

Kiku's Kitchen

An apathy to precooked food led Kiku Engineer to cooking and eventually catering

Kainaz Antia

“No two days of cooking are ever the same but I love the fervor and exhilaration of it all,” says Kiku Engineer (née Mistry), nicknamed “the Godiwala of Chicago.” Sorely disappointed when she realized that the cuisine served at the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago (ZAC) functions was not authentic Parsi food, she decided to take matters into her own hands. “Don’t get me wrong, I love a good butter chicken, just not on Navroz!” she exclaims.

Her debut with catering started when the young bride who had just moved to the USA made *lagan nu achar* for a fundraiser. Needless to say it was a success, followed by orders for *sali margi*. Cooking then was just a hobby and not something she did on a daily basis. Actively involved in the local Parsi community and attending various functions, before she knew it, she was catering for the Navroz events at ZAC and has been doing so since 2010.

“Cooking in bulk takes a lot of discipline. I start off by planning the menu and then work out the costing. Never one for numbers, this was quite challenging for me. T-3 days (three days before the event) I procure all the ingredients myself and start the ‘prep’ work for the feast. The days prior to the event are intense and there is no time to slack off. For instance, the *sali margi* itself requires 10 pounds of onions and chopping them takes at least 45 minutes! I have to then cook the *vaghar* (fried onions and spices) in various batches.”

Her most memorable event was catering for the navjote of her daughters Zara and Alea in 2016. “Cooking for my daughters’ navjote was extra special for

me and something that I always dreamed I would do. My love for good *lagan nu bhonu* combined with the ability to feed 250 people on this special occasion was something that I will always cherish,” she reminisces. With the help of her sister, Kamal Mehta and mother, Mehroo Mistry, Kiku prepared a feast of *sali margi*, mutton *pulao*, *masala dal*, *kolmi no saas* and *lagan nu achar*. They also prepared a western menu consisting of chicken dijonaise, seafood paella, spinach and bean salad, macaroni and cheese, french fries, etc. Cooking for the guests was hard work, she recollects, but says it was worth the effort to see their satisfied faces.

Her biggest challenge is that she is severely allergic to various ingredients including lentils, peas, beans, chick peas, etc but has managed to overcome that by asking friends and family to taste those items to ensure that the recipe is on track.

Born and raised in Bombay, she remembers the emphasis on cooking wholesome and fresh food for every meal in her house. Deriving inspiration from her grandmother Motan Mehta, Kiku’s earliest memory is connected with assisting her grandmother in the kitchen. “We didn’t rely on frozen or packaged foods because everything was made fresh on the stove,” she states.

After graduating from Sophia College in Bombay with a bachelors in psychology and political science, her first job was food related when she worked with noted food writer Rashmi Uday Singh, compiling recipes for her cookbooks and planning celebrity culinary shows. Recently, Kiku has gone back to school, formalizing her culinary knowledge with



a degree in culinary arts and pastry from the College of Dupage. She will graduate in December 2018.

Her aim is to open a carry-out/take-away food shop that features well-portioned, healthy, home cooked meals at an affordable price. “I think the biggest challenge American families face is the convenience and the availability of packaged and frozen foods, canned goods and mixes, and artificial colors and preservatives that tend to flood the grocery aisles. The idea of cooking healthy meals, or just cooking at all, has taken a backseat and our children suffer the consequences,” she laments. Although, her specialty is Parsi food she also loves experimenting with different cuisines like Thai, American, French, Japanese, etc and loves learning new techniques. She has also been trained in specialty diets like ketogenic (low carbohydrate, high fat diet that in medicine is primarily used to treat epilepsy in children), paleo (high protein, low carbohydrate as consumed by ancient hunters-gatherers) and sugar free diets.

Kiku currently co-parents her two daughters with her ex-husband Jim Engineer who is an active member of the Chicago Parsi community. “To be a Zoroastrian means to be a good person, a good neighbor, brother, sister, mother, father, husband and wife. The values that come with the three basic principles of our religion: good words, good thoughts and good deeds is what resonates with me to be a fellow Zoroastrian and that is also what I instil in my children. At its very core, our religion is simple and basic.” Kiku takes her children to religion classes at the Darbe Meher in Chicago held every Sunday where they are taught the basic values of the religion through songs, plays and crafts, and community building activities.

