



University of Iowa photos

# Six recipe cards, a wing and a prayer

BY NINA MUKERJEE FURSTENAU

An astonishing network of mothers, aunts, and cousins — epic really in its proportions — reached out to me in Kansas when I was 17 in 1979. It was because of Indian boys. Other than my brother and a son of a family friend, no Indian males my age had lived nearby for most of my life. Heads were no doubt scratched, brows furrowed. Then, as if by magic, one day an Indian boy arrived at the bus stop on Fourth Street.

He — a friend of a cousin of an aunt, I am sure — stumbled out of a bus to meet me (though this was never said directly), after a 14-hour-plus ride north from a university in Texas. He had been raised in India but had come to the United States a year or two earlier. He was dressed well and was from a good family. Unfortunately, just before leaving, the young man had broken his arm in such a way that the position of the cast made him look as if he were taking the oath of office or reciting the Boy Scout pledge. Either way, I couldn't take him seriously.

After that, no other young Indian male visitors arrived, and I was relieved. I was off to college, anyway. Who could have predicted that there, swiftly, I would meet and soon marry Terry, a Missouri man from a farming family? Not only did we marry, we left for the Peace Corps just after my graduation. So, though Terry and I had our own two cultures to juggle, we decided to add yet one more: Tunisia.

In June 1984, we left for a two-year assignment in the



## Biting Through the Skin

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Mukerjee Furstenau will appear at 10 a.m. Saturday at Kendall College School of Culinary Arts, 900 N. North Branch St. For details or to RSVP, call 847-432-8255.

from mine in Kansas: softball and Slurpees, ballet and tap, clarinet and piano, so far removed from her doings but a tether to home just the same.

I smile now at the mix of English and Bengali on these recipe cards. Blots smudge several lines, but I make out “take one whole chicken, skin, cut into pieces and set aside.” I groan, remembering my mother pulling at yellow

North African desert. I packed only essentials: two dresses, three long-sleeved cotton shirts, a pair of loose pants. I tucked in a tiny sample of Clinique makeup. I brought Rockport shoes, ugly and thick; a sun hat; and a small flip notebook with “RECIDEX Recipe Organizer” printed to look like cross-stitch on its front.

The month before we left, I sat facing my mother at the kitchen table as she folded laundry and tried to write down all the recipes I couldn't do without. I could have relied entirely on the native foods of Tunisia, or on noodles or peanut butter from the commissary at the U.S. embassy in Tunis, where I heard volunteers had access, but instead I copied out six recipes as I sat at our Kansas table: a curry for meats, green beans with cumin, tomato chutney, dal, payesh, and oatmeal cookies. The Indian recipes, I realize now, were the same ones for which my mother had written frantic letters to Didu when she left India for Thailand in 1960. They had emerged from her girlhood in India and now

chicken skin over the sink in Kansas, hacking at the carcass limbs. The soft, fatty skin would cling to her fingers and bits would stick to the sides of the sink. She went at the task with a set face, bringing with her from India a sure sense of how things got done in the kitchen. This was odd, though, since she never cooked until after her marriage, until after she was in the United States, really.

When I was a child, tomato chutney was normal to me. Later I learned that most people in Kansas had never heard of chutney made with tomatoes. Even now, the thought of it makes my mouth pucker anticipating the sweet, tart mixture of chopped tomatoes cooked with sugar, raisins, mustard seeds, and lemon. There are many chutneys, or relishes, in India, but this is a common one in Bengal and in my mother's kitchen. Chutney is meant to cleanse the palate for the next dish, to separate the tastes of lentil and vegetable and meat if it is served, to balance flavors.

With those six recipes, my heritage was so quickly reduced to something I could put in a pocket. In the Indian tradition, I have inherited many fine pieces of jewelry from my family. More precious than these jewels, though, are the recipes my mother gave me. They live in ways the other items cannot because they are adaptable — more cayenne? less ginger? Such a useful kind of gift, with the right appeal to my practical Midwestern mind: a gift that will not lose value, seem too fancy, go out of style, or get diluted, separated, melted down or forgotten.

Born in Thailand to Indian parents, Nina Mukerjee Furstenau grew up in Kansas, served in the Peace Corps in Tunisia, and founded a publishing company with her husband. She is now a food writer based in Fayette, Mo., who teaches journalism at the University of Missouri. This essay was adapted from her memoir, “Biting Through the Skin.” For related recipes, visit [printersrowjournal.com](http://printersrowjournal.com).