

## CHEF CHAT

# Indian cooking teacher has found her niche

*Chef Chat: Alamelu Vairavan*

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Alamelu Vairavan will be the first to tell you she's not a caterer or professionally trained chef. She just loves to cook.

Vairavan actually worked in health information systems and was disheartened by the packaged, processed meals she saw. Her children were in college when she decided something had to change. Driven by a love for healthy cooking, she focused on teaching others.

Sharing recipes that come together quickly, she also incorporates a number of gluten-free and vegetarian options into her menus.

Dreaming of reaching a larger audience became the reason for her to pursue her own cooking series on public television in 2011. Filmed locally at Milwaukee Public Television, "Healthful Indian Flavors with Alamelu" now reaches audiences around the country on the Create channel.

The companion cookbook of the same name was released last month (Hippocrene, \$19.95) and features recipes from the show, including some of her favorite lentil soups, seafood and vegetable dishes from the first three seasons plus new recipes.

Vairavan, who has also worked as a culinary consultant with local businesses, lives in Whitefish Bay with her husband. Find more of her recipes, blog and classes at [curryonwheels.com](http://curryonwheels.com).

**Q. Do you consider yourself a late bloomer when it comes to your cooking career?**

**A.** I am a late bloomer, although even before the book came, when I had my two kids in schools, the teachers would call me and say we are having international day, would you like to come do cooking for the students? I'd say sure, why not? I would take the wok and go.

I was a student at UWM, but when I was cooking, the kids would say this is so cool! I never thought I'd write a book or do television.

**Q. How did you get started cooking?**

**A.** I came from India at the age of 18. I was married and I didn't know cooking, not even how to make coffee, tea or rice. I had to learn cooking in a hurry. I learned in my aunt's home in New York. My

uncle worked for the United Nations and just like in India they had a well-known South Indian chef working in their home. That's how I started my cooking lessons.

**Q. How did you gather recipes?**

**A.** I would go back to India and every time, I'd go back to the kitchen, take a notebook and take notes. My mom could not believe it.

**Q. How do you describe the flavors of India and menus that you teach?**

**A.** Cooking in India, whether south, west, east, India is so well-known for using spices in cooking. Not only the spices, but the legumes, beans, peas and lentils. They use all those things quite often.

In north India the staple food is wheat. South India, the staple is rice. When you want to learn about vegetarian cuisine, you really want to look at South India. When you use the spices, you cut down on salt, cream and cheese.

**Q. Did you grow up vegetarian?**

**A.** I'm not a vegetarian. Although vegetarian is predominant in everyday meals, I was brought up in a family introduced to chicken, fish, shrimp and lamb meat.

When you go to an Indian restaurant, you'll see the word Chettinad. That is the region I come from, and you go to any part of the world, you will see recipes like Chettinad lamb or Chettinad chicken. It is famous.

**Q. You worked with a doctor for the introduction to this new cookbook?**

**A.** I wasn't actually working with the doctor, it was all magical. I got my degree from UW-Milwaukee and I was working as a professional in the health industry. I worked for a private facility, and when I saw how the food was served to the residents I was so heartbroken.

In America we have an abundance of food, but why do these institutions bring these prepackaged foods? It started bothering me that people are not fed properly.

My husband said, "Alamelu, just quit your job and do whatever you like to do." I quit. My two children are just entering college. I'm still young, I don't have a plan. What am I going to do?

As I'm sitting there that day, my husband called, did you give your resignation letter? Yes. He said, "You have an important call from USA Today, they want to interview you about your cookbook."

On January 8, 2007, this article about my cookbook came out, called “Tasty Curry Might Have a Fringe Benefit. Research says turmeric may prevent diseases.” When I started telling this reporter about the benefits of all the spices, I quoted the research scientists at UCLA doing studies on curry, and Dr. Bharat Aggarwal at the MD Cancer Center. She went to Dr. Aggarwal, and he was also interviewed in the article, along with other scientists.

**Q. How did you come to have a cooking program on public television?**

**A.** I was doing a lot of programs in farmers markets, and I like to think big. I thought the best way to teach would be television, and before my book was released or the cooking series, I was asked to appear on a Discovery Channel show called Home Matters. I took a baby step, and in that particular show, just before my segment, guess who appeared? Julia Child. I still have that DVD.

**Q. What has hosting a cooking program on public television taught you?**

**A.** I am very passionate about promoting healthful cooking. I feel like we have a lot of obesity, diabetes and other health issues. My mantra is also cooking is love, and it doesn't have to be all day or even two hours. Cooking can be half an hour.

**Q. Why is cooking a skill worth learning?**

**A.** Cooking can be learned at any age, by anyone. As we age, we do not want to reach out for more and more medications. We need to cook and eat healthy. When you cook on your own, everything is under your control. Now that I've finished this book, I want to explore other cuisines and learn more.

**Q. What's something you want to be known for?**

**A.** There is a great salt substitute that I talk about in my book. Take black pepper and ground cumin, half and half, and blend in a (clean) coffee grinder. That's my salt substitute.

## **Recipe**

Savory Tuna Masala

