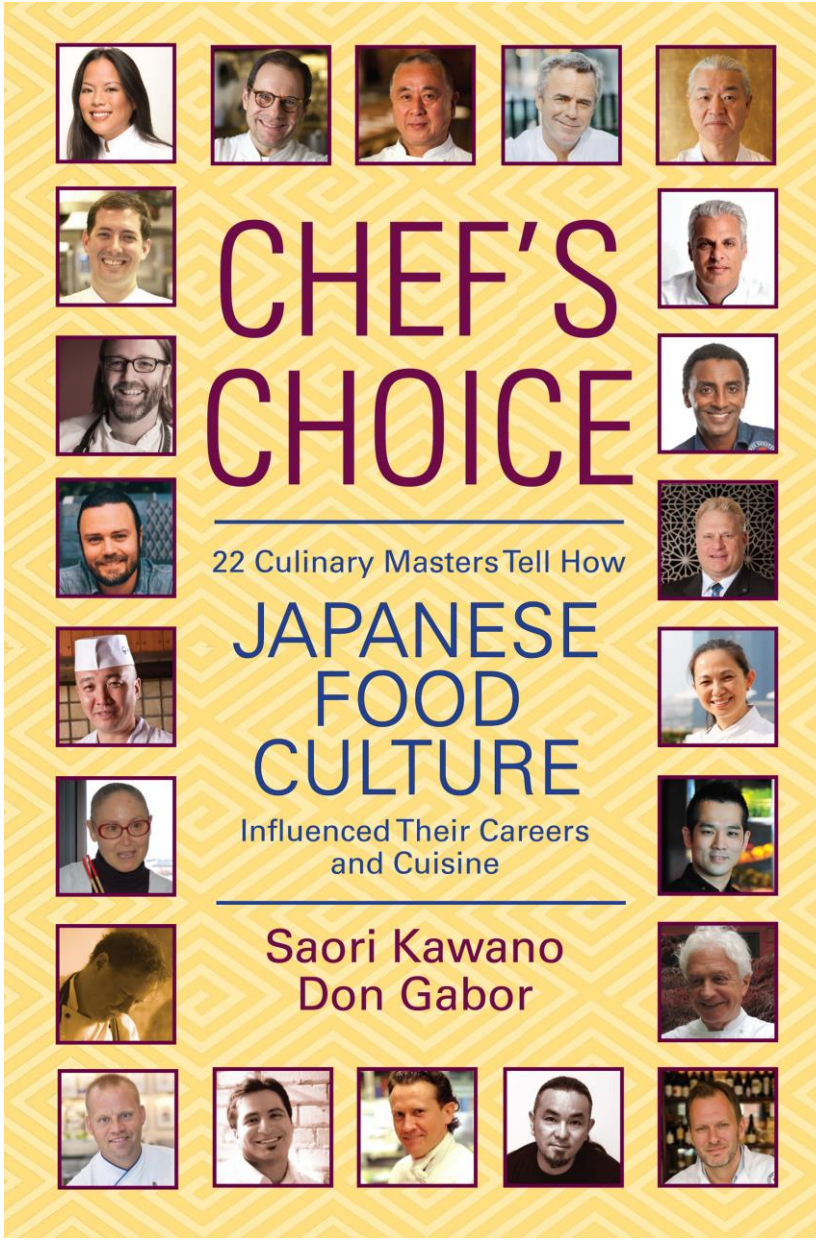

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FIFTEEN

SUVIR SARAN

Chef/Consultant

New Delhi-born Chef Suvir Saran has nurtured a lifelong passion for the traditional flavors of Indian cooking, which has led him to become an accomplished chef, cookbook author, educator, and organic farmer. Suvir Saran's approachable and informed style has helped to demystify Indian cuisine in America and ultimately formed American Masala, his culinary philosophy, which celebrates the best of Indian and American cooking.

Suvir Saran is Chairman of Asian Culinary Studies for the Culinary Institute of America. He leads classes nationwide for audiences ranging from home cooks and fellow chefs to physicians and nutritionists. He has been a featured speaker and guest chef for notable gatherings including the Food Network's South Beach Wine & Food Festival and the NYC Wine & Food Festival.

