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The Seasoning Of a Food Guru

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Hindu Cuisine, Writing, Acting Create a Pungent Life for Madhur Jaffrey

In New York city there is a famous Jeffrey and Jaffrey, both pronounced the same. The first is an air-scissoring, innovative ballet company. The second, an earth-wandering, innovative guru of Indian cuisine. It is hard to believe there was a time when Madhur Jaffrey, author of award-winning cookbooks, was a humbler in the kitchen. She recalls, "My very first cooking experience was by force. I had to study domestic science in school in Delhi and one of the subjects was cooking. In the test I was given some potatoes and some masalas and told to cook. I probably failed because I'd never cooked."

A lot of sauce has flowed in the cooking pots since then. Today, Jaffrey is the Julia Child (a popular American woman chef, writer and critic) of Hindu culinary culture. While Child is busy publicly justifying meat-eating and cruel methods of livestock raising, Jaffrey is articulating the ancient principles of Hindu vegetarianism and put a fantastic collection of non-meat recipes in print, World-of-the-East Vegetarian Cooking. She is also a food critic, restaurant consultant and the host of public television programming on Asian cooking-shown in many parts of the world. For 30 years she has lived in America.

Draped in a green cotton salwaar-kameez outfit Madhur Jaffrey met me for our HINDUISM TODAY interview at Diwan, a tony, pink-toned Indian restaurant in Manhattan. She is the food consultant here, a bland term for a very creative craft. Every item on the menu aromatically arose from her senses and hands. They are blends of family recipes, regional specialities and pure serendipity.

Waiters are hovering nearby, overshadowing her petiteness. As a girl she came to London to learn acting. Years on the stage and film sets impart a coronic presence, but she is usually soft-spoken. As our interview proceeds she tastes the lassi (sweet, lime-flavored yogurt drink). To me it is perfect. But in the built-in mass spectrometer of her tongue it needs more jeera. Instructions are gently, precisely conveyed to the waiters.

Jaffrey can be volcanic. She tells how she took a Chinese friend to the Kasiviswanath Siva Temple in Benares who wanted to record the temple bells. One of the priests accosted them and said Jaffrey had polluted the temple by allowing her friend to enter. Jaffrey grilled him, "You are ruining Hinduism because it is your kind of orthodox fundamentalism which is so terrible for the country."

Cuisine mastery was a spinoff of her acting pursuits. She left home in Old Delhi to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London in an era when there wasn't an Indian curry place on every corner. Jaffrey wasn't a strict vegetarian then. Paper-thin English roast beef and bleached vegetables at the Academy's cafeteria rapidly became wearisome. Recipes from her mother began arriving in the mail and Jaffrey reproduced them by trial and a lot of error. The cooking talents simmered slowly on the back burner while her acting career hit full boil. She still occasionally practices stagecraft and her appearances include the Broadway plays *The Guide* and *Conduct Unbecoming*; the films *Autobiography of a Princess*, *Shakespearewallah*, and *Heat and Dust*; and the three-part BBC series *A Wanted Man*.

Her pace is frenetic: films, plays, cookbooks, articles for upper crust magazines from *Vogue* to *Gourmet*, long travel researching for these stories. Somehow she manages to juggle all her interests successfully.

Jaffrey grew up in an enormous house in Old Delhi, in a joint family of thirty to forty people. "We were a very Hindu family and my grandmother very specifically kept up the traditions of Hinduism. She believed in giving alms to the poor. In fact, there was a whole system to almsgiving which my grandmother followed meticulously. Hinduism came to me from my grandmother, and from my mother who kept up all the rituals and traditions after my grandmother died."

In her childhood home there was an annex for the dining room, kitchen, pantry and storeroom. "The women of the house cooked at every festive occasion. The women would be rolling puris, pickling and doing the things which were done at every festival. It was always exciting to watch because the women did not work quietly. They talked and recounted their lives as younger women. My mother would wake up at 3:00 AM to keep the fast of Karva Chauth for the welfare of the husband, and we children would get up very often with her to watch her. She couldn't eat until the moon came out, and she would tell us the fascinating story behind the fast."

These childhood stories of Hindu gods and goddesses, enlightenment and ignorance, stayed with Jaffrey. A few years back she compiled them-with her own illustrations for other children in an award-winning book, *Season of Splendor*.

When Jaffrey was thirteen, she remembers going to some lectures at the Ramakrishna Mission. The swami giving the talk compared the soul to a light in a basin of water. If the water has ripples, the light will be unclear: the moment you can still the water you see the light clearly. Jaffrey notes, "It's little things like that one remembers. I don't know what they add up to but they probably blend and contribute to your philosophy. Tiny events, tiny thoughts in a chain of thoughts and events which make you who you are - I suppose."

Her three daughters, from former husband - actor Sayeed Jaffrey - are living their own lives now. On raising them, Jaffrey admits in terms of morality and discipline, it is hard, especially regarding respect to elders. "All you can do is give them certain Hindu values which I think I have. I think my kids have gone through the worst of the drugs in schools and colleges and they have managed to come out totally free. Their tolerance, sense of goodness and charity is greater than mine. So obviously I have done something right." Is middle-age steering her toward more meditative Hindu practice? Not quite yet. "Meditation is something I need to do, aspire to do, but I haven't gotten around to it yet."

In 1967 Jaffrey married American violinist Sanford Alien. An apartment in Manhattan and a country house in upstate New York serve both professional and reclusive interests. On weekends the couple is famous for entertaining, Sanford on violin, Madhur on the gas range. But don't look for her in the country house's kitchen. The couple have turned a desanctified Federal church-built in the 1830's - into a weekend retreat near their house. A customized kitchen was integrated into

the rustic getaway. Says Jaffrey, "It's my work studio where we can also entertain. We thought we'd have these old-fashioned evenings with dinner and dancing."

Jaffrey was one of the first Hindu chefs to advocate the electric blender, but also to disabuse the western public about generic curry. She writes, "To me the word curry is as degrading to India's great cuisine as the term chop suey was to China." According to Jaffrey's laws, curry powders and pastes should be unceremoniously dumped in the garbage. Her own recipes are often refined explorations of food cultures munched through in wayward travels. But even her own local supermarket can trigger a creative avalanche of flavor combinations.

In her estimation, "In the West they don't know how to eat vegetarian food correctly. The ancient civilizations who knew vegetarianism eat very well. The Chinese have bean curd products, the Indians have a lot of milk products. When you eat a Hindu vegetarian meal you come away totally satisfied." Jaffrey is presently back on the culinary road, tasting, writing, maybe meditating.

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