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Local cooking enthusiast's persistence continues to pay off

By David Mullen, Staff Writer dmullen@amestrib.com

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A lifelong passion for food and cooking has paid off for Ames resident Madhu Gadia.

It started when Gadia, who worked as a registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator for McFarland Clinic while raising her two children, Menisha and Nitin, in the 1990s, began teaching cooking classes and became intrigued in the idea of writing a cook book.

Now, after having two books published, hundreds of cooking classes taught and several TV appearances, Gadia has started her own YouTube channel, which she hopes will allow everyday Joe's to learn how to cook traditional Indian cuisine.

"My goal is to teach people to cook authentic Indian food, and so I made a lot of videos throughout the past year and we're slowly releasing them," Gadia said.

Although Gadia has had a plethora of success selling her cook books, the transition to online videos is the way the industry seems to be moving, she said.

"Everything is free on the internet, (and) do people still buy cook books?" Gadia said.

Beginning in January, she began uploading her videos to her YouTube channel, "Cuisine of India." She's since uploaded six out of her seven already-recorded videos, which show cooking enthusiasts how to make baked black pepper fish, tandoori chicken and potato stuffed flat bread, and more.

Although the initial feedback has been overly positive, the number of viewers is slightly lower than expected, she said.

"I know, I need to be patient, these things take time. I'm happy (my videos) are out there," Gadia said. "People are quite distracted right now. But (I'm hoping) they have more time to try new recipes and watch more videos."

Being patient while having constant persistence has been a major key in Gadia's success. She began writing her first cook book in 1993 after striking up a conversation with a fellow dietitian at a food and nutrition conference and expo, who had written a book. The dietitian told her to just write.

"She told me I just had to start writing and it's not like rocket science," Gadia said. "I spoke with a publisher who initially was interested in my product ... after six months and several changes were made throughout their company they were no longer interested."

Although Gadia felt disappointed the first publisher wasn't interested, she used it as motivation and continued to send her book to 10 other publishers.

No one was interested.

So at a time when her dream of being an author of a cook book looked most grim, she decided to take a chance and self-publish 5,000 copies of "Lite and Luscious Cuisine of India: Recipes and Tips for Healthy and Quick Meals." Within the next year after going to every book fair, every farmers market, and after

taking any chance she had to publicize her book, they were completely sold out and in homes throughout the United States.

Publishers Weekly and Library Journal wrote positive reviews about her book, which opened a window of new opportunities like hosting her own demo in New York City, and speaking to libraries and associations across the country, she said.

But she couldn't have done it without the help of some family members, friends and Iowa State University students.

"I used an idealistic designer from Iowa State ... I had an Iowa State student do all of the scaling of the book, and I had my daughter, my son and my friends daughter (making illustrations)," Gadia said. "I definitely reached outside of my comfort zone reaching out to people, but without them, I could have never have produced my first book."

Her husband, who is a book enthusiast and constantly comments on how a book is published, helped as well.

For those who bought it and tried some of her recipes, they saw it as pioneering for Indian cuisine cook books.

"There were quite a few books on Indian cooking, but very few with the kind of nutritional information for diabetics. I think it was pretty pioneering for those times," Rema Nilakanta, a friend and customer said.

After her initial success, she was in the market for an agent to line up a publishing deal for her first book and possible her second. While walking to meet a possible match in New York, she received a call from another agent saying her book was sold and would like to meet.

“It felt like I didn’t even work that hard, and the person sold it without even signing a contract with me,” Gadia said.

Although she enjoyed every part of self-publishing besides the distribution part of the business, she was relieved once her rights were sold to Penguin Random House, a publisher based out of New York City in 2000.

“Madhu’s passion and expertise for the subject of Indian cooking made us very interested in her work. Her deep knowledge and the generous way she shares it with others really shines through in her recipes and writing,” said Marian Lizzi, Penguin’s vice president and editor-in-chief.

Before the second round of printing of her first book happened, the publisher made several edits and changed the name to “New Indian Home Cooking.”

“Both of Madhu’s cookbooks have sold solidly well in what has grown into a crowded market,” Lizzi said. “Most impressive of all is their longevity. First published in 2000 and 2009 respectively, and both books remain in print. That’s an achievement and speaks to the authenticity and appeal of the work.”

Over the next nine years Gadia worked for Meredith, a media company that produces publications in pop culture, entertainment and food, as a technical dietitian, who produced content, but also edited to make sure their suggestions were factual.

Gadia said she thought this job would be perfect since she has such a passion for writing about food. However, it just urged her to write another book. She left Meredith and began working on her second book: “The Indian Vegan Kitchen,” which Penguin published.

“I wanted Indian vegan and not vegetarian, and there are a lot of Indian vegetarian books out there, but at the time that it was published, mine was one of the first Indian vegan cook books,” Gadia said.

It had similar success to her first book and Gadia decided it was time to get another job, this time for Flik Hospitality Group, which makes recipes and sends nutritional information to local schools until 2019, when Gadia decided to retire.

“I decided it was time for me to do what I love to do, which is Indian food and nutrition courses,” Gadia said.

After touching base with several of her former business partners and hearing advice from family members, Gadia decided to move from cook books to social media by starting a blog: cuisineofindia.com, which currently has over 1,200 followers grown from strictly word of mouth.

With videos and YouTube being as big today as cook books were in the 1990's, she decided to dip her toes into new waters, and many believe she will see success without any problems.

“She’s gutsy, persistent and a hard worker. She also loves what she does, cooking as well as helping people live a healthy life,” Nilakanta said. “She has what it takes to succeed — persistence and grit.”

Even though it’s just the beginning for her video channel, the goal is to someday end up on the Food Network.

“My goal is to be able to do something on TV on a professional network like the Food Network,” Gadia said. “That would be the dream, but just having a cooking show on TV would be amazing.”