

Camellia Panjabi's 'Vegetables: The Indian Way' | Making vegetables great again

Culinary legend camellia panjabi has penned a new cookbook after three decades



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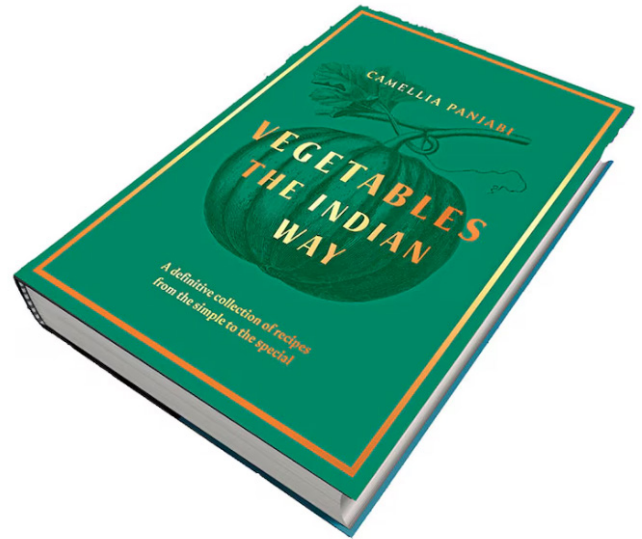
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Few can rival Camellia Panjabi's deep understanding of Indian food, so when she has something to say about it, people sit up and listen. In 1994, she published *50 Great Curries of India*, a landmark cookbook that has sold over two million copies.

Of course, she was already a gastronomic tour de force by then—as marketing director of Taj Hotels, she had overseen the opening of countless restaurants as the hotel group expanded across India. Now, Panjabi—who runs a slew of celebrated Indian restaurants in London with her sister and brother-in-law, Namita and Ranjit Mathrani—is back with another banger of a book. Don't be fooled by the understated look of *Vegetables: The Indian Way*—this is decades of wisdom, distilled like a fine spirit, and served up with impeccable taste and restraint.

None of this was ever part of the plan. But that's getting ahead of the story. Panjabi was born in 1941 in a Sindhi family in Bombay. Her father—"a great romantic"—named her Camellia after watching the Greta Garbo-starrer *Camille* (1936), based on Alexandre Dumas fils' 1848 novel *La Dame aux Camélias*. Her interest in food was kindled early, thanks to the jugalbandi between her Anglophile father who had studied at LSE—Panjabi herself has an economics degree from Cambridge—and wanted all his food to be perfectly plated and presented, whether Indian or not, and her mother, a doctor, who came from a traditional Sindhi family where the food had to be cooked in ghee and only in a kadhai.



VEGETABLES: THE INDIAN WAY by Camellia Panjabi PENGUIN/ MICHAEL JOSEPH Rs 1,999 | 368 pages

On a call from her home in Central London, Panjabi sounds excited about the new book, and genuinely curious about my assessment. "I only write a cookbook when I have something very important and different to say, and which hasn't been said before," she says. Panjabi felt that even though there was a wealth of vegetarian food in India, it wasn't known widely enough.

The research took around 20 years as it was done alongside professional commitments. "The process was so enjoyable. I kept stumbling upon new dishes. Or I talked to some hostess and she said, 'Ooh, have you eaten this karela in so-and-so's house?' I collected maybe over 200 recipes," she says. It was only when Covid struck that she was able to settle down and sift through the material.

It's an unconventional cookbook, beginning with the classification of the vegetables, arranged by the way they are grown: under the ground, under water, on the ground, on shrubs and vines, and so on. The more you think about it, the more it makes sense. Secondly, it does not gatekeep culinary secrets. For example, how do you get the bitterness out of radish for a raita? The solution is to tie the grated radish in a muslin cloth and hang it over the kitchen sink overnight.

Interesting dishes include a Popped Water Lily Seed Pudding (Makhana Kheer), the Water Chestnut Flour Halwa (Singhara Atta Halwa) and a Gujarati-style Guava Stir-Fry (Peru nu shaak). There are beloved family recipes galore, including Buttery Textured Mung Dal (Makhmi dal), Cauliflower Pulao and Stuffed Karela.



The recipes featured are lighter than the rich curries we associate with Indian food, what Panjabi calls “concocted restaurant food”. The presentation, too, was critical. “Vegetarian Indian food is always kind of dumpy,” she says. “So I decided to re-look at it as an attractive product by itself. I mean, if some bisi bele bath is wonderful as a risotto, let’s show some wine.”

In 1965, Panjabi joined the Tata Administrative Service, the first woman to do so. When she moved to the Taj Mahal Hotel as the sales and marketing manager, her job was to bump up the revenue in any way she could. The hotel only had a French restaurant, and the Sea Lounge which served tea. Panjabi opened Shami-ana, India’s first coffee shop there, followed by Golden Dragon, India’s first Sichuan restaurant. The rest is culinary history. Panjabi’s impact on the evolution of Indian restaurants is immense—and it continues to shape the very DNA of India’s food landscape even today.

Panjabi takes it easy these days—but only a bit. She gets up late, then reads four newspapers, an old habit—“I like to know what people are thinking in general”—before heading to the office. Thrice a week, she visits her restaurants, to get customer feedback first-hand. Asked if she has plans of hanging up her apron anytime soon, she says, unexpectedly, “Yes, I would like to.” But not before she’s written another cookbook, we think.

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