Suvir Saran has penned three cookbooks, and was Executive Owner/Chef at Devi in NYC. At that time, Devi earned a three-star rating from *New York Magazine* and two stars from the *New York*

Times. It was the first Indian restaurant in the U.S. to earn a Michelin star. Suvir Saran is launching a new restaurant concept in San Francisco's Mid-Market neighborhood, scheduled to open fall 2014.

Influences

I was always doing things for others in the kitchen, even though I didn't think I would ever be a chef.

I grew up in India as a Hindu vegetarian, where the family center was the kitchen. There was no alcohol, no meat, no fish, none of that. When I was four or five years old, I was always in the kitchen while my brother, sister, family, and friends were socializing. When we went to a family friend's home, I would run into the kitchen and ask, "Can I make salad? Can I wash this?" I didn't relate to the other boys. I knew I was different, but the mothers and grandmothers never judged me. They were delighted that this little kid wanted to peel a potato or a cucumber, but they wouldn't let me use a knife, so I washed potatoes and brought food from the kitchen to the table. I was always doing things for others in the kitchen, even though I didn't think I would ever be a chef. I had no role model. The only place where I didn't feel as if people were judging me was in the kitchen.

I wanted to be a painter, so I enrolled in the School of Visual Arts in New York City to study design. In India I had done knitting, sculpture, pottery, but everything at the school in New York was on the computer. I wanted to use my hands, but they had become obsolete. I was unhappy in school and hated my day life. I wanted to become a normal human being, so every night I cooked for 20, 40, even 100 people, many of whom were strangers. Friends would bring

six or eight people to dinner with this young Indian cook who made the best Indian food in New York. Instead of going to school, I was home prepping all day. Then in the evening, I hosted parties where I lived, at 90th Street and Columbus Avenue.

One evening after dinner, a guest suggested that I teach a cooking class. Another guest, Elisabeth Bumiller, a reporter for the Style section of the Washington Post, said, "Sweetie you can't do it for free. You have to charge." So that was the first time I charged. I was about 23 years old.

Cuisine

I'm a home cook before anything else.

The recipes I made were not the standard ones that people think of when they think of Indian food. These were home recipes. These recipes were passed down from grandmothers to mothers, and I cooked them for my friends. I cooked that way because entertaining people at home is as much about respecting people and their taste as it is about the desire to entertain. Cooking and entertaining are about giving and generosity.

Indian cuisine shines in the home kitchen. It's not a restaurant cuisine. If you are rich or in the middle class, it is an insult to invite guests to a dinner and take them to a restaurant. It means that you don't have the money to entertain at home or you don't value them enough to invite them to your home. At home you have one or two cooks to prepare the meal. Entertaining at home is very prestigious.

It's like the Japanese attention to detail, and it's from the home kitchen.

When Publisher's Weekly reviewed my book, American Masala: 125 New Classics from My Home Kitchen, they said my recipes begin at home, unlike other chefs. I'm not a restaurant chef. I don't have a desire to repeat the same dish 25 times. I make it, perfect it, and then I'm finished. I am the traveler, the dreamer. Do I have to repeat myself like some chefs? No. I do one thing, and then I have to move on to the next. I teach the chefs how to prepare the dish, and I move on and create a new one.

I learned about Japanese food when I visited Japan.

Once I saw Japanese chefs cook in Japan, I realized that their goal is perfection—to be the best they can be with the best ingredients and the best food service. There is no disconnect between what the customers are eating and what the chef is doing. The chefs are, at every level, perfection, perfection, perfection. They buy the freshest ingredients, the most beautiful shoyu, the most wonderful mirin. At every level, there is perfection. Japan is about simplicity and harmony. That is the very core of Japanese society.

While visiting the Suntory whiskey manufacturing plant in Yamazaki, Japan, I saw a French pastry shop with a name that reminded me of Brittany. There is no ocean near Yamazaki, so the idea of French pastries there seemed so out of place, but then nothing is out of place in Japan, so I walked in. The shop, run by a Japanese man and his wife, was perfection beyond belief. I learned that the wife had attended the Escoffier School of Culinary Arts in France, and the

husband had studied pastries and baking at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley, California.

