

Health first for Whitefish Bay's TV chef

But cooking show's dishes not short on flavor



Alamelu Vairavan, Whitefish Bay, (left) and Margaret Pfeiffer, a registered dietician, co-host a cooking show that emphasizes quality and healthy foods.

Whitefish Bay - Despite the frenzied lifestyles that are all too common in today's society, Alamelu Vairavan is on a mission. Through various forms of media, the Whitefish Bay resident aims to inspire people to carve time out of their day and cook quality, healthy foods.

"Cooking can be a lot of fun, and it's not something you have to spend a lot of time doing," said Vairavan, who is about to launch a second installment of her cooking series this weekend on local PBS affiliates WMVS-TV, Channel 10, and WMTV-TV, Channel 36. "You can do a lot with vegetables, and cooking with them can be fun, exciting and healthy."

Throughout her upcoming 13-episode series, "Healthful Indian Flavors with Alamelu," Vairavan will explore the many ways people can cook with Indian spices and other healthy condiments that will bring out the flavor and texture in everyday veggies. The new series comes on the heels

of Vairavan's initial foray into broadcasting. Last year, she hosted a six-part series of the same title that touched on a variety of themes, including the importance of children eating healthy.

Dietitian lends support

Unlike the previous iteration of Vairavan's series, the new episodes will feature a guest commentator: Margaret Pfeiffer, a registered dietitian and practicing cardiac nutritionist. Throughout the series, she will provide insight alongside Vairavan's cooking segments. Pfeiffer, a specialist in preventive cardiology, will offer comments on the nutritional aspects of cooking with the Indian flavors Vairavan uses.

In addition to serving as a TV hostess, Vairavan has delved into the publishing world in recent years. To date, she has published and contributed to four cookbooks, all concentrating on healthy eating and Indian cooking. Last year, she wrote a cookbook for an Indian audience after linking up with a New Delhi-based publisher. Additionally, she has hosted workshops, including one that sold out at the James Beard Foundation, a culinary organization, in New York City.

The initial installment of "Healthful Indian Flavors" aired nationally after PBS stations across the country picked the series up. The upcoming 13-part series also is expected to be seen on stations nationwide.

Finding her passion

Despite her many accomplishments, Vairavan said she is still amazed by the successes and her discovery of cooking. When she arrived in the United States more than a decade ago, Vairavan said she knew nothing about cooking.

"I didn't even know how to make a cup of coffee," she said, with a laugh. "Growing up in India, I came from a good family, and we had a cook. My job was to go to school, excel and be with my family."

Eventually, Vairavan married and moved to the U.S. and had to learn the ins and outs of cooking. As she dabbled with ingredients - including many foods and spices from her native country - Vairavan also took a keen interest in nutrition. She studied and eventually received a bachelor's degree in health sciences from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

"Really, I didn't know anything, so the big lesson I try and share when I'm talking with people is this: If I can cook, so can you," Vairavan said.

Message of empowerment

The fast-food mentality of America has been a concern to Vairavan, who said she believes people can still eat healthy when busy.

"Take the power of your health in your hands," she said. "As we all age, being healthy is important. Eat wholesome, organic foods, and don't do all the pill-popping. You also should get good exercise."

Vairavan said she has found her calling in life, and has reaped numerous benefits.

AT A GLANCE

WHAT: "Healthful Indian Flavors with Alamelu" TV series, hosting by Whitefish Bay resident Alamelu Vairavan

WHEN: 12:30 p.m. Saturdays, beginning Jan. 7 on WMVS-TV, Channel 10; repeats at 6 p.m. Fridays on WMVS and 2 p.m. Sundays on WMVT-TV, Channel 36