Her two passions are food and fitness. Small wonder as her father is Sensei Pervez Mistry, one of Asia’s leading fitness and karate instructors. At least, that explains how this 40-year-old dynamo is at her fittest ever! Her food mantra: Don’t serve it to others if you are not going to eat it!

You can check out Kiku’s recipes on her Facebook page — Kiku’s Kitchen

Kiku Engineer (above): passionate about food and fitness



or contact her by email: mistry.kiku@gmail.com The chef shares two of her recipes for our readers:

Prawn Curry

Prawns (60-70 — raw)
Onions (1-2 — chopped)
Ginger garlic paste (1-2 tsp)
Tomato (1 — chopped)
Curry leaves
Green chilies (2 — split)
Oil

Salt
Tamarind ball or 1 small lime

For the curry paste

Dried red Kashmiri chillies (10-12)
Red chili powder (1 tsp)
Cumin seeds (1 tbs)
Coriander seeds (1 tbs)
Peppercorns (4-5)
Ginger (1 small piece)
Garlic (2 cloves)
Curry leaves (8-10)
Desiccated coconut (1 cup)
Tamarind concentrate (1 tsp)
Salt

Water

To make the curry masala

Wash the chillies and add all the ingredients into a mixer-grinder, adding water to make a thick, smooth paste. This can be made earlier and stored in the fridge in an air tight container.

For the curry

Clean and devein the prawns. Add salt and a pinch of turmeric powder and set aside. Add oil to the vessel and add the chopped onions. To this add a pinch of salt. Add curry leaves and green chilies. When the onions begin to change color, add the tomatoes and ginger-garlic paste.

After the oil from the tomatoes surfaces, add all the curry paste/masala, stirring constantly so that it doesn't stick to the pan. Add a cup and a half of water or more if you like and let the masala cook. You will notice a change in color when it's cooked. Depending on



the consistency of the curry, add more water and check for salt. Bring to a boil and let it simmer for a while.

Add prawns and a pinch of lime if needed. Once the prawns are cooked, your curry is done. Serve with hot rice, *kachumbar* and boiled beets.

Goan Pork Vindaloo

Pork (1 kg — cut into chunks for stew. Must use fatty pork, preferably the shoulder)
Onions (2 large — chopped)
Green chili (1 — slit)
Garlic (1 tsp — chopped)
Ginger powder (½ tsp)
Bay leaf (1)
Cinnamon (1" piece)
Star anise (1)
Potatoes (3 — quartered)
Tomatoes (2 — chopped)
Vindaloo masala (2-3 tbs)
Worcestershire sauce
Tomato paste (1-2 tbs)

For the vindaloo masala

Dried red Kashmiri chillies (12-14)
Garlic (1 clove)
Peppercorns (3)
Turmeric (½ tsp)
Coriander seeds (½-1 tsp)
Cloves (3)
Cumin (1 tsp)
Cinnamon (1 small piece)
Cane vinegar (¼ cup)
Soak the Kashmiri chillies in the vinegar along with the cumin. In a mixer grinder

add the garlic, peppercorns, cloves, coriander seeds, turmeric and soaked chillies with the vinegar and grind. You will need to add water to make a fine, smooth, thick paste.

Wash and cube the pork and marinate it with salt and set aside. Sauté the onions in a pan with the bay leaf, star anise, cinnamon and let it sizzle, browning the onions a little. This should take a couple of minutes. Add the garlic and ginger and stir. Add chopped tomatoes and stir till the oil oozes out and tomatoes are cooked.

In a bowl mix the vindaloo masala and Worcestershire sauce and add that to the onions.

Let the masala cook. This will take time. But take care not to let it burn. Cook on a slow flame and cover it and keep adding just a little water at a time. When the masala is partly cooked, add the tomato paste, stir and then add the pork. Keep covered. Add cubed potatoes and stir. Brown the meat a little.

Add enough water — about one and a half cups but not too much — just enough to make the desired gravy you want. You can cook it on the stove or pressure cook it. If the gravy is too runny, thicken it by boiling the gravy after opening the pressure cooker and letting some water evaporate.

Taste for salt. Serve with *pao* (bread) or white rice and onions, tomatoes and beet salad!