



Expatriate Life Under Quarantine: Reflections of a Reluctant Cook

By Parul Malik

How do you do [sambar](#)? The one that brings together [daals](#), vegetables, and tamarind in a flavorful bomb.

As much as I love sambar, I never learnt to make it. I have been dipping [idlis](#) and [dosas](#) in sambar for as long as I can remember. More than a decade ago, as a Master's student in New York City, I remember our first 'desi' student dinner was at [Saravana Bhavan](#) on Lexington Avenue. I vividly recall the shock of seeing wine and beer on the same menu as sambar-idli. I also remember our penny-pinching graduate student group running up a check of over \$200—a princely amount in student days. The shock was bigger because of our humble order of sambar-idli, dosa, [upma](#), and [uttapam](#) with a few beers. I learnt the word entrée that evening. And that idli-sambar was kosher to New Yorkers. Over the next decade, my husband and I continued our explorations from one coast to the other with stops in between. Living, learning, and eating across several U.S. states, looking up Yelp, Tripadvisor and OpenTable reviews in search of Indian flavors. We sampled [Vikas Khanna](#) and [Hemant Mathur's](#) culinary creativity in Manhattan. We savored hot sambars in steel [thalis](#) and countless [katoris](#) at homey Indian restaurants in the [borough of Queens](#), in the [pockets of New Jersey](#), [Indiana](#), [Illinois](#), [Wisconsin](#), and

[California](#). We concluded [DOSAs restaurants](#) in San Francisco served it with more flair and less spice. But the [Udupi Palace](#) across the street in Valencia did it better. Sambar there came with amazing tomato, coconut, and mint chutneys—all too perfect on a platter. The [Michelin-starred Rasa](#) in Burlingame elevated sambar and everything else to another level.

Even though I had interest in food, I shied away from cooking. The PhD had been a prolonged excuse for not cooking. In West Lafayette, I mainly lived on sandwiches and thin crust pizzas from the [Purdue Memorial Union](#). The produce in the refrigerator would regularly rot. I could not tell lettuce from cabbage. Sometimes, I drank a day-old [chai](#). Back in New Jersey, most meals were outsourced. We ordered Indian food on apps, hired cooks and nannies who did homestyle Indian cooking. We tried a [tiffin service](#) that emailed a new menu each week. Then there were boxes of frozen [Trader Joe's Indian meals](#). We looked forward to being fed by visiting parents over summer and fall. Because cooking was such a dreadful task.

As an undergraduate in [Lady Shri Ram College](#) in Delhi, I had internalized that cooking, along with other household chores is political. It involves labor. It is gendered. It confines women to the house. In my parents' home, there was no expectation that I cook. I admired [Adrienne Rich's poetry](#) and she had cast the kitchen sink as a place where dreams died. Therefore, I took a perverse pride in not cooking. Not accompanying my parents to the sprawling [sabzi-mandi](#) less than a kilometer from our home. Not knowing any recipes. Not learning to identify basic ingredients. My mother cooked multiple times a day with a full-time job. I did not help her in the kitchen either.

In mid-March 2020, we flew into a shuttering California after attending my brother's wedding in India. I had never seen LAX that empty. When I turned on my phone, Whatsapp was buzzing with messages asking about airport screenings. We brought in suitcases packed with [Nalli](#) silks and [Fabindia](#) cottons and [mithais](#) like [besan ladoos](#) and [kaju barfis](#). But we did not have much grocery stored. Panic purchasing had swiped the local Walmart and Whole Foods empty. I did not have the foresight to stock up for a pandemic before leaving for India. So, I ordered a bag of [atta](#) from an Amazon seller in New Jersey. [Toor daal](#) and [idli batter](#) arrived from Shastha Online. I am glad I did because those too became 'unavailable' soon after.

Then classes were cancelled. I made sambar for the very first time. It was a strange way to start Monday morning. I googled recipes and found the one I could make with limited ingredients. An uncomplicated one with pressure cooked daal, diced tomatoes, baby carrots, thawed vegetables from the freezer, and [sambar masala](#) with a spoonful of tamarind paste. The [tadka](#) of dried red chillies, black peppercorns, coriander, cumin, and mustard seeds roasted in hot olive oil was the flavor bomb. It was surprisingly easy. The sambar simmered. I immediately whatsapped photos of my sambar-idli to my cousins' group and to my family group. It tasted as good as it looked.

A month into the quarantine, I have been cooking almost every day. Sambar is a staple in our Punjabi-Telugu household. There is also chicken curry, [tamarind salmon](#), [aloo shimla mirch](#), [aloo palak](#) with rotis. [Rotis](#) come from the [Rotimatic](#). I jokingly describe the Rotimatic as technology that solves a "real problem" of not having the time,

inclination, or talent to knead, roll, and flip rotis on [tawa](#). Our 4-year old likes steamed idlis as much as he likes fresh rotis smeared with butter. We know we are fortunate to have most groceries delivered at our doorstep. We are eating better. I am a few pounds lighter.

I still see cooking as political. Cooking at home in the U.S. is a luxury. It is clearly connected to matters of class, culture, education, and occupation. What we eat, how we eat, and where we eat is often determined by who we are and the work we do. In this pandemic, these differences have become even more pronounced. As [conversations](#) about food come to the forefront, I know that I want my son to grow up with food literacy. My goal is he knows about nutrition and grows up self-sufficient cooking his own food. Hopefully, he will acquire and appreciate Indian flavors. Maybe he will interpret India through food. I doubt he will get the nuances of north (Punjabi) or south (Telugu) Indian. In all likelihood, it will be simply Indian.

