



Over four decades have passed, but Nina Mukerjee Furstenau vividly remembers playing softball, riding her ten-speed, and going to the Dairy Queen, 'eyes bright, fingers sticky, all the while losing' her 'identity.'

The second child of immigrants, Sipra, an English teacher, and Sachin Mukerjee, an engineer, Nina had just started school in Pittsburg, Kansas.

Her hometown was in the 1960s, she writes in her memoir, *Biting through the Skin, an Indian Kitchen in America's Heartland*, 'rich in its own story of assimilation, but had no particular interest in differences.'

But securely hidden behind their front door, Nina recalls, 'India could be found in the aroma in the air, the taste of cardamom, the brush of my mother's silk sari, and the cadence of my father's speech.'

Her memoir covers about two decades leading to her marriage to a rancher, who was also a Peace Corps volunteer like her in Tunisia in the early 1980s.

Nina teaches science and agricultural journalism at the University of Missouri.

She also writes a food column, *A Spiced Life*, for the *Columbia Tribune*, and a blog, *Savor Missouri*, for *Missouri Life* magazine.

She received a master's degree in creative writing from MU in 2007, and a degree in magazine journalism from the Missouri School of Journalism in 1984.

Nina and her husband Terry launched and published three construction magazines in 1987 and two others.

What did home-cooked Indian food mean to you while growing up in a little town in Kansas?

Children in the Midwest learn their food story early. For instance, corn on the cob is served at July 4 celebrations, and fried chicken too. These foods are tied to the agricultural cycle and the settlement story of the region.

I not only had that story, but another of crops harvested half a world away in India. The food my mother prepared, despite the lack of availability of some of the ingredients, was what she would have made in Bengal.

From this I learned early that there were other settlement stories.

I was born in Thailand, where my father worked as an engineer, and I came to America along with my older brother as a toddler.

My strongest connection to India while growing up in Kansas was when the front door of our home closed around 5 pm.

The story of India was alive in my senses, as my mother would tell me the importance of spices and why a meal had to be balanced.

I learned that certain foods were prepared during certain festivals and began to learn about various Indian rituals in the kitchen. All this would prove very helpful when we visited India and traveled across the country.

My mother cooked using the vegetables that were available seasonally — and this was in the 1960s and 1970s, years before

'When you know a region's food story, you know its people'

The boundaries of varied cultures often meet at the dinner table, writer Nina Mukerjee Furstenau tells **Arthur J Pais**



Nina Mukerjee Furstenau

COURTESY: NINA MUKERJEE FURSTENAU

the organic and seasonal vegetables movement in the United States.

There was no Indian store in and around Pittsburg, and hardly anyone knew about cooking with yogurt. So it was a big challenge for my mother to find what she needed. She began teaching English few years after we settled in Pittsburg and as she got busier, she did not have time to cook Indian food every day, and that meant that many times we ate quickly prepared American food.

But we, and I in particular, looked forward to the dinners on weekend when India came home.

What was your assimilation process like?

I was very proud of our heritage and our food. But my brother and I also wanted to be like other Kansas children and later, teenagers.

In all our activities, I know we did the best we could knowing that in some way we represented India to the town. This had the effect of producing high-achieving children, and it seems a little tiring thinking about it now.

I had fun in school, but I didn't always share my home story.

At 16, I decided it was time to show part of my private world to some of my classmates.

My mother and I cooked several dishes, nothing fancy, but what I would call comfort food, and as I offered them to my friends, I explained how my mother and I had prepared them.

But a friend looked at our chicken dish, poked at the meat, and asked, What is it? I was hurt. The dinner was a gift from my perspective.

I did not try again as a teenager to offer home food.

What are some of the most important things about your Bengali heritage that you learned in your mother's kitchen?

In my mother's house, I witnessed what I term as the kitchen dance. Whole spices starting to pop in hot oil, chopped onions ready to sizzle. They went into the pan and released a new aroma into the air.

My mother turned gracefully from stove to chopping block to spice boxes. I realized then that spices release different flavors depending on how they are used — whole spices in hot oil deepen the flavor of a dish, powdered spices or roasted ones give nuance and layered taste.

Moreover, I learned the food story of a land that was far away. When you know a region's food story, I feel you know its people. What tastes are preferred? What methods are used to get those flavors? What proteins, pulses, chutneys are favorites?

Food and the system to get that food to your plate tell you quite a bit about what's important in a culture.

This is no different for immigrants to a new land. I could see from the groceries and farms around my hometown, how Kansans ate.

What role did Indian food play at your wedding?

I met Terry while studying at the University of Missouri. He comes from a farming background, of German-Swedish origin.

