

An Indian Feast with Madhur Jaffrey

By Mary Luz Mejia

Meet author, actress and Indian food expert Madhur Jaffrey in mid-town Manhattan at Dawat restaurant, which features her creative dishes. We make our way through the cream-toned dining room and sit down for what I think will be dinner.

Forget just dinner – instead I’m treated to a veritable symphony of regional Indian flavours. The feast begins with *dahi aloo poori*, crunchy semolina puffs filled with chickpeas, diced potato, chickpea flour crisps, coriander and yogurt and tamarind sauces. As we eat, she tells me about her childhood in Delhi.

Minutes after Jaffrey’s birth, her grandmother dipped her little finger into honey and wrote the sacred Hindu symbol “Om” on the newborn’s tongue. This ritual proved prescient: Madhur, as her father subsequently named her, means “sweet as honey.” She has collected several more identities over her lifetime, but this fiercely independent and intelligent woman is much more than the sum of any labels bestowed upon her. Some call her the “Curry Queen,” others an inspired actress, and still others – like Britain’s *Good Food Magazine* – dub her one of the world’s 20 most influential food personalities. A prolific, award-winning author and BBC cooking show presenter, she has penned over a dozen books (including her latest, *Climbing the Mango Trees: A Memoir of a Childhood in India*) and helped make Indian food mainstream in Britain and North America. Whatever you decide to call her, this petite powerhouse is undeniably a creative force of nature.

After our *chaat* (snack), the *baghari jhinga* arrives – a luscious shrimp dish enhanced by garlic, mustard seeds and curry leaves, which many restaurants have tried to imitate. “This sauce is traditionally for chicken, but I wanted to do something different, so I chose to change it a bit and use shrimp,” explains Jaffrey. Succulent and plate-lickingly good, it’s a resounding success.

Jaffrey’s childhood experiences on her grandfather’s sprawling compound, where mealtimes would see anywhere from 30 to 40 family members sitting down to eat, trained her palate well. But her wealthy family employed cooks,



Photos by Mary Luz Mejia

Interior of Manhattan’s Dawat, where Jaffrey is the food consultant.

and Jaffrey didn’t spend much time in the kitchen. “The food was marvellous, so we didn’t have to make it. It was glorious, so why would there be any incentive to learn how to cook?” she says.

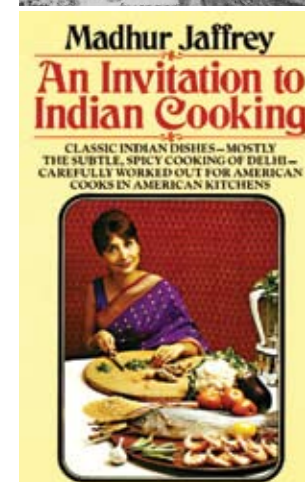
Cooking, however, is what really made Madhur Jaffrey a household name – ironic for someone who “was dragged kicking and screaming into the world of food.” After completing an English degree in India, she moved to London to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, but quickly realized that she couldn’t feed herself. “There’s hardly any good food in London, and I wanted home cooking, the kind I’m used to. So I started writing letters to my mother saying, ‘Please – I can’t make tea. I can’t make rice. Help!’” says Jaffrey. Her mother wrote back offering simple recipes (which Jaffrey still saves) to make the food for which her daughter longed. Trial and error eventually led to some spectacular results.

One such triumph is the evening’s highlight – a spicy Cornish hen dish that Jaffrey discovered through a Baghdadi Jewish family in Kerala, India. Flavoured with fiery green chilies and sour tamarind, this dish is as unique as it is superb.

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When a 20-something Jaffrey moved to New York City in 1957, however, she was still years away from perfecting a recipe. She hoped to build an acting career, but directors couldn’t get past the fact that she was South Asian, telling her, “We want to use you, but we’re trying to find something for you to do.” Jaffrey says, “They were trying to pigeonhole me into some Indian role. Well, Indian roles came around once every five years or something.”

At the time, Madhur was married to fellow actor Saeed Jaffrey, whom she had met in Delhi. While raising their three daughters, Jaffrey did some modelling work and continued to attend auditions around New York City. She landed a solid part when director James Ivory cast her in the film *Shakespeare-Wallah*. The production won numerous awards and netted Jaffrey a Silver Bear award for best actress at the 1965 Berlin Film Festival. She would go on to appear in over 20 feature films. Yet just as her professional life was



1 Madhur Jaffrey’s memoir, *Climbing the Mango Trees*, describes her childhood in India and includes over 30 family recipes. The cover image shows a young Jaffrey with an arm around one of her sisters.

