

## THE RELUCTANT GOURMET

SHONALI MUTHALALY

# The flavours of home

**FOOD** Never mind how sophisticated the palate is. It is impossible not to crave for traditional home-cooked food



**HOMELY TOUCH** Traditional recipes have timeless appeal

**M**y cousin called home from another continent to find out how to open a pressure cooker. She finally needed to be talked through the process, step-by-step, like a nervous trainee pilot landing his first aircraft. But she did learn how to use that pressure cooker.

Young Indian boys and girls spend their lives pursuing tough degrees and fancy jobs. Or, fancy husbands and wives. Often, mission accomplished, they move far away from home. Then, after about a month of restaurants, takeaway, instant curries and cornflakes, the phone calls begin.

"I tried to make dal, and it was such a failure," says Gilgamesh Kabir, a pilot with Air India talking of his days at flying school in Texas. "Then I made kichidi with broccoli. It turned green – but tasted all right." And then there's his friend Rachna, who went into a panic at the prospect of making rice. "Then I told myself firmly not to be silly. It's not brain surgery, right? So I poured water and shoved it on the stove." The result? "A disgusting, glutinous mass. Ugh."

"But you do learn – because you miss home food. It's soul food and makes you feel good," says Hisham Osman, adding "When I was working in Dubai, I would dream of just rice, hot rasam, pickle and appalam." Irrespective of how sophisticated your palate is, you ultimately you tend to crave the most familiar foods. Vikram Chesetty, a widely travelled businessman agrees: "After 14 days abroad, rasam is to die for!"

That could explain the slew of

recipe books that celebrate traditional food, but break it down into simple recipes – such as Viji Varadarajan's *Samayal: The Pleasures of South Indian Vegetarian Cooking*. "If one recipe is four pages, I make it one page," she says, "Paruppusili is supposed to be complicated. But if you flatten it in a microwave pan and zap it for two and a half minutes, it's quick." Stating that it's only sensible to learn to work with microwaves and non-stick pans, she adds, "If you cook rasam in the traditional lead pot, it has a fabulous taste. I don't deny that. But just change the order of adding the ingredients and you get the same result."

## No timer then

"But the major difference between my grandmother's cooking and mine is she never got into the kitchen with the timer running," says Aparna Karthikeyan, who – nonetheless – cooks elaborate South Indian meals from her stylish but small display kitchen in Amsterdam. "Rasam was made on a coal-stove so the spices and tamarind water simmered gently, releasing the fragrances that die really quickly when I boil them on high heat for 10 minutes."

Aparna, however, persists. "When everything in the world is losing its identity, (with big chains and global cuisine), it's only with home cooked food that one can keep tradition alive. I really admire the Japanese for this... they not only send their kids sushi for lunch, they also make their kids feel proud of eating it! How many Indian kids

abroad take *thayir sadham* for lunch?" If you grew up in India, however, food habits are difficult to break. "I think all humans are instinctive cooks," says Vikram. "When I was in the dorm in the U.S., I found guys who couldn't cook rice turn into gourmet chefs in weeks."

## A reminder

And while most people do start out by taking short cuts, eventually many do the best they can to recreate flavours and aromas that remind them of home. Aparna says her best friend Anu Menon "always makes her gravies on a mud-pot that she's carried all the way to Amsterdam from Kerala. The result: yummm." Devidas Banerji, a Singapore-based lawyer with Clifford Chance, tends to work till 2 a.m., and survive on toast, coffee and restaurants, but still enjoys cooking. "It's relaxing, and takes my mind off the stress of work and life." He cooks Bengali food, "because it tastes awesome, and makes me feel at home," although he admits it can be "time consuming and tedious at times." And he takes no shortcuts. "My cooking methods are the same as my mom's," he says. "But, of course, my mother's cooking tastes better!"

*The Reluctant Gourmet is no food connoisseur. But she's learning, (and really working the treadmill). Food and wine snobs won't find much fancy terminology here. (She can barely pronounce 'Foie Gras'). But if you simply enjoy food and dining, and all the drama built around both, this weekly column could be your new best friend.*