



Madhu Gadia

Demystifying and Dispelling the Myths of Indian Cuisine

When her father nudged her toward a career in nutrition, Madhu Gadia, MS, RDN, CDE, had no inkling it would start her on a winding journey that's taken her from clinical to corporate to publishing, culminating in a fourth act focused on dispelling the myths and misconceptions around Indian cuisine. Gadia's passion led her to become the first dietitian to write about Indian cuisine and cooking in multiple books that have won over audiences worldwide.

"Somewhere in between my work counseling patients, I started teaching Indian cooking classes locally, and realized I could write a book ... It took me two or

three years to figure out how, but I did. I wrote and self-published *Lite and Luscious Cuisines of India*. Which was the trajectory into my future," Gadia says.

Marketing that book led to cooking demonstrations and speaking engagements, which positioned her as the Indian cuisine expert. That first book acted as her springboard into the publishing industry and Meredith Corporation, where she was a health and nutrition editor working on titles like *Diabetic Living and Heart-Healthy Living*. She also sold her first book to Penguin Putnam, which was republished as *New Indian Home Cooking: More Than 100 Delicious and Easy Low-Fat Recipes* and helped lead to the publication

of *The Indian Vegan Kitchen: More Than 150 Quick and Healthy Homestyle Recipes*.

From there, she developed an interest working in both the culinary and nutrition fields. While attending the Healthy Kitchen, Healthy Lives conference at the Culinary Institute of America, she met dietitians that were doing the same, which led her to Flik Hospitality Group, where she would serve as wellness director for eight years.

"People are at work almost 10 hours of their day, so my goal was to make sure there were adequate healthful options in the cafeteria. I worked with chefs helping them to see that, in some ways, nearly all foods can fit into a healthful diet, as well as provided modified recipes and nutrition information for food served in the cafeteria. I loved it," she says.

Showing people how to prepare fast, healthful and, most importantly, tasty meals remains her passion.

"I want to give [people] options that are tasty. That aren't going to be meals they eat and think 'oh, I ate a healthful meal,'" she says. "Hopefully, they'll think it was a delicious meal that was healthful. It's that kind of all-in-one cooking that inspires me ... because taste trumps nutrition every time."

Today's Dietitian (TD): When did you know you wanted to pursue a career in nutrition?

Gadia: I received my bachelor's in India, in home economics. Then, I admit, my father steered me toward nutrition. I moved to the United States, earned my master's in food and nutrition from the University of Illinois, and I've never looked back. I love it. The science of food and health excites me. It's something that I thoroughly enjoy, so it was a good steer.

TD: Your career has taken you from diabetes education and media to consulting and corporate hospitality. What experiences stand out most to you, and why?

Gadia: My career has been a complete journey, and I love that it always has worked out. What stands out is writing that first book. It's what changed everything. My most fun and fulfilling experience was when I was at Flik Hospitality Group. We did an Indian food station where I taught chefs how to cook authentic Indian dishes using all my recipes. It was a huge success. It was

a personal accomplishment and boost to see my recipes work in a larger service environment.

TD: You were one of the first dietitians to write about Indian cuisine and cooking. In fact, your work in this space is popular even outside of the dietetics world—coming at a time when it wasn't a cuisine familiar to many Americans. What were some of the myths and misperceptions you were hoping to dispel, and what's the overarching message to your audience?

Gadia: I had two reasons for writing the book. One was to show that Indian cuisine is easy to cook. People think it's hard, and some cookbooks do make it seem that way because there are so many spices. But I can make an Indian meal for my family in just 30 minutes. My second reason was, of course, nutrition. In America, there's an overarching opinion that Indian food is high in fat, cream, and calories, because most people have eaten Indian food only in restaurants. My goal was, and still is, to show the world that Indian food is healthful. In my books, I talk about diabetes, weight loss, and heart disease and how you can fit my recipes into everyday eating and healthful diets, such as for diabetes or heart-healthy living. Today, we talk about the Mediterranean diet with lots of vegetables and grains. Indian food is very similar. It's what I grew up eating. Lots of vegetables, beans, and whole grains. Very little meat. Each recipe has nutrition information, which no other Indian cookbook had. My expertise lies in the homestyle healthful, and authentic Indian cooking, and I want to show people how easy it is to cook. I'm a firm believer that "healthful and tasty foods go hand in hand." If it doesn't taste good, people aren't going to eat it. I don't care how healthful it is. I also wanted to demystify Indian cooking and dispel the misconception that Indian food is only curry and curry powder. That's such a small, small part of Indian food.