The couple came back to their hometown of Yamazaki, where they created this pastry shop that offers every conceivable pastry confection, from madeleines to tarts, better than anyone could imagine—even better than in France. I bought up practically everything, went to the Suntory plant, and then went back to the pastry shop. They had new offerings, so I had to buy everything all over again, but I missed one little cheese pizza. When I said I wanted to buy it, the wife insisted on giving it to me. I said, "No, no, no," but between her lack of English and my lack of Japanese, I accepted her gift. So here in Yamazaki, a Japanese couple was making authentic French pastries to perfection. That speaks a lot about the Japanese mentality.

In Japan, every meal is treated as if it'll be your last meal, so the chefs do it perfectly every time.

I realized that in Japan, I never ate anything that was less than special. The fish I ate in the evening had been swimming in the ocean that morning. I think that local connection is so amazing. In Tokyo, I walked into an unknown place to have cocktails. At first it looked like a fruit stand, but there was a bar at the opposite end of the room. Standing behind the bar in front of a display of antique bottles from around the world were two bartenders in tuxedos. I asked for a martini or a mojito or a margarita. The bartenders got the fruit from that stand and, after chopping it, placed it into little Japanese bowls filled with the liquors and squeezed citrus. The ripe fruit in the drink heightened the experience. The cocktails were like poetry, and they were so

delicious I could have cried. The Japanese never had cocktails until they learned about them from the West. Now they think of every little thing.

In Tokyo I went to a small tempura restaurant with eight seats at the bar. The chef and the assistant sat on the floor chopping vegetables and then frying them. They were also the hostess and waiters. There were 11 courses, all of which were tempura, and each dish was better than the last. There were thin pieces of ginger dipped into the batter and then fried in the oil. They came out like crunchy little breadsticks. And deep fried ginger shoots—heaven on earth. The chefs' attention to detail, whether they were cooking or presenting, was incredible.

We visited Chef Ueda's restaurant and watched him butcher a fish. He is a magician with a knife. He had this ease about him, like a performer. It is an art form and a tradition. He took a needle and jabbed it in the fish's head between the ears. When the fish's mouth opened, that's when we knew the fish had died. It wasn't like he was butchering the fish. It was more like he was massaging it. It was done so gracefully.

Ingredients

> *The sensibility I learned in Japan is stamped in my mind until I die.*

When I visited Japan, I didn't have to cook to learn about Japanese food. I learned by watching the chefs and tasting the food. I learned that if I use the best ingredients, then I don't have to add 10 more

things. Now, that Japanese sensibility affects everything that I do every time I cook, whether I'm cooking Indian, French, or Italian.

Before I create a new dish, I pick plates that I like. I make up the meal in my head and create dishes that look pretty on the plates. Before I create a particular dish, I might choose a round plate, or maybe a flat one. This dictates how recipes are developed. Different plates and bowls make me think of foods that go with them.

I think tempura and yakitori are my favorite Japanese-inspired dishes that I like to cook at home. We made a version of yakitori with mirin, shoyu, salt, pepper, and shichimi—the seven-flavor Japanese spice mixture—and I slow-roasted them together in the convection oven for three-and-a-half hours at low temperature. As for the peppers, I cut them in half and boiled them until they were almost al dente. I had to bring in some other flavor, so I added some olive oil with soy to the water. Then I grilled the peppers with the skins on. The flavor had permeated through the boiling water. The texture was good, the flavor was complex. I also had carrots that I cooked over a long time. I added more mirin, less shoyu, sesame, salt, pepper, and shichimi. I added a lot to them, so they were spicy.

And I had asparagus, which I ended up grilling. First I let the asparagus sit in water for two hours so they were rehydrated and juicy. Then I brushed them with mirin and shoyu, salt, pepper, and shichimi and put them on the grill. They got crisp on the outside, and when they were caramelized, I put on lemon zest. So it was Italian antipasti with a Japanese twist.

