

What's in your pantry?

Good cooks keep great ingredients close at hand

By Liane Faulder, Edmonton Journal July 6, 2011



Selva Naidoo – Head Chef at Narayanni's Restaurant

Youmashni Naidoo tells a loving story about the pantry of her "mama," chef Selva Naidoo.

Not too long ago, the Naidoo family, who run the delightful Narayanni's restaurant on Edmonton's south side, returned from a cruise they had taken. By the time they all made it from the airport to the Naidoo parental home -owned by Selva and her husband, Daya, and located near Sherwood Park -it was late, after midnight. The whole family was exhausted.

"Mama said to us, go upstairs and have a shower," recalls Youmashni. By the time the family had freshened up, no more than half an hour later, Selva had a delicious meal on the table: fish, seasoned with mama's own secret masala combination and served with basmati rice.

The secret to her excellent and quickly prepared dishes is found in Selva's pantry, and in the wide range of dry ingredients (backed by a freezer full of protein) that she keeps on hand. There are a half-dozen varieties of rice and more than a dozen different lentils. The soul of the Naidoo pantry, however, is spice. Using a wide selection of Indian flavourings, from turmeric to cardamom to fenugreek to coriander, Selva concocts her own magic masala, a spice combination that adds punch to everything from meat to vegetable stews.

But there is another key staple in Selva's pantry, Youmashni says.

"Mama puts a lot of love in her dishes."

If one sign of a good pantry is loving abundance, another is an extravagant assortment of condiments. For Twyla Campbell and Steve Cooper, a diverse, international pantry is key to the creation of authentic meals. And that means ready access to Spanish hot sauces or a good Czech mustard that can conjure the spirit of a barrio or an East European deli, just like that.

"When I make paella, I want to use Spanish saffron because that's how it's supposed to taste," says Cooper.

To that end, Cooper and Campbell, active members of Slow Food Edmonton, make a point of bringing home exotic food products from their extensive travels.

"We end up picking up weird items, and then we get them home and don't know what to do with them," says Campbell.

Often, the weirder items end up in a box in the pantry that's specially reserved for the family's yearly Crazy Food Night when Campbell and Cooper and their combined four children (along with assorted experimental friends) spend the evening sampling strange foods, just for fun and shock value. Campbell says they have to think hard about how to use various pantry items, if only to clear space for more.

The day I visited their Sherwood Park home to ogle the pantry, Campbell decided to take a crack at using a can of guava paste she had picked up at Argyll Foods, a Latino grocery store in Edmonton. The result? A flaky popover (made with President's Choice puff pastry) bubbling with the sweet, but slightly tangy flavour of guava and softened with a lashing of cream cheese. Though it was raining and cold outside, it suddenly felt tropical within the Campbell/ Cooper home.

During my visit to the Naidoo family home, Selva had, with seeming ease, put together mid-afternoon snacks to reflect the family's Indian and South African roots. There was vada (spicy chickpea patties with green chilies, onion and cilantro), plus potato samosas and lamb samosas, topped off by a milky mug of chai tea. While Selva and Youmashni initially insisted there was nothing special or exotic in mama's home pantry, closer investigation revealed nothing could be further from the truth, at least from the perspective of a Prairie dweller with British roots.

Black mustard seed. Curry leaves. Garlic flakes, sliced and dried by hand. Using organic products when possible, Selva preserves her own lemons, and makes mint chutney and green mango pickles to add quick flair to any entree. She roasts and grinds her own spices at home and at the restaurant.

"Roasting brings out the flavour, gives the spices a longer shelf life and makes grinding easier," explains Selva, who sells her secret fusion of Indian/South African spices at Narayanni's (10131 81st Ave.).