TD: What is *Cuisine of India*, and what inspired the website's launch?

Gadia: When I wrote the first book in the mid-1990s, I went to a book fair and was told I had to have an online presence—which I certainly wasn't aware of at the time. I created the URL CuisineofIndia.com, which made it easy to market my

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book and spice boxes (a business venture that wasn't flourishing). Today, you'll find everything about cooking authentic Indian dishes. I share cooking videos, recipes, books, and more. I also post healthful information on Indian cuisine and 500-calorie meal plans for customers' and dietitians' convenience. As I went into my next act, I just focused on Indian cuisine, so I redid my website, created more cooking videos, and started blogging with the goal of helping people master the art of Indian cooking easily and effortlessly.

TD: Who or what inspires you as a dietitian, nutritionist, and/or Indian cuisine expert?

Gadia: Numerous dietitians, authors, and entrepreneurs have inspired me over the years. There are so many now, but when I authored my first book, there were just a few. I was impressed by dietitians Marion Franz, Maye Musk, and Brenda Ponichtera, as they were paving the road. As for Indian cuisine experts, Madhur Jaffrey was my initial inspiration. I'm impressed by and follow many dietitians and Indian cuisine experts as I'm always learning.

TD: What's left on your professional bucket list?

Gadia: I'm toward the end of my career, and I have to say, I am very happy with my career journey. The book helped me achieve things and meet people beyond my imagination. There's just one career goal left on my bucket list: a cooking series. It would reach more people, and I could help them master the art of Indian cooking—that would be the cherry on top.

TD: What does your typical workweek look like?

Gadia: This is my next act, so to speak. While I did retire from work, I still follow my passion for Indian cuisine, and I've

been reevaluating what I'm going to do next. My workweek involves making sure I get some postings out on social media. I may write a blog, take some photos. I'm always looking at recipes to see what I can do that's different, easy, and can share with my audience.

TD: When you're not working, how do you like to spend your leisure time?

Gadia: I love to travel and have been doing a fair bit of it the last few years. I also go out to parks and see friends. Walking is my stress reliever, and I do some yoga and pranayama. I also belong to a book club, love having tea with my friends, and just hanging out and enjoying the fruits of my labors. I also love to entertain; my house is always open.

TD: What are some of your favorite meals or foods?

Gadia: Naturally Indian. But I also love anything flavorful—Mexican, Chinese, pizza, etc. As for examples of foods I make, a typical Indian meal is my go-to fare. It's fast, nutritious, and satisfying—for example, dal (beans) cooked vegetable with basmati rice or roti (whole wheat flatbread). I primarily cook vegetarian dishes. I love to cook desserts, too, anything from Indian desserts to cakes and cookies. I also make a variety of vegetarian pasta, pizza, and Mexican dishes. Anything that I cook has to be flavorful.

TD: If we were to peek into your pantry or refrigerator, what would we find?

Gadia: One thing you'll always find in my pantry is a whole rack of dried beans. Every Indian bean and any other bean. There are probably 20 kinds of dry beans in my pantry, along with canned beans and tomato products because they help when preparing meals in a hurry. You'll also find extra bags of spices, because I never want to run out of those, and whole wheat flour. In the refrigerator, you'll always find plenty of fresh vegetables and plain yogurt, which we use a lot of as part of an Indian diet. In my freezer, there'll always be frozen vegetables and Indian flatbreads, because they can be convenient, and other ingredients like shredded coconut, paneer, etc. But frozen vegetables are a must. ■

Elizabeth S. Goar is a freelance health writer based in Benton, Wisconsin.