

WELCOME TO



HER WORLDS

As season seventeen wraps on Bravo's *Top Chef*, fans of Padma Lakshmi (and there are many) can tuck into *Taste the Nation*, her new Hulu show exploring America's many immigrant cuisines. No straight-faced judging here. Lakshmi declares: "I want to lick my fingers and put my hair in a ponytail." BY ANN FARMER

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AS YOU MIGHT EXPECT, PADMA LAKSHMI HAS SAMPLED COUNTLESS BOUNDARY-PUSHING DISHES,

including beer-battered tempura rattlesnake, bacon and avocado ice cream, and chile rellenos stuffed with seitan. After all, she's been host of Bravo's *Top Chef* since it launched in 2006 and an executive producer since 2013. What revs up her taste buds lately, though, is something decidedly more traditional and straightforward — like a perfect pot of saffron-infused Persian rice that's been prepared in the same manner for generations.

"I'm interested in the food of the common man. That's what gets me excited," Lakshmi says, stepping out of a postproduction suite in lower Manhattan, where — before the coronavirus shutdown — she was editing *Taste the Nation*, her new show about food, travel and culture.

The ten-part documentary series, which drops all of its episodes on Hulu June 19, explores the heritage cuisines of immigrants across the U.S. It provides the participants — chefs, home cooks, cookbook authors and others — a platform to share personal stories about being a first-, second- or third-generation immigrant in America today. "People you would pass by at the grocery store," she says, "or sit next to on the subway."

The featured cuisines aren't necessarily the best known or most popular. For one of her first shoots, Lakshmi headed to Los Angeles, home to the largest concentration of Iranians outside of Iran. "It was important to me to do Iranian food," she says, "because Iranian food, like Persian culture in general, is very layered and sophisticated and delicate, and rich with history. It's also very approachable. And I think the only reason it hasn't had its moment yet is because of the animosity between our two countries."

She helped prepare meat kabobs and tahdig, a Persian rice dish that uses lettuce leaves, potatoes or flatbread to create a golden, crisp, crunchy layer at the bottom of the pot. In turn, the cooks uncorked their immigrant chronicles, such as fleeing Iran after the 1979 Revolution with only a suitcase of clothes. "The food is just a Trojan horse," she explains. "Because no one can get mad at food. We all love to eat."

Lakshmi also zeroed in on Chinese-Americans in San Francisco, where any number of chop suey joints can be found. She met Japanese-Americans in Hawaii, where the poke bowl originated. She explored a German community in Milwaukee and a Peruvian enclave in Paterson, New Jersey, and other ethnic clusters that keep their culinary traditions going, including Native Americans.

She was especially moved by a group of Thai immigrants in Las Vegas. As Lakshmi helped pound together the hot and sour spices for a traditional green papaya salad, one described coming to America as the bride of an American soldier who'd been fighting in Vietnam. She met him in Thailand during his R&R breaks. Although she was a thirty-one-year-old single mom with four children and he was only twenty-one, he courted her for two years. Her mother-in-law also embraced her, teaching her to drive, to maintain a checkbook and most of all, to feel welcome — in contrast to the backlash against immigrants today. "I wanted her to tell her story," Lakshmi explains, "because this is not the America that has always been there."

The woman's story also hit a familiar note. "It's not unlike what my mother had to do in the '70s," Lakshmi says. "This is a very personal project for me."

LAKSHMI WAS BORN IN INDIA TO PARENTS WHO DIVORCED BY THE TIME SHE WAS TWO.

Stigmatized in India for divorcing, her mom emigrated to America to work as a nurse. Lakshmi joined her two years later, but the culinary tastes and aromas of India remained a constant. In her 2016 memoir, *Love, Loss, and What We Ate*, she recalls watching coconut shavings fall from her grandmother's grater, inhaling the scent of frying mustard seeds and knocking tamarind pods out of trees. She preferred to eat the pods while they were still green

and tart, and she still prefers to eat rice with her hands.

Attending school in the U.S., Lakshmi encountered prejudice and bullying. Tall and stunning-looking, Lakshmi is endowed with impressive cheekbones, a graceful neck and a caramel skin tone. Her classmates called her "black giraffe" and the n-word. She recalls, "People were cruel when I'd first open my lunchbox," which would issue a pungent waft of homemade Indian food and routinely elicit a chorus of eww's. When she returned home, however, she was accused of not being Indian enough. "Where's your bindi?" she'd get asked, referring to the forehead dot that Hindu women wear.

Her new country also tested her culinary predilections. As an Indian vegetarian, she struggled to adapt to the carnivorous eating habits of Americans. (Her Indian grandmother still can't watch *Top Chef*, because the meat dishes turn her stomach.) However, the soy sauce and Tabasco bottles on restaurant tables beckoned. She'd douse her rice with them. She assuaged cravings for classic Indian cheese and chutney sandwiches by substituting Philadelphia cream cheese and ketchup. She brightened up Campbell's soups by adding pickled jalapeño juice and dried herbs.

(Now a single mom herself, Lakshmi makes homemade chicken soup for her young daughter. But after eating at a friend's house, her daughter started asking for Campbell's chicken noodle soup. Lakshmi notes with amusement, "She finds the red and white can to be very glamorous.")

After high school, Lakshmi began modeling and acting. But again, her Indian pedigree often worked against her. She recalls asking her agents why they weren't sending her out for certain auditions: "They'd say, 'Well, we asked the casting director and they said they're not going ethnic with this role.'"

