

# Sophie's choice

**LAUNCH** Sophie Girot was so fascinated with traditional Tamil cuisine that she and award-winning author Viji Varadarajan have put together a cook book in French

Heat oil. Pop mustard. Squint into kadai and yawn. After all, it's hardly the Mona Lisa.

Try telling Sophie Girot that. Her eyes are closed, as she delightfully takes deep breaths of the mustard busily popping in her saucepan. "Listen," she says, hushing the crowd, "And breathe. That smell. It's so good." Everyone sniffs experimentally. It suddenly dawns on us. Mustard really does have an alluring fragrance.

We're at a cooking demonstration at Alliance Française to mark the launch of 'Saveurs et Traditions du Sud de l'Inde', a French cook book on traditional Tamil cuisine by Viji Varadarajan and Sophie Girot.

Viji Varadarajan is one of the new wave of cookbook authors promoting a return to the healthy, wholesome, additive-free menus of the past. Not surprisingly, her work has been gradually garnering attention

abroad. Her books won at the Gourmand awards in 2008 and 2009. Her recipes, inherited from generations of women in her circle of family and friends, are being translated into Japanese by Kurumi Arimoto, a cook book writer. And in the most unexpected corners of the U.S., young Americans are experimenting with her brand of Tamil Brahmin cuisine.

Taking all this into account, a French translation seems like the next logical step. Though writing a cookbook was the last thing on Sophie's mind when she found herself confronted with piles of okra at the Pazhamudhir down her road. "I was buying vegetables there, and Sophie wanted to know what to do with okra," says Viji, explaining how they met. Then there were the mangoes. "There were 7 or 8 varieties lined up," says Sophie. "It was impossible to decide which to buy." Viji not only guided her through the



**TASTE OF TRADITION** Viji Varadarajan (left) and Sophie Girot  
PHOTO: S. S. KUMAR

mango conundrum, but followed that with a dinner invitation to show Sophie exactly how to use the local vegetables.

Although Sophie has experimented with a range of food styles in her home kitchen ("I also cook Japanese and Chinese food"), she found herself drawn to Viji's Tamil

is so different. It's healthy. Less spicy. Less oily. I thought, 'Oh my gosh - I really like this.'

The French book features recipes sourced mainly from Viji's book "Samaya! The Pleasures of South Indian Vegetarian cooking". Targeted primarily at the French expatriate community in Chennai, and eventually the rest of India, it has simple recipes using cooking techniques that can be carried out in a Western kitchen, without a bevy of elaborate Indian implements.

The demonstration, for instance, begins with a tasty, and very quick, okra dish (in memory of that first meeting perhaps), which involves stir frying okra, tempering it with mustard and adding yoghurt. It's followed by a slightly more elaborate plate of spongy steamed mani kozhukattais, and finally a practically effortless aval payasam, in which beaten rice is tossed in ghee, boiled and then added to rich cardamom and saffron-infused milk.

Along the way, guided by Sophie, we appreciate the smoky aroma of sizzling curry leaves. Marvel at the way saffron stains milk a glorious orange. And take deep breaths of gorgeously nutty ghee.

SHONALI MUTHALALY