

CHEF CHAT

## Indian food specialist's 7th cookbook, 'Vegetarian Flavors,' makes cooking vegetables easy

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Alamelu Vairavan did not grow up cooking. In fact, when she got married and moved to the U.S., she didn't even know how to make a cup of coffee.

She craved the foods she'd grown up with in India, and if she wanted them, she had to learn to make them. Nearly 50 years after she moved to Wisconsin with her husband in 1971, she's built a nationwide audience for her recipes and approach in the kitchen.

She began by taking her electric skillet into her children's schools in Whitefish Bay to demonstrate recipes. Eventually she gained audiences across the country with 32 episodes of her own cooking show with MPTV, later picked up by PBS Create.

Now, she's published her seventh cookbook, "Vegetarian Flavors with Alamelu: Wholesome, Indian Inspired, Plant-Based Recipes" (Hippocrene Books, November 2020). Photographs for the cookbook were done by Linda Smallpage of Whitefish Bay. Vairavan has cooked dinner at the James Beard House in New York, but most of all she loves hearing from home cooks and helping them to add vegetables to their meals.

**Question: This is your seventh cookbook. What might surprise people who have seen your cooking programs or cookbooks?**

*Answer:* Even my family in India, who knew me when I came to this country without knowing any cooking, they are so surprised. When I came to the U.S., I was very young. I had only turned 18 when I came here. I didn't think about health or fiber or protein, all I wanted was home-cooked food.

I spent some time with my aunt and uncle in New York. My uncle worked for the United Nations, and as a foreign diplomat he could bring in a cook because they invited a lot of visitors. My husband was doing his PhD at Notre Dame, so my aunt said "Leave Alamelu here and we will teach her cooking." In India, I was born into an affluent family, we had a cook, driver and maid. Here I was alone and the one who was supposed to be it all ...

I am very thankful to my aunt, Visa. ... Their cook was a very well known chef in India, but also good in home cooking. He took me under his wings, opened the spice box and told me the names of the spices. I had a notebook, started writing. When we started cooking I was running away from the pot. The spices were sizzling and it scared me! He showed me to not be afraid.

After a month, my aunt took me to South Bend, Ind., where my husband was studying. The first thing my aunt did was take me to Kmart and get a small pot for the spices. She labeled all my spices. She said “OK, now you have to cook.” Then she stayed with me for 10 days to make sure I knew what I was doing and I was safe.

Right after that, I started a fire in the kitchen and didn’t know how to put it out. I ran to the street and found a stranger. Fire! This guy asked me for a blanket. I gave it to him, he put out the fire. I wouldn’t even go to the kitchen for a week after that. That’s how it all started. Slowly.

**Q: How did you go from cooking at home to teaching and sharing recipes?**

A: We moved to our Whitefish Bay home. Our next-door neighbor, Patricia Marquardt, is a professor at Marquette University. During summer, I keep my windows open. She came with her husband, tapped on the window and said, “It smells so good; what are you cooking?” Come in, come in, and our friendship started.

I was a student at UWM. My education journey took 10 years to finish my bachelor’s. By the time I was 30, I got my degree in health information management. I started working in the health care facility. I made friends with the dietitians, but I did not think about a cookbook. My children were growing up. When they’d have an international day they’d invite me into the schools. I’d go with my electric skillet or wok and do a demonstration.

**Q: What do you want people to know about your recipes and cooking style?**

A: My recipes are short and simple. You don’t have to slave in the kitchen for hours. You can create a vegetable dish within 30 minutes.

**Q: What have you learned about teaching others to cook Indian foods?**

A: Once you get the basic spices and pick up the vegetables, the recipes are easy. ...People go home and try the dish, then email me. That brings enormous happiness to me. I am making a

difference. I have gone to food pantries, senior centers, schools. I am so thankful to have my electric skillet.

**Q: You've always highlighted vegetarian recipes, though you're not vegetarian. What made this the time for a vegetarian cookbook?**

A: People will say "I don't like that vegetable." I take that as a challenge.

Here in America they steam, they boil, or saute vegetables in butter with a lot of salt. I want people to eat more vegetables. Working with diabetics and cardiac care patients, I found a definite need for people to learn how to cook vegetables. ... There are 101 recipes in the book.

I was really inspired when I attended a vegan and vegetarian festival in Scottsdale, Ariz. I walked in and it was eye opening. There were thousands of people, like our state fair! All these people are looking for flavorful recipes.

**Q: What are some of the things that set this book apart from your earlier cookbooks?**

A: People are interested in buying the spice box, but they aren't sure how to set it up. These are the spices you use to cook your vegetables. That is my actual spice box in the book photo. From all the questions I get from my cookbooks and TV viewers, I decided to include a multilingual guide using Hindi and Tamil as well as English. This is helpful if you shop at Indian or Asian markets. ...

You can get all the spices online, through Amazon, but also [ishopindian.com](http://ishopindian.com) is based near Mayfair Mall (Indian Groceries and Spices, 10701 W. North Ave., Wauwatosa), and they do my "Start-up Spice" package and ship it around the country.

*Table Chat features interviews with Wisconsinites, or Wisconsin natives, who work in restaurants or support the restaurant industry; or visiting chefs. To suggest individuals to profile, email [psullivan@gannett.com](mailto:psullivan@gannett.com).*

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