Kerala cuisine—Aloo parathas, mooli parathas, black dal, aloo poha, saboodhana khichidi, appam and vegetable stew.

One indispensable kitchen ingredient: Sambhar powder and curry leaves! It is amazing how flavourful and delicious the dish turns out to be without losing its authenticity!

The yummiest thing... and the least yummy: The yummiest I've ever eaten are Kuzhakattais. The least yummy are tortillas rolled with black beans!

Half-an-hour to prepare a meal... what's the quick fix: Instant tomato *rasam*, stir fried beans *kari*, rice with toasted *appalams/papads*. This can be prepared in 20 minutes. It has always been soul food for me.

VERSATILE VIJI

Viji has learnt three classical dance forms, and has actively performed as well. She also loves Carnatic music, reading historical fiction, doing yoga, relaxation exercises and walking everyday, watching movies and learning languages. She even read news on Madras Doordarshan for a few months and lent her voice to a few commercials. ■