

Doing Chennai proud

ACHIEVEMENT Three books by Viji Varadarajan have been nominated for the Gourmand Awards this year

Ever felt that a plate of creamy *thayir sadam* and mango pickle is the tastiest food in the world? Or that your grandmother's fragrant *vaangi baath* could make a Cordon Bleu Chef hang his head in defeat. Ever travelled abroad and had such a desperate dosa craving that you were up all night hankering for a ghee roast?

In keeping with all the attention India's traditional food has been attracting over the past few years, the prestigious annual Gourmand World Cookbook Awards — the Oscars of the culinary world — have been taking note of Indian publications. Not surprisingly, our forte seems to be vegetarian cooking. Rashmi Uday Singh won the award in 2005 with 'Around The World In Eighty Plates' for the Best Vegetarian Book In The World and last year 'Cooking at home with Pedatha' by Jigyasa Giri and Pratihba Jain brought home the pachadi, in the same category.

This year Chennai-based Viji Varadarajan has had a whopping three books nominated for the Gourmand Awards. There's 'Festival Samayal' featuring in the category of Best Local Cookery Book. 'Samayal — The Pleasures of South Indian Vegetarian Cooking' in the Best Vegetarian Cookbook category and 'Cooking with Yoghurt' in the category Best Single Subject Cookbook, under Best Health and Nutrition Book.

Which could explain why she's so bubbly. "I can't believe it. I just can't," she trills, "All three books! And they're all so simple... I did everything keeping the costs in mind. No glossy pages, nothing..."

However, this simplicity seems to be their strongest point. Clear, sensible and unpretentious, the recipe books carefully deconstruct everyday recipes from traditional South Indian kitchens. The only nod to the overseas market is the endearingly earnest, sometimes comical, attempt at translating absolutely everything: so a *paruppu usili sevai* is steamed dhal crumble pasta, *vadais* are savoury doughnuts



TRIPLE TREAT Viji displaying her books

and a masala dosa is a stuffed potato pancake. Since quantities have been carefully measured and recorded — something traditional home cooks, who work with a "pinch of this" and a "handful of that" just won't do — and all available shortcuts, including microwaves, blenders and pressure cookers, have been used, Viji's books are as useful to home cooks as they are to the many young students who carry them abroad, for their first independent stab at sambar.

Viji says this year a record 107 countries have participated, resulting in the Gourmand Award committee receiving 6,000 books to choose from. Although the books have been created to be more economical than flamboyant — the most expensive one costs Rs. 225 — they have been shortlisted to compete for 'Best In The World' in three categories.

Viji says the award committee has asked her to put their signature sticker labels on her books. "A gourmand award will now give these books an opportunity to be displayed in book exhibitions in Europe," she says, adding this will mean publishers across the world will then probably be interested in buying rights for translations in foreign languages.

And about time too. Finally, *paruppu usili* and *kathirikkai thovayal* get to take a bow on the world stage.

SHONALI MUTHALALY