

Intergenerational cooking
links kids to their heritage



PHOTO • MATHEW McCARTHY

Paying it *forward*

Poems have been integral to human life since prehistoric times. As we sing or recite phrases to recount the histories of empires, pray to our gods, brew beer and entertain, those parts of our brains linked to reward, emotion, introspection and memory light up. For Roshan James, poetry allows her to explore the layered depths of emotion and life.

“Writing poetry was always first and foremost about processing my feelings,” says James. “You can wonder and wander and probe into topics in subtle ways, which to me is a gentle way of approaching new thoughts.”

James’ lifelong affair with words began almost as soon as she could hold a pencil. Before enrolling in kindergarten, she was creating little books. By the time she was 11, she was writing chapter stories. She was



Jasmine
Mangalaseril

in high school when she discovered poetry.

Its therapeutic release helped to ride teenage emotions by examining and contemplating provocative, risky questions. It satisfied her independent streak. When set in context with other artistic pursuits, her words took on additional understanding and awareness.

“Poetry was my freedom of expression because I felt at liberty to create new words, new phrases, based on new thoughts and rising awareness,” she says. “The act of writing is a cathartic release and helps me integrate my thoughts and senses into

alignment.”

James, who’s also a musician and a visual and industrial artist, comes from an artistic family. She traces her creativity to her maternal grandfather, a Tibetan orphan who was adopted by Welsh-Irish missionaries. He became a painter and hand-lettering artist as well as a pharmacologist in Kolkata.

In her devoutly Christian home in suburban Toronto, James’ parents, Ben and Rita, instilled a love of the arts in their two children. Ben, a retired assembly worker at the Oshawa General Motors plant, is an inventor, maker, photographer and collector of rare and beautiful things. Rita, an office administrator who founded a gourmet foods company, plays the guitar and instilled an appreciation of Indian culture and artisan crafts in their children.

They arrived in Canada separately in the mid-1970s – Ben as a sponsored Burmese refugee and Rita as an Indian immigrant. They met at a party and married half a year later. While those early years were difficult, they were determined, worked hard and established themselves in their new country.

Their shared love of cooking saw them put twists on traditional British dishes, while dishes from home helped to create links for their children with their Indian, Burmese and Tibetan cultures. Celebrations featured Ben's biryanis (recipe follows). On weekends, the family adventured through Canadian food: lobster at Ed's Warehouse, exploring Toronto's Chinatown, and Saturday nights at Swiss Chalet. Summer vacations were spent with friends in Chincoteague, Virginia, enjoying the freshest seafood.

"There was a lot of fusion cooking in our house because my mom really liked Hakka-Indian style. I think they both really like food and cooking and just trying different foods."

At about the time Roshan left to study economics and English at Queen's University, her mother began selling salsa, eventually growing the business to supply southwestern Ontario gourmet shops with condiments, chutneys, dried spices and Indian cooking sauces.

Kingston brought unexpected challenges for Roshan. Unlike Whitby, where people from different backgrounds mixed and mingled, she found the university town had a "very small-town mentality," and she struggled academically and socially. Transferring to York University's English program was the right move—she excelled and graduated summa cum laude.

Graduation ushered in major life changes: she married, moved to downtown Toronto, and started her master's degree. "This is a bit of a theme for me. I will do everything all at once in short bursts, and then look back and go 'What the heck? Why am I trying to do all of this at the same time?'"

Depression, agoraphobia and the breakdown of her marriage marked that first year. She put her graduate work on



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hold and joined a corporate communications team. A few years later, she met her second husband, and they seized an opportunity to transfer to Waterloo, where they could settle down.

James describes those first years away from Toronto as a time of self-discovery, transformation and more self-discovery. Her writing slowed but flowed again when she was having their first child. At that time, she told a colleague she wanted to write and publish poetry.

Over the next seven years, life took several professional and personal turns, including the birth of a second child and a new relationship, but her goal to write and publish poetry gathered momentum – and blossomed. She published her first collection, “This Is My Story, This Is My Song”, in 2017. The following year, she published “Art of the Unknown”; her most recent collection, “Breaking”, came out during the pandemic.

Drawing from her personal journey, she uses simple phrases and short verses to weave themes of vulnerability, healing, faith and transitioning. Her willingness to share vulnerability while recognizing hope has attracted tens of thousands of fans worldwide.

“My poetry comes to me as I sit and read and meditate on spiritual topics, and as I contemplate nature and the universe, and the many connections in between. I’m collecting, sorting and matching ideas to weave a story of the whys, hows, and interconnectedness of existence and awareness.”