Whenever she worked or traveled abroad, she'd head for the food markets and spice shops. At one point she was encouraged to write the cookbook *Easy Exotic: A Model's Low-Fat Recipes from Around the World*. It unexpectedly won the "Best First Book" award at the 1999 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards. It also caught the attention of the Food Network, which installed her as the host of *Padma's Passport*, where she cooked dishes from around the world as part of its *Melting Pot* series.

After marrying British-Indian author Salman Rushdie, Lakshmi wrote *Tangy Tart Hot & Sweet*, another cookbook. "It helped to have him in the house when I was testing recipes for *Tangy Tart*," she says of Rushdie. "Because he's also from India, he has a sense memory of what a particular dish tastes like. So I'd run up to his writing room and say, 'Taste this,' 40 million times a day." She details the disappointing dissolution of that marriage in her memoir, where she also intersperses recipes for what served as comfort food during her divorce and other trying times.

THE BIGGEST BOON TO HER CAREER HAS BEEN HOSTING *TOP CHEF*, FOR WHICH SHE WAS EMMY-NOMINATED IN 2009 AS OUTSTANDING REALITY HOST

(as a producer, she's been Emmy-nominated another seven times, when the show competed for Outstanding Reality-Competition Series in 2007 and 2014–19). You wouldn't suspect it from her poised appearance, but it took a bit of time to find her footing alongside head judge Tom Colicchio, judge Gail Simmons and the many other celebrity chefs and food experts who weigh in.

"Every day we have a revolving door of James Beard [Award-winning], Michelin-starred, multi-restaurant-owning chefs," says Lakshmi, who initially found their culinary expertise intimidating. "I don't cook like that. There is a big difference between restaurant food and home cooking."

Acclaimed French chef Eric Ripert, however, kindly reminded her that her sensitive palate was as discerning as the best of them. "After that, I calmed down," she says. "I realized that my role was to report and judge exactly from the point of view of the person that I am."

As seen in the most recent season of *Top Chef*: *L.A. All Stars*, Lakshmi

can be a slippery judge. When she bites into something on-camera, she doesn't give away what she's thinking. It keeps the suspense going. But she has no problem recalling the worst thing she ever ate on *Top Chef*: a chocolate ganache dessert by Ilan Hall that included a morsel of liver at its center. "Nobody wants to eat that," she says, though she adored his baked Spanish noodles with clams and chorizo, which helped him win the show's second season.

In *Taste the Nation*, Lakshmi drops the poker face. She thinks nothing of scooping up food in her hand and blurting out her enthusiasm. "I want to lick my fingers and put my hair in a ponytail," says Lakshmi, who likewise replaced the designer ensembles we're used to seeing her in with her own jeans. "I did my own makeup for half the season," she says. That reduced her shooting team to three, which helped relax interviewees who are not used to camera crews.

She dismisses comparisons to the award-winning CNN series *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*, which featured the late celebrity chef convivially chowing his way around the globe. "Tony and I were friends for a lot of years," Lakshmi says. "This is not at all like Tony's show. Because I'm not Tony. This is a completely feminine view of the world. I talk about these people's families. I talk about their children. I'm not a swashbuckling guy who's going to bite the head off a chicken."

She believes it's important that her show have a female point of view. "Most food is cooked by women, and the production of food on TV is male-dominated," she says. "I wanted to take food back to its original apron strings." In one subtle woman-to-woman exchange, Iranian cookbook author Naz Deravian, for instance, teaches Lakshmi an age-old method of testing for the right temperature — by swatting a wet finger against a heating pot to hear if it sizzles. "That's a very female thing to do. That's a home cook thing to do," Lakshmi says.

Her idea for *Taste the Nation*, which she pitched to Hulu, originated with a series of events in her own life. As a result of her battle with endometriosis, a condition that affects female reproductive organs, Lakshmi cofounded the Endometriosis Foundation of America. Last year she was appointed a Goodwill Ambassador to the United Nations Development Programme to aid in its fight against inequality and discrimination. She also began working with the ACLU after family separation issues developed at the southern U.S. border and in response to President Trump's ban on travel from several Muslim-majority nations.

"I wouldn't consider myself that political a person," she says. But in light of recent events, "You can't help but become political."

Hulu welcomed her proposal. "When Padma brought us the idea for *Taste the Nation*," says Belisa Balaban, the company's vice-president of original documentaries, "we knew it was the perfect fit for our food programming. [It offered] inclusivity, authenticity — and we loved Padma's perspective that food is a bridge to understanding people and cultures."

WITH THAT INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK, LAKSHMI CAN BE EXPECTED TO CHALLENGE BELIEFS ABOUT SOME FAMILIAR FOODS.

For example, hamburgers and hotdogs. "Those aren't American," Lakshmi points out. "They were brought here by Germans." And apple pie? "Not one ingredient in apple pie is actually indigenous to North America, including the apples," she says. "Not the lard. Not the milk, wheat, butter, cinnamon, sugar, nutmeg or apples. None of it comes from here."

"Historically speaking, the only thing that can call itself the original American food is a salad of three sisters, which is Native American and [consists of] corn, beans and squash — like succotash. That's truly what Native Americans were eating."

"We love to say things like, 'That's not American,'" she adds. "Well, what is American? And who gets to call themselves an American? I wanted to look at that in a very intimate and holistic way." ©



TOP CHEF

Top: Lakshmi on Taste the Nation with Emiliano Marentes, the first-generation Mexican-American owner of Elemi, a restaurant in El Paso, Texas, bottom: at the Top Chef judges' table during season seventeen, with guest judge Jeremy Fox, chef at Birdie G's in Santa Monica, California, and her cohorts Tom Colicchio and Gail Simmons.