

Spice of Life



Pinky Lilani FRSA runs Indian cookery courses in her kitchen. She also works tirelessly with the Asian Women of Achievement Awards and the Women's Interfaith Network. Chico Kidd talks to her about all her different roles.

It's my friend Jane's birthday, and another of her friends has given her a brilliant present. Gill went on a corporate jolly earlier this year, and enjoyed it so much she wanted to go back.

So here we are to experience "Spice Magic" – a culinary adventure hosted by the delightful and multi-talented Pinky Lilani. Essentially, it's an informal Indian cookery lesson – more a demonstration than a lesson, really, though chopping and stirring are allowed – followed by a leisurely devouring of the feast. But more of that later.

Pinky is the author of *Spice Magic*, the book, and is a development consultant with Sharwoods and other major food companies as well as adviser on Indian food to Tesco, Sainsbury's and Safeway. But she is far more than just another celebrity chef. Apart from being Chairman of the Asian Women of Achievement Awards, she recently helped to set up the Women's Interfaith Network to encourage communication and understanding between women of different faiths. As well, she is a mentor with the Prince's Youth Business Trust, a member of the Asia House special project committee, the Mayor of Croydon's charity committee and the European Women of Achievement Awards. Somehow, she also finds time to be an after-dinner speaker and to spend time with her family.

Yet when she arrived in England in 1977 with her new husband after a three-week whirlwind romance, she didn't know how to cook at all... She explains: "My love for food, for eating and for meeting people combined to force me to cook so that I could entertain. Hospitality and giving people copious amounts of food when they visit your home is an Indian tradition, and one that I wanted to continue. A cup of coffee and two digestive biscuits would be unpardonable in our home in Calcutta – the coffee tray always groaned with bahjias, cheese toasts and bite-size kebabs – I thought it all came together always! Hence it was a rude shock when I realised it would be a lot of hard work to replicate that – but I was determined to do so."

Since my own mother arrived from India with similar lack of expertise but never got any further than using Mr Sharwood's curry powder, I appreciate what she might have gone through – especially since in 1977 it wasn't that easy to get hold of anything

more exotic than garlic in England. Pinky managed to stay true to her enthusiasm for the Ayurvedic principles, and in her demonstrations describes the spice box as being the medicine chest and the beauty cabinet as well. The scent of Pinky's spice box alone is enough to rejuvenate you!

"According to the Vedas," she tells us, "food is said to be the mother essence of healing. Food and spices are for nourishment but spices also have medicinal qualities." She gives a few examples: "Turmeric is one of the world's best antiseptics – in ancient India it was applied to cuts, cleansing wounds and speeding up their recovery. It has an anti-inflammatory action that works well against coughs, colds, asthma and other bronchial-related illnesses. Ginger improves circulation, prevents flatulence and helps overall with digestion. It also is known to combat rheumatism and arthritis due to its key component zingerone." We in the West have become accustomed in recent years to hearing about the benefits of garlic, but it's old news in Ayurveda. "Garlic is a powerful antioxidant," explains Pinky, "fighting off the effects of damaging free radicals in the body. The key chemical in garlic, allicin, works as a natural antibiotic and helps the body's immune system."

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I wondered how Indian restaurants measure up to these principles. There's a famous anecdote about the invention of chicken tikka masala, supposedly Britain's most popular "curry" (but unknown in India), being created by adding a tin of cream of tomato soup to the dry dish when the chef was asked for gravy! So I asked Pinky her opinion of the Indian restaurant scene in Britain today?

"If the typical Indian restaurant does not embody the Ayurvedic principles," she says, "it is only because most people who go to them, demand onion 'bhajis' (it should be bhajiyas), chicken korma and nans. Not a well-balanced meal. In India we would eat a variety of dishes and share the food – not just have one dish by ourselves! However the restaurants obviously use all the wonderful spices that are good for your health. I think the restaurant scene has improved tremendously – though I do think vegetarian creations still have a way to go."

Pinky is involved in so many different things, it's difficult to comprehend how she fits them all in. There's no such thing as a typi-



cal week: "That's what I love about what I do – each day is different – though I do try to go to the gym three times a week, and do two crosswords and the simpler su doku every day (often at midnight)." Su doku? The woman is superhuman! "I do cook a fresh meal for the family every day," she continues, "often not Indian, but using herbs and spices that are typically Indian – pasta with chicken, cumin seeds and fresh coriander.

"Besides that – every day is different. Corporate team-building seminars based around Indian cookery, meetings for the Asian Women of Achievement Awards, the Women's Interfaith Network, radio discussions, seminars, speaking engagements, charity events and (this is a first) next month I have been asked to inaugurate an exhibition!"

The Asian Women of Achievement Awards is her brainchild: "I really believed that Asian women were not getting a fair deal. Stereotypes and lack of recognition were obstacles to the realization of their potential. The celebration of their achievements and inspiration it provided others has been phenomenal." Have they achieved what she hoped they would?

"They have achieved more than I ever imagined – and changed the paradigm for so many."