Today, James shares custody of her two children with her ex-husband and lives in Newton with her fiancé Patrick LaFrenere, a multimedia artist and singer-songwriter, and his two children, who live with them part time. The blended family explores and collaborates creatively, whether with sketchpads, musical instruments or in the kitchen.

While LaFrenere and the children are comfortable cooking (LaFrenere’s former partner is a Red Seal chef), James’ kitchen confidence – particularly with Indian foods – only started growing over the past five

years. Her father Ben passes on his traditional cooking knowledge to his grandchildren, while Roshan tries new recipes and cooks and bakes with them.

“I love cooking with the kids and having them cook with my parents because it really is woven into our family heritage. So much of our culture is passed down through knowledge about food as medicine, nourishment and pleasure... Food in our house really does equate to a feeling of hominess that we all love.”

BEN JAMES’ LAMB BIRYANI

(Makes 10 to 12 servings, but recipe can be halved)

Prep time: Approximately 45 minutes

Cooking time: 2 to 3 hours

While layered rice and meat dishes were known in South India for about 1,800 years, it’s the Mughal Dynasty (early 16th to mid 19th centuries) that’s most associated with biryani.

Rooted in the Persian word “birian” (meaning “fried before cooking”), the once-royal dish, adapted to regional tastes, can now be found throughout the Subcontinent.

If you plan to steam the whole dish in one pan, use one that’s at least 13 cm deep (five inches); otherwise, you can divide it between a couple of pans.

For the lamb stew

1.6 kg (3½ pounds) lamb, cut into 5 to 8 cm (2 to 3 inch) chunks

45 ml (3 tablespoons) curry powder

10 ml (2 teaspoons) garam masala

12 ml (2½ teaspoons) salt (or to taste), divided

15 ml (1 tablespoon) vinegar

30 ml (2 tablespoons) plain yogurt

125 ml (½ cup) vegetable oil

3 large onions, chopped or sliced

2.5 cm (1 inch) ginger, finely chopped

3 garlic cloves, finely chopped

15 ml (1 tablespoon) chopped fresh coriander

2 large tomatoes, roughly chopped

625 ml (2½ cups) water, as needed

For the garnish

125 ml (½ cup) vegetable oil



125 ml (½ cup) raw cashews

250ml (1 cup) raisins

3 large onions, sliced

For the rice

875 ml (3½ cups) raw basmati rice, washed in two to three changes of water and drained

1,375 ml (5½ cups) water

45 ml (3 tablespoons) ghee

Optional: Pinch of saffron mixed with 30 ml (2 tablespoons) of hot water

Serve with Raita and pappadum

For the lamb stew:

Wash and drain the lamb, then sprinkle with curry powder, garam masala and half the salt. Mix the vinegar and yogurt, and pour over the lamb. Mix well and set aside.

Heat the vegetable oil over high heat and fry the onions until they've just turned colour and have lightly browned. Stir in the ginger and garlic. Continue frying for one or two minutes, so that the ginger and garlic release their aromas without letting them brown. Add the fresh coriander and remaining salt. Mix well with the onion mixture.

Add the lamb and mix thoroughly so everything is well coated. Stir in tomatoes and cover the mixture with water. Bring to a boil, then lower the heat to medium, cover and cook for 20 to 25 minutes while stirring occasionally. When done, the gravy

should thicken so it's stew-like and the meat is tender. If the gravy is too watery, simmer uncovered until ready. Set aside.

For the garnish:

In a separate pan, heat the vegetable oil over medium heat. Add cashews and raisins. When the nuts have browned, add the onions. Stir well, frying until the onions have browned nicely. Set aside.


For the rice:

Combine the rice with water and ghee over medium heat. Bring to a boil. Then cover, lower the heat and let simmer for roughly 16 to 17 minutes. Set aside.

Constructing and steaming the biryani:

Preheat oven to 130 C / 250 F. In a large lidded ovenproof pot or one that can be covered with foil (such as roasting pan, Dutch oven, cocotte or lasagne pans) spoon 3 cm (approximately 1 inch) layers of rice, lamb stew and garnish, and then sprinkle with saffron tea (if using). Repeat these layers until all ingredients are used up. Lid or cover tightly with foil and let steam in the oven for 30 to 45 minutes.

When ready, remove from oven and let stand, still covered, for 20 minutes.

To serve: if you're serving directly from the roasting dish, lightly fluff the rice with a fork before taking it to the table. Alternatively, you can spoon it onto a serving platter. 

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