I don't know whether he had eaten



'When you know a region's food story, you know its people'



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From right, Nina Mukerjee Furstenau with her mother Sipra, father Sachin and brother Sandeep when they first moved to Kansas.

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Indian food before, but he fell in love with my mother's cooking and then my own.

He loved the flavors and a variety of tastes and he wanted to know a lot about our heritage. This was one of the most important things that endeared him to my family.

We were married in 1983 in Pittsburg, Kansas.

We had two weddings in one day: First, a Methodist wedding, and in the evening, a Hindu wedding, with my great uncle as the officiating priest.

Relatives from other towns came for the

wedding and the women worked hard to help make Bengali dishes.

This was before there were companies catering to Indian weddings, so it was an all-out effort by a lot of kind people.

Everyone pitched in and on the day of the wedding there was a near disaster (*laughs*) when one friend slid the foil-covered Sandesh tray that my mother had lovingly prepared into the oven. Thankfully, my mother noticed and pulled it out unharmed.

My in-laws had not been exposed to Indian culture, and yet I found that they embraced my two heritages. My father-in-law, who did not go to college and had lived



Nina's children, Nathan and Anna Furstenau

most of his life in Missouri and Nebraska, was genuinely curious about my Indian heritage.

What was it like cooking in Tunisia?

I loved cooking in Tunisia. It was certainly not because of having a state-of-the-art kitchen. In fact, we had a hot plate and mortar and pestle. No refrigerator, not many utensils, and the pots we had were thin aluminum.

The women there, however, were enamored with Indian movies and were curious about Indian foods and culture.

For the first time in my experience, I shared my foods and recipes and accepted the same from my Tunisian friends. My most treasured memories of that time are not from my job, but of cooking with the women around a two-burner hot plate. They taught me so much about generosity and about their own food story.

I felt ready after that experience to share my foods back in the US.

How did knowing about Indian food help you during your visits to India?

I had come to know a little of how Indian regional foods had been influenced over the centuries by settlers from other parts of Asia, and later in the 16th century onwards by the Portuguese and British.

This intrigued me and I began to see how Indian heritage and culture is multilayered. I enjoyed the idea that you could see these layers, literally, in the way food was prepared. You could peel back history by looking at your plate.

What are some of the exciting experiences you have had during your India trips?

I thoroughly enjoy visiting Indian temples and places of history. I feel transported in those spots. I was fortunate to be able to visit Tirupati with my parents just a few years ago and it is one of my most memorable trips.

How much of your Indian heritage has rubbed off on your children?

My son and daughter, who are in college and are living independently, have always loved Indian food. I felt that in many ways, the food of India was all I had to pass down to them — so I made it often.

I began *Biting Through the Skin: An Indian Kitchen in America's Heartland* with an essay I wrote about discovering that the first recipes I asked for and prepared when I started my independent life were the same basic Indian recipes my mother had asked of my grandmother in letters she wrote in the 1960s when she left home for Thailand.

Those recipe cards, something I could fit in a shirt pocket, seemed like a cultural baton to me. My daughter writes to me now asking for recipes. And that is a very gratifying feeling.

In many ways, I feel that all families in the US are small pockets of culture within the larger American landscape.

The foods we eat, the ways we prepare those foods, say a lot about who we are. Food tells story. It tells our particular story. I find that the boundaries of varied cultures often meet most easily at the dinner table and to me that's not only accessible to all of us, but a fascinating and delicious way to bridge differences. ■



From Nina's kitchen

Pishima's Pungent Jhaldae Maach

(Mustard Fish)

Preparation: 15 minutes

Cooking: 15 minutes

Serves: 4

Ingredients

1½ tablespoons mustard seed, ground into a paste with a little water
 ½ teaspoon turmeric
 Salt to taste
 1 green chili, finely chopped
 ¼–½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
 1 cup water
 1 tbsp oil
 1 small onion, sliced in long, thin strips
 8 pieces fresh fish
 1 green chili, finely chopped
 1 cup water

Method

Mix the mustard paste, turmeric, salt, green chili, and cayenne in a small bowl, add 1 cup of water, and set aside. Heat the oil in a frying pan, add the sliced onion, and stir-fry until the onion turns slightly brown.

Push the onions to the side of the pan and drain the oil. Place fresh fish fillets on the surface. Pour the mustard paste mixture over the fish to cover. Cover and simmer until sauce is thick and fish is cooked through.

Serve with rice.

