



SPICE OF LIFE

A quest to eat well and improve her health saw Usha Gupta take advantage of lockdown and retirement to reinvent the cooking of her childhood

Cooking has been a solace for many of us over the past 12 months. From sourdough starters to Bake-Off worthy cakes to Insta-worthy suppers, we've all been at it. But for one woman, what started out as a passion has turned into a career.

Microbiologist Usha Gupta, who lives in Marlborough where she grows her own splendid array of veg, turned 60 in May 2020, during the first lockdown.

"The lockdown, working from home and turning 60 prompted me to take early retirement and concentrate on my passions in life," she says. "I'm passionate about travel, gardening/vegetable growing, cooking, photography, reading, theatre shows, live music events and Qigong! Whilst the travel, theatre and live music events have been on hold, I started Usha's Very Own."

Usha's Very Own – with recipes, photos and videos on its website, Instagram and Facebook – is already attracting curry-lovers, health nuts and, of course, people trapped at home keen on a new hobby.

"This food comes from the heart," says Usha. "The recipes are authentic and true to the flavours my mum shared with us. But I use organic and fresher ingredients, strip out most dairy and gluten, and work with coconut sugar wherever possible."

The reason for the focus on health? Usha was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis in 2014 and to slow the disease's progression, she followed medical advice, but also transformed her family's Indian vegetarian recipes to be lean, vegan and gluten-free.

"Rheumatoid arthritis is an inflammatory condition so any diet high in anti-inflammatory foods (rich in omega-3, antioxidants, fibres and flavonoids) is deemed to be beneficial in



Gusha's parents in Nairobi circa 1959



‘I gave up gluten, dairy, refined sugars and convenience foods on top of my already vegetarian diet. In just over a month, I felt so much better’

relieving the symptoms,” she explains. “Being a chronic condition, I feared I wouldn’t be able to do all the things I wanted to do in life. After consulting with a nutritional therapist, I gave up gluten, dairy, refined sugars and convenience foods on top of my already vegetarian diet. In just over a month, I felt so much better. The bloating had gone and I felt more energetic.”

Ever true to her microbiology training, she’s worked assiduously to get the conversions right in her recipes for hearty curries, veg-filled flatbreads, chutneys, salivating snacks and luscious desserts.

“The curries are mostly vegan and gluten-free anyway, but the breads, snacks and desserts have been tricky to adapt. Usually my fourth try is spot-on,” she laughs.

She also tries to ensure her recipes boast the proteins and iron that vegetarians and vegans crave, as well as complex carbohydrates that break down slowly, unlike classic sugar. Her family’s original vegetarian recipes are also featured, for those of you not quite ready to part with ghee, wheat flour or that sweet tooth!

One of Usha’s earliest memories is watching her mother in the small kitchen of their Kenyan home, whipping up curries from her native northern Punjab state.

“I remember watching my mother cook in our small single-storey courtyard property in Kenya where we had a stove in one of the two rooms,” she says. “My earliest memory of cooking by myself was at the age of 11 after we arrived in the UK in the late 1960s. I used to come straight home from school, change out of my uniform, and go into the kitchen to start the curry for dinner. My father worked shifts at Mars Confectionery and my mother full time at Burtons Biscuits to provide for us. After ➔

preparing the food, I would sneak in some time watching television before my mother arrived home – Star Trek and Blue Peter were amongst my favourites at that time.

“Cooking early on in life instilled in me a love for food. I learnt most from my mother, who had learnt from her own mum. Over time, she and I would have a production line of sorts going to make the samosas. I would roll out the pastry, mum would make the pockets, I would then fill them with the delicious filling and mum would seal them or vice versa.”

Usha’s passion for cooking saw her run her own catering business in Wiltshire, selling her food at fairs and giving classes.

“I find inspiration in cooking for family and friends and seeing the joy it brings to them. My son, Girish, has a voracious appetite, and I enjoy cooking up his favourites, one of which is chole bhature, a chickpea curry with bhaturas, a flat bread. I’ve been teaching him and my daughter-in-law, Alexandra, how to cook, which has been great fun and also a source of inspiration to try new recipes.

“Cooking is also a way for me to connect to my ancestors. I have many memories of cooking with my mother so ensuring that her recipes are still brought to life is a huge inspiration for me. And her recipes were hand-me-downs from generations ago, so in reality we’re talking about preserving an entire cultural heritage. I’d like to build on that by traveling around the Indian subcontinent to learn more about vegetarian Asian cuisine.”

So what is her favourite comfort food and naughty treat?

“Pakorras with a piping hot cup of masala chai. Whenever I am feeling under the weather this is what my body craves and what makes me feel instantly better. Pakoras are made with a number of various vegetables mixed in a spicy chickpea flour batter. They’re very filling and moreish, especially when they’re hot and crisp straight out of the fryer. The spices in the masala chai are just so heart-warming.

“My guilty treat is ras malai, a dessert made with discs of paneer soaked in sugar syrup and then transferred to a saffron and cardamom-infused milk which has been reduced to make



Usha, Kenya,
14 months old



'I'm happiest when I come across a truly vegetarian restaurant with a wide choice of dishes made with fresh local ingredients and no chemical enhancers'



the milk creamy. It contains all the ingredients I should avoid but it's just so delicious. Definitely naughty, hence I treat myself to this once in a while. I'm working on a vegan version."

One of the delights most of us are looking forward to taking up again once restrictions are lifted is dining out.

"I like to discover new cuisines," says Usha. "I'm happiest when I come across a truly vegetarian restaurant with a wide choice of dishes made with fresh local ingredients and no chemical enhancers. Eliane in Marlborough fits the bill. The food is fresh, delicious and nutritious. They use only the best ingredients, sourced locally wherever possible, and cater for vegetarians, strict vegans and those with allergies."

Back to home-cooking, though, isn't Indian food difficult to get right?

"Nonsense!" declares Usha. "It's not that hard, although you do need patience," Usha says. "The trick is getting the curry base (tarka) right. Master that, and you'll be making delicious curries in no time!"

And apparently, the secret to a good tarka is time.

"Take your time layering the flavours from the partial caramelisation of the onions, through adding individual spices, fresh garlic, ginger and green chillies to finishing off with the garam masala made from a blend of whole spices, dry roasted, cooled and ground to a fine powder. Each family has their own secret recipe for the garam masala passed down from one generation to the next.

"Sometimes it's hard not to rush this process but it's so worth it when you sit down to taste what you've created!"



ushasveryown.com