Next I did lobster tail, but instead of a straight butter dip, I made a miso sauce and a little butter. It was perfect—nothing fussy. I put the lobster on the grill with nothing but a little butter and salt and then onto the platter. Finally, I dusted the lobster with shichimi, salt, and

pepper, and nothing more. It was all about the lobster. So how can you go wrong? Everybody likes a little spice.

Japanese chefs think about subtle flavors—Indian chefs think about drama.

When you go to an Indian restaurant, you don't order just one dish. There are also condiments, fresh vegetables, and the protein. You never just eat one thing. You eat a complete meal. This is how a Japanese chef thinks, too. All types of ingredients go together to create a complete meal. In that way, we Indian cooks are like the Japanese, because they care for their food but don't give people large amounts of any one dish.

One of the biggest differences between Indian and Japanese food has to do with conception of flavor. I didn't understand the Japanese conception of flavor until I saw the Japanese chefs in action. For example, for a hot pot soup, Japanese chefs combine a lot of beautiful fish and seafood with very savory shoyu and a little rice vinegar. Good quality shoyu has an amazing, rich flavor. Adding kombu and dried bonito flakes gives it layers of flavor. In India, it's the opposite. We have lots of spice, so who cares about flavors? The ideas regarding food are diametrically opposed. Japanese chefs think, "How can we make it simple?" Indian chefs think, "How can we make it more complicated?"

Many chefs are tempted to persuade their customers to taste a new dish by explaining or saying something positive about the ingredients or the preparation. But customers may not think that exploration is important, so it is better to just give them a chance to embrace the dish. This allows the customer to take ownership. It's not about

preaching or selling them on the dish. In many cases, the less said the better.

For example, one evening I had cooked chicken tails for some guests. If they had known what was in the dish, they probably would have said, "I'm not eating that!" When they asked me what the main ingredient in the dish was, I told them it was just some dark meat. They ate it and loved it. When people don't know the ingredients, it's okay. However, these days I do ask people, "Are you allergic to anything? Can you eat beef?" Once they say "Yes, yes, yes," then I can surprise them after the meal by saying, "Well, you've just eaten veal brains or liver," and they say, "Woo-hoo!"

Tools

Japanese knives are as amazing as they are beautiful.

My favorite knife is a little one with a bamboo handle. When I use a Japanese knife, it is like magic because it is so sharp. There is no effort. It's the knife doing the work rather than my muscles. A bad knife is an obstacle. I'm thinking about the chopping, not about the next step. What the Japanese have given us through centuries of practice is a perfect tool that lets us dream about our cooking. We dream and keep cooking. The minute I have a knife that's dull and heavy, I think, "Oh God, I still have two more vegetables to chop."

My mission is to not only teach about good ingredients, flavors, and cooking, but to emphasize that it is important for people to pay attention to and be connected to the food that they eat.

As the Chairman of Asian Culinary Studies for the Culinary Institute of America, I travel and teach at large and small cooking schools all over the country. I also work with Harvard Medical School on a program called "Healthy Kitchens, Healthy Lives." This program gives physicians a better understanding of food and nutrition so that when they talk with patients about how diet affects health, both can make better decisions. I also want to educate chefs and other people about the benefits of eating more legumes, including beans and peanuts.

I think anyone going to cooking school needs to do what their teachers tell them, without prejudice and without blinders. It's important to see everything. But students must build on what they have learned in school, because their education doesn't end there. It's just the beginning. It's what they learn outside of school by being mindful every day, every minute, that's important.

A Day in the Life

"Something's burning!"

Chef Hiroko Shimbo and I were in Minneapolis, Minnesota at a lovely cooking school. We had just finished teaching a class on how to make home-style Indian apple chutney and had sat down for dinner. That's when I said, "Something's burning!" The students said that

everything was on the table, but I said that something was hurting my nose. It smelled like burning cinnamon and ginger. One student ran to the kitchen because she realized that she forgot to serve her dish and that it was still on the stove. She came back into the room with a charred container. Most of the ingredients inside had been burnt to ashes. But remaining in the middle in the bowl were two teaspoons of this beautifully caramelized chutney. I had a pinch. It was the best chutney ever because of the caramelized sugar. I gave the rest of the chutney to the student and told her this recipe would be in my next book.

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