

thereluctant **GOURMET** SHONALI MUTHALALY

Back to what grandma did

FOOD *It's comforting to know that home cooking still celebrates local vegetables and lesser known spices*



BY THE BOOK Viji Varadarajan PHOTO: R. RAGU

A pooshnika is a pooshnika is a pooshnika. Or is it? (And to think Gertrude Stein figured that line worked best with roses!) Without actually getting entangled in metaphysics, let's ask ourselves — can a pooshnika ever be anything else? Well, if you have this ash gourd cheerfully bursting out from all corners of your vegetable garden, you had better be able to transform it. Many times over. Vegetable gardens might be a thing of the past for those of us who live in apartments, and have long-since resigned ourselves to dried herbs and cellophane wrapped vegetables, forlornly forgoing the romance of strolling into the garden and deciding the day's menu. But with today's focus on eating local so that you don't have food miles on your conscience, it helps to look back, and remember what our grandmothers did right.

"Earlier, everyone grew vegetables in their own backyards. They had to be creative, so they would find 20 to 30 different ways to present a single vegetable," says Gourmand-award winning writer

Viji Varadarajan, explaining why her new cookbook, written with Padmini Natrajan, focuses on recipes for local vegetables. *Classic Tamil Brahmin Cuisine: Pure Vegetarian South Indian Samayal* is all about old fashioned recipes and local ingredients. Fortunately, since it's a valiant attempt to get what Viji calls 'Gen Now' (specifically her daughters) to cook, the recipes are simplified, shortened and celebrate blenders, microwaves and other time savers. But it's the ingredients that make it interesting. The fact that the book deliberately ignores the current supermarket stars, posh broccoli, gleaming capsicum and flamboyant bok choy, choosing to stick with our less hip, more homely vegetables such as pudalangai (snake gourd), karamani (long beans) and vazhaithandu (banana stem.)

At Viji's house there's a creamy pooshnika mor kootu for lunch, cool yoghurt chunky with juicy slices of ash gourd. There are also zesty long beans, lavishly showered in coconut, subtly spiced banana flower chunky with gold-

en steamed dal and a juicy white banana stem sections in raita. There's colour, variety and flavour. It's comforting to know that home cooking still celebrates local vegetables and lesser known spices. Things like Chettinad cooking's kalpasi or marathi mukku, or Chennai's trademark molai keerai, or Udipi's coveted mettugulla brinjal, are what keep each type of cuisine distinct, preventing Indian food from just becoming a sea of kadai-paneer, chicken 65 and sambar. Creating a demand for vegetables like the small crisp cucumbers, the many varieties of leafy vegetables and even local wild berries will force supermarkets to stock them so you don't wake up one day and find you're forced to choose between just beans, carrots and spinach. Which in turn means farmers will attempt more variety since there's a demand. The best part? The ability to create a meal that you can put together right here, and only here. At a time when almost everything is so easily accessible, even that alone is worth celebrating.