KATONA ON MAKING INDIAN FOOD ACCESSIBLE
by ASjad NAzir

AN ATTRACTIVE barrister-turned-cookery ex-pert is on a one-woman crusade to make the curry an easy dish that is accessible to all.

Nisha Katona was led in the early-1990s by the delicious book Curry In A Hurry and has fol-lowed this up with TV appearances, demonstra-tions at cookery schools nationwide and being a guest presenter at various food festivals.

“I first got interested in cooking when I started having dinner parties at home. I realised that In-dian food is the most spectacular, kaleidoscopic way to wow friends with very little effort,” said Nisha.

The Wirral-based kitchen queen speaks with a genuine passion for cooking and definitely knows what she is talking about. Even though it seems like she has been chopping and slicing her way through food her entire life, Nisha only started her spicy journey towards creating culinary del-ights after she conquered the legal profession.

“The barrister came before the cook,” she says. “Through my youth, the aim was to study hard and get a good job. Creating food was not my primary concern and very typical of many Asian parents, my mother was more interested in making homework than learning the ropes of the cuisine. I came to the food when I needed it and I needed it to keep my friends happy when I got my own kitchen.”

Practice does indeed make perfect and that was definitely the case for Nisha. While she bal-lanced a busy legal career with learning the tech-niques needed to create perfect recipes, she stumbled upon an idea that led her towards writing the book Curry In A Hurry.

“I realised there was a definite, eminently teachable formula that spanned Indian cooking techniques. When I discovered this formula, I wanted to tell the world. I wanted them all to know how simple and quick Indian food should be and a book was the obvious vehicle for this.”

The recipes have been drawn from her own and other Indian families. The key for Nisha was to get authentic recipes, which were quick and simple to make, for the book. However, she says the biggest challenge of writing it wasn’t selecting the recipes, but actually getting all the weights and measurements correct.

“No Indian kitchen is dependent on kitchen sca-les. We are a culture of feel and touch,” she says. The greatest strength of Curry In A Hurry is that it caters for all cooking abilities and is not intimi-dating. Although the book is aimed at anyone who is not a confident Indian cook, the greatest response to the ‘curry formula’ has come from second- and third-generation South Asians des-perate to recreate the food of their parents with-out having a phone pressed to their ear.

“The aim is to make curry as easy as dishes like spaghetti bolognese. Curry is the most popular dish in Britain and yet only 10 per cent of the population can cook it. I want to lift the veil on my simple curry-making formula, freeing people from the lists and chores that surround curry.”

She says it is important to have great taste buds as a cook and thinks that only elevates the appre-ciation for food. In fact, she thinks having terrific taste buds equates to having a love for food.

“Here is the truth. If you live food, you must have live, interested, expectant, demanding taste buds which will make you a demanding customer.”

Not surprisingly, she is always under pressure to entertain friends on a regular basis. Although she says she has a couple of cooks that she mixes that close friends rarely cook for her nowa-days because she is too confident in creating an authen-tic curry from any ingredient.

“No curry in my view should take more than three spices and 20 minutes. Meat on the bone simmers for a while but creating it is quick.”

People from all cultures, ages and abilities come to her cookery classes, and interestingly, she says more women than men attend the classes.

“I believe it is the women that want to re-gain their kitchens by learning a genuine Indian method. They know nothing about. It’s stran-ger but curry phobia is particularly prevalent in women in making the perfect curry. They own the curry gene – it’s seen as a matey, glory dish and men say things like they cook ‘my curry’.

Women now want to share the experience.”

Talking of curry phobia, the main reasons people often shy away from making Indian food are the exotic ingredients and number of cooking processes involved. Non-Indians, par-ticularly blaming the many complicated cookbooks that are on the market.

All curry cookbooks list hundreds of ingredients and involve long mar-ination, grinding and crushing. You need to have nothing else to do to be able to do these things and that also involves shopping for ingredients.

“Indian cooks don’t come in from a day’s work and create amazing curry with just three spices and no time at all.”

The growing number of peo-ple being converted to Nisha Katona’s way of cooking shows she is defi-nitely succeeding in her endau-ron. This has made the once complicated curry a lot simpler to make which, of course, is a good thing. Converting people to mak-ing quick curries has earned Nisha the nickname the ‘curry evangelist’.

What types of dishes do you enjoy cooking the most?

Humble, dull winter vegetables are the magician’s canvas and Indian dishes – they have a really spectac-u-lar before and after. It’s a magical trans-formation.

Do you have a signature dish?

Mango dal is the only recipe that my moth-er taught me. I nearly died of shock when she did!

Do you have any secret tricks you use when you are cooking?

I add a touch of sugar in most dishes and it quiedy satisfies all the areas of the tongue. It brings a smile to any curry.

Tell us something not many people know about you?

I speak Hungarian as I am married to a classical guitarist who is a Hungarian identical twin. This has got to be weird fact number one.

What are your biggest interests away from cooking?

I have a keen interest in the classical arts - music, art, theatre and opera. I am a trus-tee for the National Museums Liverpool and keen to make the arts more approachable to the people. Similar to my passion for cur-ry evangeline, I am keen on the idea of helping people feel like they can understand and enjoy the classical art forms instead of them being a keen horse rider and do street dancing (I kid you not) once a week.

Who are your cooking heroes?

Fanny Craddock, you can’t beat her high camp style and Jamie Oliver has a good heart. My mum has a great curry brain and my aunt has the culinary patience of a saint.

DISTANCE in a relationship can be defined in many ways, being married and not under-standing each other is one way. Being in a relationship and falling out of love is another thing that can create a distance. But nothing is worse than someone you love being in a far-away country, you don’t see each other every day and don’t have a way to communicate.

Many people do make the distance seem like a small obstacle, but this only comes with hard calls and dedication, trust.

You may be a girl living in Leeds and your boyfriend lives in London – if there is trust, you will be happy for him to go out after work for drinks with friends and know that he will not be sleeping around. If you are the guy in this relationship you should trust that she isn’t taking up date offers from other men.

If there is an event she wants to go to and you can’t accompany her, and she is go-ing to go with a male friend, you must trust her. It works the other way too. Just because your other half lives three hours away doesn’t mean you can play around.

A lot of people say a long-distance rela-tionship can’t work – the person is at the end of the phone and not in front of you; it caus-es too many arguments and you end up fan-cying someone else; but I don’t believe that.

As a hopeless romantic, I think every rela-tionship, regardless of distance, can work if there is an end goal. This is usually marriage, someone moving to the other city or moving half way to be together.

I have been in a long-distance relation-ship myself where the guy moved to hours away and we had a few things that we did on a regular basis to ensure the relationship was successful. No matter how busy we were, we made a point to speak on the phone every day, take them on our commute back home or before bed.

So if you are in such a situation, plan meet-ins in advance and on these occasions, make sure you enjoy your time with each other. It’s great going to see a mov-ie or a concert but rather than sit-ting in silence for two hours, do something where you can ac-tually talk to each other.

Another great way to communicate is via email. A few messages a day are a great way to bring a smile to your partner’s face and be reminded that you are thinking about that person every day.

A long-distance relationship can be hard work but think of it as a test. Both need to be as com-mitted as the other and work towards an end goal. If you both do this, love will prevail and your relationship will have a happy ever af-ter ending.

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