Pinky is a committed Muslim, and with a friend has set up the Women's Interfaith Network. "Gilda Levy and myself had been friends for a few years, but after 9/11 she felt we really needed to create an organisation that would help to counteract the effects of anti-semitism that the Jewish community was experiencing and the Islamophobia that was so evident. So we thought that a Jewish woman and a Muslim woman leading the initiative would be a great idea."

It sounds a wonderful idea – but how does it work exactly? Pinky explains, "We have a committee of women of almost all faiths and organize two major events and local events. We really hope to get women to set up groups locally to discuss relevant issues over cups of coffee which we could support." I ask whether things

have become more difficult since the London bombings, or are women more sensible about interfaith relationships? "The response to our organisation has been tremendous – everyone wants to join and be part of it, especially in the present climate. It's so reassuring

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for people to know that for most religions the issues are the same – often it is the media or fanatics who stir up hatred and fear."

An eminently sensible answer, as you would expect I'm almost afraid to ask how she relaxes. "Work for me is relaxing!" she beams. "I love what I do! My favourite way of relaxing is going to a 12 noon cinema show when nobody else is in the cinema – and parking is a doddle. I actually love having the whole cinema to myself and come out feeling rejuvenated and ready to start again!"

As for yoga, "I love yoga and have a teacher from the Bihar school of Yoga each year when I go back to Calcutta. He comes every morning and I feel brilliant – but lacking discipline, I only manage to do it about three times a week when I am back in London and that only for 20 minutes. But I must confess when I do it I feel energised."

Getting back to Spice Magic, though: after our chat, Pinky takes us into the kitchen. It's about six times as big as my kitchen, but all the pans look reassuringly well-used. One of the gas rings is alight, and on it a barbecue coal is glowing. Having had a previous demonstration from Gill, Jane and I know what is going on. In the meantime Pinky has

opened her fragrant spice box. "You only need six spices, plus garlic and ginger, to make 60 dishes," she tells us. These are coriander, cumin, chilli, turmeric, black mustard seeds and garam masala. And that last is not pre-ground stuff out of a jar, Pinky says sternly, it's whole spices: cloves, cardamom, cinnamon and bay leaves. She does,

however, purée garlic in quantity and keeps it in a box in the fridge. It looks like pistachio ice-cream: this is apparently what garlic does when treated like this.

Six spices, and four techniques: bhunao, dhuan, tarka and dun. No-one has ever put it that simply before. And I've been cooking Indian for years. Spice magic, indeed.

Pinky demonstrates, explaining as she goes. Bhunao means frying at a high temperature for quite a long time. And high means high. None of your wussy turning the ring down once it's got hot.

The barbecue coal on the stove is for the dhuan method. Pinky picks it up with a pair of tongs, puts it in a pre-prepared dish which has been marinating, and adds a dash of oil. Smoke billows out, quickly covered by the lid. The end result will taste as if it has been barbecued. Tarka means putting spices

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into hot oil to release their flavour, and dun, cooking with steam. She shows us all four techniques, and the resulting dishes, along with "some she made earlier", form the feast. Dessert, also made from scratch, includes kulfi and mango mousse. Never mind all that messy business of getting the flesh off fresh mangoes and juice all down your arms. Pinky's secret is mango purée in a tin. "But it has to be Alphonse mangoes!"

Among our number we have a vegetarian, one person who doesn't eat dairy, and one with a coeliac intolerance. Not one of us feels disappointed.

*The book **Spice Magic**, as well as recipes, surveys the influence of history, culture, geography and religion on the food habits of India. But the hardest part of writing the cookbook, Pinky says, was measuring all the spices so precisely. She published and launched the book in 2001, promoting it by holding culinary demonstrations in shops with her multi-purpose cooker. This is what she usually cooked.*

MASALA WALE ALOO (Spicy Bombay potatoes)

4 large potatoes, weighing about 1.25kg (2lb 2oz)

1 teaspoon chilli powder

1 1/2 tablespoons coriander-cumin powder

1/4 teaspoon turmeric

1 tablespoon tomato puree

4 tablespoons oil

6 curry leaves

1/2 tablespoon black mustard seeds

2 teaspoons pureed garlic

2 green chillies split down the middle

1 tablespoon lemon juice

15g (1/2 oz) finely chopped coriander leaves

salt

First cook the potatoes in their skins in a pan of boiling salted water until tender. Drain, cool, peel and cut them into 2.5cm(1in.) cubes. Set aside. Mix the chilli powder, coriander-cumin powder, turmeric and tomato puree with a tablespoon of water and set aside. (This is the masala mixture.) Heat the oil in a large frying pan and, when it is very hot, drop in a curry leaf. If it sizzles and turns a darker shade, add all the other leaves and the mustard seeds. If the leaf turns very dark, reduce the heat and add the remaining curry leaves and mustard seed after a minute. As soon as the seeds start to pop, add the garlic, the masala mixture and 125 ml (4oz.) of water. Stir for a few minutes over a high heat. Add the potatoes, salt and green chillies, then lower the heat and cook for 2 minutes. Add the lemon juice, garnish with the fresh coriander and serve immediately.

Visit Pinky's website at www.spicemagic.com