

Meeting Madhur

INTERVIEW BY KASHA VAN SANT

The first lady of Asian cookery dispels some common misconceptions and talks about her inspired story of success.

I am sure that I will not be alone in thinking of acclaimed food writer and actress Madhur Jaffrey as a British culinary institution. For as long as memory permits, she has been at the forefront of educating the wayward English palate to the delights of classic and contemporary Indian food. Initially, beginning her career as a RADA trained actress, with appearances in over twenty films including Merchant Ivory's 'Shakespeare Wallah', 'Heat and Dust' and 'Cotton Mary' to name but a few. It is however for her skill as a cookery writer that has sealed her fate as the world's best loved authority on Indian cuisine.

Madhur Jaffrey's Indian Cookery' series filmed for the BBC in 1982 was the real test of British public opinion, at a time when the burgeoning Indian community was making its culinary mark upon British multicultural society.

This extended hospitable hand of friendship had a huge impact upon audiences, cementing her firmly in the hearts of everyone who shared her love and passion for Indian cookery. Although the series was initially commissioned to educate and "fulfill a niche" its success was remarkable.

I was curious to know if Madhur Jaffrey had accomplished a little more than introducing food to these shores.

"I think I opened people's eyes to the whole background of Indian food, the variety of it and what home cooked Indian food was. I never write recipes in a vacuum, with this comes the culture and the stories behind each recipe. This probably added to a broader knowledge of India. Certainly I wrote that way with food being one aspect of our culture and how it fits in with other things. That's what people saw."

One might assume that the knowledge of food that she has so skillfully passed on to the generations of food lovers was second nature to her. It was not until she moved to London to study that this was put into practice.

"I was saying from day one that I could not cook and when I was twenty I knew nothing about cooking! I learned everything through letters my mother wrote. People know this in their heads but they assume that it isn't true. Now maybe

they will believe me."

The process of learning was a long one that took years to perfect.

"I asked my mother just to send me two recipes to begin with and I made them again and again for months until I understood what they were about. Then I asked her for more, I asked her for only things we cooked in our house. I was very familiar with the flavours and the tastes and I could recreate the recipes, because my mother did not write very elaborate recipes. I just did it a little at a time."

Was this part of reconnecting with her home and a subliminal remedy for homesickness?

"Yes, for me it was that. I was homesick for my family and the food that I associated with the family. I associated that with love and comfort, and I wanted that in England. I was happy in England but I really missed the food and I desperately wanted it. The only way to have it was to make it myself."

Doubtless, the sense of tradition is inherent in Madhur Jaffrey, but what of its importance in her life?

"I know that we had it and it gave all of us a kind of confidence, we had no problems with identity. We knew who we were; in fact one of my problems was that I didn't want the baggage. I didn't want to know all of those ancestors. Although I enjoyed it, I wanted to set out on my own path that was not necessarily the path of my ancestors. But look what I am doing, I am writing,

So I am on exactly the path of my ancestors without planning it!

Sporadically Madhur Jaffrey has appeared on and off our screens for years. I will not be alone in expressing the great affection that her face evokes. In this current fickle and self absorbed climate it seems that autobiographies are the domain of the insignificant few who wish to stand on soap boxes to regurgitate what we already know. Madhur Jaffrey on the other hand has lived her life quietly, and her revealing memoir of childhood in India, feels like the truest representation of a person that there can be.

'Climbing the Mango Trees' for want of sounding like a PR driven endeavour is exactly what it claims to be. She may have been asked to write her story ten to fifteen years ago, and refused because "the time was not right", even though glimpses of her personality were revealed in the many books and countless magazine articles. She elaborates, "Writing has always come relatively easily to me perhaps that's because I read a lot. I always enjoyed expressing myself, all the things that I couldn't normally say. I wrote about so it was a wonderful outlet in some ways. I wrote a short story about my grandfather's death but I fictionalised it. So writing is something that I have been playing with."

Packed to the seams with some of the most thought provoking and startlingly real bursts of nostalgia; there does not fail to be a sense of accomplishment associated with this frank testimonial. Simplistic and curiously intriguing it is a final dotting of 'i's and crossing of 't's as far as gaining an insight is concerned. Thus far the

"I was quite confident. To work, to learn, to go out into the world alone - but I still had my own insecurities in other areas."

response to the book has been overwhelming with praise coming from all quarters; in fact calls are for a sequel but Madhur is ready to quash the suggestion.

Although we know Madhur Jaffrey as an inspirational leader amongst women, but it was the seeds of rebellion, precocious intellect and pioneering spirit that helped create the woman we see today. Had the sensitivity and quietly confident yet reticent approach to life dissipated over the years?

"I think your insecurities stay, your confidence can build but in certain aspects I was quite confident. To work, to learn, to go out into the world alone - but I still had my own insecurities in other areas."

With a wide range of creative talents in her repertoire I wondered where her heart lies and possibly the most interesting revelation from Madhur Jaffrey must be her relationship with food.

"It's not cooking, definitely - cooking is a means to eating for me, I enjoy cooking when I am not writing a book. It's probably acting actually. Whereas with writing, I don't enjoy in the sense that it is lonely, just sit by yourself for hours. You agonise over every line. It's very rewarding in its fourth draft, but as you're struggling to get it out, it's angst all the way through. Acting has that quality to it but it's also very satisfying because it occupies your whole being, all of you is being used. Acting to me is the most enjoyable."

Looking remarkably well for her years, most probably due to the "milk washes" instigated by her mother, there still seems another reason for her youthfulness. As a mother and grandmother I wonder if the part of her own inner child has helped these relationships blossom.

"I haven't done it deliberately, there is a part of me that is always full of wonder and wants to see more and more. I think it makes me who I am, it keeps me very alive and makes each day a joy." As for fulfilling a sense of purpose it is safe to say that she has done so, be that solely to act as the

cookery bible for the hundreds of young women who married and could not cook.

"It makes me feel so worthwhile, that was the whole idea, I know so many college students who bought my books and learned to cook. That's the whole point; they know nothing just like I knew nothing. If I can cook, they can cook!"



For many people the writing of a memoir can be cathartic, was this the case? Had lessons been learned?

"Not really, I didn't think that I would be able to remember anything. People would say to me, 'you can't remember what happened yesterday so how are you going to remember all of that?' I would say 'I don't know', but you just have to start with page one and see how it goes. It's very

strange how you remember emotions at very early ages and then they trigger a memory of an event, then that triggers a memory of another event. Once you let your mind go it just keeps moving, I didn't think it would happen. It was miraculous almost."

Although the public love affair with Madhur Jaffrey began at the BBC during a time when Asian faces were scarce on television, it may have come full circle with this fascinating memoir. She remarks upon the impact that this had,

"So many South Asian people would come up to me and say, 'it's wonderful to see you on television because there aren't any people like you on there'. I know I feel like that in America because I don't see too many Asian faces on television. Even when I did *Bombay Dreams* which was the first South Asian show on Broadway, so it meant a lot to be in it."

In fact her belief and sense of duty towards her fellow compatriots is such that she often takes on the scripts of young writers, for free; 'but only if they are talented, because one day they will be great' Madhur Jaffrey is truly self effacing, magnanimous and accommodating all at the same time.

Often people do not accurately translate in reality to their public persona, and being able to come away with a 'preconception' untarnished is indeed rare. As gut instinct would dictate, for me this was not the case and as a result I was more than happy to

leave this highly intriguing woman with a few more 'Writer's Treats' that I could save for a rainy day.

'Climbing the Mango Trees' is available now in hardback priced £18.99 from Ebury Press or as an audio CD priced £11.99 from Random House Audio.