Shukto

(Bitter Gourd with Mixed Vegetables)

Preparation: 20 minutes

Cooking: 25 minutes

Serves: 4

Ingredients

1½ tsp mustard seeds, finely ground and mixed with 1 cup water
 ½ tsp turmeric powder
 ½ tsp cayenne, plus another ¼ tsp (optional)
 A handful of *bari*, about 1/8 cup (pureed, dried lentils made into small balls, available at Asian groceries)
 2 tbsp vegetable oil
 ½ tsp *panch phoron* (Bengali five spice mix) plus another ¼ tsp
 1 dried chili pepper
 ½ bitter gourd, chopped into very small pieces
 1 carrot, julienned and parboiled
 1 medium-sized potato, boiled in its jacket and cooled overnight in the refrigerator
 ¾ cup green beans, cut in half to match the carrots in length

Salt to taste
 ½ cup water
 ½ tsp clarified butter

Method

Peel the potato, cut it into small cubes, and set aside. Stir ground mustard seeds into 1 cup of water. Add turmeric and cayenne, mix well, and set aside. In a heavy saucepan, heat half tbsp oil.

If using *bari*, add it now to the hot oil and when it is slightly browned, remove from oil and set aside.

Add *panch phoron* to hot oil, then quickly add dried chili pepper, broken in half. Let the spices sizzle for 5 seconds, then add all the vegetables.

Stir-fry for 3 minutes. Pour mustard, turmeric, and cayenne mixture into the pan with the vegetables. Add ½ cup water. Add salt to taste and heat through.

In a small pan, heat clarified butter, add ¼ tsp *panch phoron*, and let sizzle for 10 seconds. Add ¼ tsp cayenne if desired, immediately take pan off the heat, and add the mixture to the vegetables.

Add *bari* just before serving. Serve Shukto with rice.

Time to Chat Chops

(Ginger Mashed Potatoes with Savory Filling)

Makes: about 12 chops

Preparation: 20 minutes

Cooking: 30 minutes

Serves: 4

Ingredients

4 potatoes, boiled in their jackets and set aside to cool (these can be boiled a day ahead and refrigerated)
 Salt to taste, about 1 tsp
 Dry ginger powder to taste, about 1 tsp

For the filling:

2 tbsp oil
 A small piece of cinnamon stick



3 whole cardamom pods
 3 whole cloves
 1 small bay leaf
 ½ large onion, chopped
 ½ tsp sugar
 ½ pound ground meat (lamb or beef)
 ¼ tsp cayenne pepper (or more, to taste)
 1 inch of mashed fresh ginger
 1 clove garlic
 2 eggs, beaten, set aside
 1 cup fine bread crumbs, set aside

For the filling: Heat 2 tbsp oil in a saucepan; when hot, add cinnamon stick, cardamom, cloves, and bay leaf.

Let it sizzle for 10 seconds, add chopped onion, and fry until onions begin to turn brown at the edges. Push onions to the side of the pan and add sugar.

Let the sugar caramelize slightly and then stir in with onions. Add ground meat and brown. Add cayenne pepper, ginger, and garlic. Stir-fry for a few minutes. Stir to mix. Add

just enough water to cover and simmer until dry, stirring occasionally (about 20 minutes).

Wrapping: Beat 2 eggs in a shallow bowl and set aside. Pour bread crumbs into another shallow bowl and set aside. Peel potatoes and mash them with a fork or potato masher. They will not be perfectly smooth. Add salt and ginger and mix well.

Place a layer of mashed, spiced potato mixture on your palm; add about 2 tbsp of filling and 1 raisin.

Close potato mixture around filling, adding more potato to the top to close if needed.

Form egg-shaped ovals; roll chops in beaten egg and then roll in bread crumbs.

Place on a flat plate or cookie sheet, ready to fry.

Heat 1–2 inches of oil in a small wok or frying pan and fry chops until golden brown, turning to get evenly browned.

Lift out of the hot oil when brown and place on a paper towel.

Remove to a serving dish and serve warm with chutney.

'Inside my head, Bengali made its noises'

Bengali, my mother tongue, was something I took right out of the air only to give it away. My parents would speak, mumble, or laugh it out loud, unafraid of my stealth.

Of course, my first efforts at speech were feeble, focused on food and comfort.

No one worried. I then moved on to persuasion. "*Chan cor, dada, chan cor,*" I said, beseeching my brother to wash in the bath.

This, too, was treated with gentle humor.

But it is said that what can be named with words is not real; it is merely a reflection of truth or what is called God.

Each word is a trail of crumbs, evidence. Each word, a gift in proportion to the spirit in which it was uttered. Inside my head, Bengali made its noises. But even as I grasped for them, my Bengali tongue went still.

I was down to one true fluency and

American English had nothing to say about all the god stories in India.

The food on my plate, too, was silent. The world sang its reality: birds, frogs, water, all singing, all wordless. Language became a fetter and at age five, school age, I had no word for sorrow. ■