

Cooking up an interest in healthy eating habits

By ANNE SCHAMBERG
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Who: Alamelu Vairavan

What she does: Cookbook author and culinary instructor

Cooking is like exercise. It takes motivation to get going.

"It's all in the attitude," said Alamelu Vairavan. "Come home in the evening, get into your comfort clothes, put on your favorite music and start cooking - enjoy the whole experience."

Vairavan connects time in the kitchen with relaxation and healthy eating.

In particular, she champions the food of her native South India, "which is so well known for its vegetarian cooking."

Vairavan has been conducting classes - from hands-on cooking courses to wellness programs - for several years. Last fall, she left her job in health information management to pursue a full-tilt culinary career, hoping to teach more and get people to eat better.

Foodie

"My goal is truly to make the American public eat healthier and to include more vegetables and lean meats in their diets," she said.

With Patricia Marquardt, her neighbor in Whitefish Bay, Vairavan has written two books: "Healthy South Indian Cooking" (Hippocrene Books, \$24.95) and "The Art of South Indian Cooking," which is no longer in print.

A second edition of "Healthy South Indian Cooking," with new recipes and photographs, is due this fall.

Vairavan has a keen understanding of culinary newbies, having been clueless herself when she first arrived in the United States as a young bride in the 1970s.

"I couldn't even name the spices. I would say what is that black one? What is this brown one? The yellow one?"

In the city of Chennai (formerly known as Madras), where she was raised, the family had a household staff, including a full-time cook.

"I didn't even go to the kitchen. When I came back from school, everything would be set up on the table. That's how I grew up," she said.

But beginning with lessons from her aunt's chef in New York City, she mastered the richly spiced - but not necessarily fiery-hot - traditions of her homeland.

Now she's convinced of the intrinsically healthy nature of the vegetables, legumes, and spices in the Indian repertoire.

So she nudges students toward the stove.

"Yes, we are all busy," she said. "But many of these authentic recipes are very simple, very easy."

You can find a schedule of Vairavan's classes and programs, as well as a list of ingredients essential for South Indian cuisine, on her Web site: www.curryonwheels.com.

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