

Soundara Nayaki Questions to Alamelu Vairavan, Author & Culinary Educator

Singapore E-Magazine Interview at <http://www.onlinevoice.info>

From: Alamelu Vairavan, Milwaukee, WI, USA

1. Share your views on your cooking experience – like how and when did you develop interest in cooking...

Answer: I was born in Karaikudi and I was educated in Chennai, India. I grew up in a large household with a professional cook and regularly shared in an abundance of delicious foods. Although I knew nothing about cooking itself, I did greatly enjoy good food. After my marriage, I accompanied my husband Dr. K. Vairavan to the U.S. as a young bride. Necessity, as they say, is the mother of invention. I learned cooking in New York from a professional Chettinad Chef Natesan at my aunt Mrs. Visalakshi Alagappan's home, while my husband was finishing his Ph.D. at the University of Notre Dame. Following my basic cooking lessons in New York I joined my husband at Notre Dame. To my surprise, I found immediate joy in cooking. I am a person who loves the company of people and loves to entertain. My mother is a warm, gracious hostess and I have learnt the art of hospitality from my mother. Whenever friends dined with us, they indicated how much they enjoyed the food. That gave me great confidence in my cooking ability. Many even asked me for the recipes. These compliments not only gave me joy but have inspired me greatly.

Besides learning from Chef Natesan, I also during a regular visits to India, I expanded my culinary knowledge. We don't have a cook in America, and that motivated me even more to learn Chettinad and South Indian dishes during my trips to India. After my trips to India, I was happy to come home and try those recipes on my own modifying some time-consuming recipes to a shorter versions that still resulted in authentic dishes. While learning to cook, I also participated in many community activities and did many cooking demonstrations to the American public. All these activities encouraged my interest in cooking very much. As my interest grew, I discovered that there was hardly any book on South Indian cooking written in English. This fact, in addition to the repeated requests for recipes and my own growing interest in cooking, convinced me to write a South Indian cookbook. Another motivating factor has been my desire to pass on my recipes to our children and to the generations to come.

My co-author, my dearest friend and neighbour, Dr. Patricia Marquardt enjoys cooking and loves to explore different cuisine. Whenever Pat tried one of my Indian dishes for the first time, she would come to me with great enthusiasm and say, "This food is divine". How did you make it?" Pat was particularly fond of vegetarian dishes, flavoured rice dishes. After Pat learned a few Indian dishes, she encouraged me to sample her cooking, which I also found to be marvellous. When I asked Pat, to work on a book with me she was delighted. I was thrilled to have Pat observe my cooking, ask questions, request precise measurements of the ingredients, and help write the recipes in a step by step format. Our collaboration, which began several years ago with a vision of a good South Indian cookbook accessible to modern day cooks, now culminates in three publications by Hippocrene books publisher, New York.

In 1997, we published, "Art of South Indian Cooking".

In 2003, we published "Healthy South Indian Cooking".

In 2005, I contributed recipes to “Cooking Healthy Across America” published by American Dietetic Association by John Wiley publishers.

In 2008, we published “Healthy South Indian Cooking – Expanded Edition”.

In 2011, I also contributed recipes to “Healing Spices” by Dr. Bharat Aggarwal, a cancer research specialist at M.D. Anderson Care Center, Houston, Texas.

In 2011, I published “Chettinad Kitchen” by Westland-TATA company, New Delhi, India

2. How do you experiment your cooking...how do you categorise to your audience needs...your books, awards, achievements etc..etc..

Answer: Whenever I cooked my husband indicated how much he enjoyed the food I prepared. My husband kept encouraging me saying, I have become a good cook who knows how to prepare authentic healthful Indian dishes that are easy-to-prepare, not time-consuming. When friends dined with us, they indicated how much they enjoyed the food. Many even asked me for the recipes. I have also given cooking demonstrations in the community to American public, participated in block party contributions for neighbours and friends, and conducted local cooking classes.

As a culinary educator, I offer classes teaching the public easy ways to prepare and enjoy healthful foods using legumes, spices and herbs. I offer classes through community education, hospital and university outreach programs and “wellness programs’ for corporations.

I had been featured on numerous TV shows and was a featured guest in many radio shows in several states. My books and recipes have been featured in magazines, newspapers including USA Today, Los Angeles Times, Wisconsin Woman, Indian Today and India Abroad.

I also serve as a culinary consultant for major institutions creating fusion dishes for major events incorporating individual Indian dishes into a typically western meal resulting in a delicious blending of tastes.

I participated in many major “Food and Wine Events” in Wisconsin.

Additional information about my culinary activities can be found at www.curryonwheels.com

3. In general you can talk about your cooking experience....

Answer: I love food and people.

I attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, while raising a family, and graduated with a degree in B.S. Health Information Management. I worked in a health care facility part-time as a Director for Health Information Management. As a health care professional, I was very much into health. I saw how poorly the food was served to patients in the institutional settings. So, I decided to quit my job in health care setting and pursue my passion in promoting healthful cooking to the public.

In America, obesity and diabetes are on the rise. People are often encouraged to eat 5 to 7 servings of vegetables and fruits. America is blessed with abundance of foods. People here

usually eat vegetables as salads or simply steamed and boiled resulting in bland and boring vegetable that is not appealing. Americans consume more red meat and not as much vegetables.

There was a need to show people how to cook vegetables, lean meats and flavoured rice dishes in a more appealing way enhancing them with spices and legumes. I am able to transform vegetable haters to vegetable lovers including kids. Americans are not used to spices and legumes. I orient them to spices and legumes and I discuss how setup a basic spice pantry. I also talk about the health benefits of spices. Spices are easily available here and are inexpensive. To make things easier for Americans at the beginning, I have come up with a "start-up spice package" (includes 7 spices and 50 recipes) for them to make from our cookbook.. It is big hit...a cookbook with start-up spice kit! When Americans tell me that they love making poriyals, kootu, sambhar using variety of vegetables, it is a very satisfying, fulfilling experience for me.

My New York publisher has made our cookbook available through amazon.com and our book is available world-wide. Please see the reviews for the cookbook on amazon.com

During my last visit to India, I was approached by TATA-Westland company to write a cookbook on Chettinad cooking. "Chettinad Kitchen" cookbook was released in Jan. 2011, in India.

Now, I have Second Season TV cooking series in American Public Broadcasting station titled, "Healthful Indian Flavors with Alamelu" This will be 13 (1/2 hour show) that will be broad cast weekly starting Jan. 7th, 2012.

My first series of 6 shows was picked up around other states in U.S. and I am so excited to get such positive feedbacks from people around the country.