2 Madhur Jaffrey graduated with a BA in English from Miranda House, Delhi, in 1953.

3 Jaffrey, left, played Gwendolyn in her college’s all-girl production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

4 Jaffrey’s first cookbook, *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*

(Photos 2 and 3 courtesy Madhur Jaffrey)

taking off, her personal life began to suffer. She and Saeed divorced, which meant the newly single mother of three had to find more consistent means of making ends meet. “I was an immigrant, so I said, ‘I’ll take any kind of work that I can.’ And so I started writing, and I wrote one article about growing up in Delhi and the food I ate as a child for a travel magazine called *Holiday*,” recalls Jaffrey.

One article led to another, opening up doors for the budding food writer – including “getting discovered” at one of the dinner parties she regularly hosted with her new husband, musician Sanford Allen. James Beard (known to many as the “father of American gastronomy”) was a frequent guest, and it was Beard who suggested Jaffrey document her recipes. In 1973, she wrote her first cookbook, *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, and followed that success with many more bestsellers, three groundbreaking food and travel series for the BBC and a spate of acting roles for good measure.

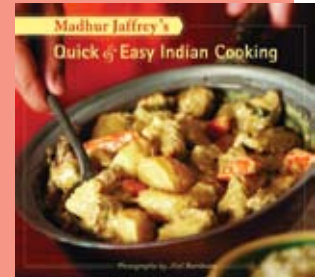
Part of Jaffrey’s appeal as a food writer is her approach – she assumes the role of “the perfect teacher,” who “will not leave out anything” for the nervous or novice cook. The other key ingredient is her ability to provide readers with a picture-perfect window into Indian culture. She brilliantly sets the scene of a time and place, sending readers’ imaginations drifting to rose-tinted Indian sunsets suffused with the smoky scent of roasted spices.

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An elegant dish of *kulfi* (traditional Indian ice cream) crowned with toasted pistachios arrives just as a lovely Brazilian woman at the next table recognizes Jaffrey. The glamorous foreigner gushes, “I just want to tell you that the best moments of our lives come from when my husband cooks from your book!” Given Jaffrey’s enduring popularity, her fan is not alone in the sentiment. I suggest that Jaffrey enjoys acting more than food writing because it’s more of a challenge for her. A little surprised at my observation, she says, “Yes, that’s right. Writing is such a lonely business. When I am on the stage, I feel full.” Similarly, when I digest a story or recipe written by Jaffrey, I feel sated, even if I have yet to step foot on the soil that has given us a thousand heady, aromatic spice combinations, as well as the writer behind just as many vivid food tales. ❖

CHICKPEAS COOKED IN TEA DHABAY KAY CHANAY

Cooked in tea? You might well ask! This is the trick that all the vendors at truck stops use to give their chickpeas a traditional dark appearance. The tea – leftover tea may be used here – leaves no aftertaste. It just alters the colour of the chickpeas.



For speed, I have used canned chickpeas. As they are already cooked, they need just 10 minutes of gentle simmering to absorb the flavourings. I have also used canned chopped tomatoes. If you wish to substitute fresh, chop them very finely and use 1/2 cup instead of 1/4 cup.

This chickpea dish may be served with store-bought pita bread, a yogurt relish, and some pickles or salad. It could also be served as a snack or as part of a more elaborate meal with meat or chicken, a green vegetable, and rice.

Serves 4 to 5

- 2 cans (19 oz each) chickpeas (garbanzo beans)
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- generous pinch ground asafetida, optional
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- 1 medium-small onion (6 oz), peeled and chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped
- ¼ cup canned chopped tomatoes
- 2 tsp peeled, finely grated ginger
- 1¼ cups prepared tea (use a plain black tea; water may be substituted)
- 1-2 fresh, hot green chilies, cut into very fine rounds (do not remove seeds)
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 tsp ground toasted cumin seeds
- 1 tsp store-bought garam masala
- 3-4 Tbsp coarsely chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 Tbsp fresh lemon juice

Drain the chickpeas. Rinse them gently with fresh water. Drain again.

Put the oil in a wide pan and set over medium-high heat. When the oil is hot, put in the asafetida. Let it sizzle for a second. Now put in the cumin seeds and let them sizzle for about 15 seconds. Put in the onion. Stir and fry until the onion turns quite brown at the edges. Put in the garlic and let it turn golden, stirring as this happens. Now put in the tomatoes. Stir and cook them until they turn dark and thick. Add the ginger and give a few good stirs. Now put in the chickpeas and all the remaining ingredients. Bring to a simmer. Turn the heat to low and simmer, uncovered, for about 10 minutes, stirring gently now and then. Taste for balance of flavours and make necessary adjustments.

From Madhur Jaffrey’s *Quick & Easy Indian Cooking*
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