

**Episode Title:** Vishwesh Bhatt's Mississippi Magic

**Episode Summary:** In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, welcomes the James Beard Award-winning chef Vishwesh Bhatt. Vishwesh talks about the shared ingredients between Indian and Southern cultures, how he developed his own unique style of cooking at Snack Bar, and why he hopes to expand and redefine what we think of as Southern food. He also talks about his mom's rice pudding, Punjabi-style fried catfish, and other things that will make you very hungry.

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## **Episode Transcript:**

### **(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins)**

**Sid Voice Over:** Welcome to Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, and my guest today is a chef and cookbook author who has changed the way we think about Southern food. Vishwesh Bhatt, the James Beard Award-winning chef at Snack Bar in Oxford, Mississippi, was born and raised in the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat, India, but he moved to the United States at the age of 18, when his father accepted a teaching position at the University of Texas in Austin. As the youngest in a big family, he had grown up in the kitchen, helping his mother prepare meals, and he later discovered a passion for cooking and sharing food with others. After meeting Chef John Currence, another James Beard Award winner, he found a friend and partner who would ultimately help him open one of the most celebrated restaurants in America. In his gorgeous new book, 'I Am From Here: Stories and Recipes From a Southern Chef,' Vish talks about the shared ingredients between Indian and Southern cultures, how he developed his own unique style of cooking at Snack Bar, and why he hopes to expand and redefine what we think of as Southern food. He also talks about his mom's rice pudding, Punjabi-style fried catfish, and other things that will make you very hungry. All that and more this week on Biscuits & Jam.

### **(Music ends)**

**Sid Evans:** Vishwesh Bhatt, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Thanks, Sid. Thanks for having me.

**Sid Evans:** Well, congrats on the book, first of all. It's just gorgeous and I know it takes a lot of time and a lot of love to produce a book like that, and I know you must be pretty excited to get it out into the world.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** I am. It's- Yeah, it's a lot of fun.

**Sid Evans:** So, Chef, I want to start by asking you about the name of your book. It's called 'I Am From Here: Stories and Recipes from a Southern Chef.'

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Right.

**Sid Evans:** Talk to me about that title and how you landed on it.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** I mean, there are a couple of things at play there. One is we tend to ask people that don't look like us where they're from and then they'll answer and then that is immediately followed up with, "No, no... Where are you really from?" I get a lot of that. I'm from Mississippi. I've been here since '92. This is where my home is. This is where I work. This is where I learned how to become a chef. This is where I learned my craft. So when I say I'm from Mississippi and I have to, you know, sort of then backtrack and explain that I was born somewhere else, but I've been here longer than anywhere else in the world and then my parents lived here and you know. So there's that aspect of it. The other aspect of it is, you know, people should have a right to call a place their home if they are contributing to that place. If they have become a part of that town or that country or, you know, that neighborhood, it should be something that they should be able to claim. And very often we- this idea that somebody remains an outsider for a very long time, that's something that bothers me and I wanted to talk about that, I mean, especially in a place like the U.S. where everybody, unless you're Native American, has come from somewhere else at some point. Especially the last three years, the direction we were headed in and just, you know, the divisions that were showing up, it was bothersome and, and worrisome. So, I am from here. This is where I want to be and, by God I- you know, I'm gonna stake my claim.

**Sid Evans:** Well, there's something very proud about that title and, I just, I love it. I think it'll really resonate with a lot of people. So Vish, you grew up on the western coast of India in the state of Gujarat-

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Correct.

**Sid Evans:** ...and I'm probably mispronouncing that.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Just a little bit. Not too bad.

**Sid Evans:** (laughs) And the city is Ahmedabad. How do you say that?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Ahmedabad. Yeah.

**Sid Evans:** Ahmedabad.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Yeah.

**Sid Evans:** So, how would you describe the city to someone who's never been there?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Okay. (laughs) Think about Chicago, but more chaotic, maybe? Ahmedabad is a good-sized city, as far as cities in India go, but it's divided into two parts or was. Now, off course, it has the urban sprawl and there are even more parts, but there was the old part, which was the original city that was founded, uh, in the 1500s that was on the right bank off the Sabarmati River, and then the new part which were the suburbs that started being built in the late 1800s and 1900s and then the 2000s on the left bank of the river. The suburbs were more leafy and more modern, if you will. The old walled city, of course, was the old walled city and it was, you know, restricted by the wall, but then the walls finally came down and it has not expanded but it has always been a city that, even though there was a ruler, the merchant class were the ones that sort of dominated the city's politics and, uh, economy. And so, therefore, it was always a city that welcomed trade of any sort and with that came lots of different people, right? Because if you had something to sell that somebody wanted, it didn't matter who you were. So, it was for a very long time, a very outward-looking city and so the merchants also decided that, "Well, if we want to keep talent here, young talent here, we need to have schools and universities." And so a lot of these rich folks donated land and helped build educational institutions, which then brought even more people from across the country to Ahmedabad. So overall, it was a city that used to be very progressive and in its outlook, it was always very welcoming, but also a very historic city. And the old part is a UNESCO World Heritage site

**Sid Evans:** When was the last time you went back?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** At the end of 2019 or maybe the first week of January 2020, right before, uh, the world came crashing down.

**Sid Evans:** So, Chef, you said that you grew up in a very full house in the introduction to your book and there was usually a very full kitchen.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Mm-hmm.

**Sid Evans:** I'm wondering if you can kind of paint a picture of that kitchen and what it might have looked like and, and smelled like on a typical night at, say, dinner time.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Sure. So, it was a square room with the stove facing a window that looked out on the front yard so, you know, my mother could see as people walked up and down the street or if somebody was coming through the front gate. So you would see her through the window and you could wave at her and she would wave back at you. And on the other side of that were the pantry shelves and then behind her were the shelves where she kept her old pots and pans and all that kind of stuff. There was a side door that went out to a nice patio area that we often sort of included in our outdoor dining space, if you will, because we could, we could spread out. And then at the far end, right before that door was our dining table that sat six, but there were never six people at that table...

**Sid Evans:** Always more.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Yeah, always more of us. You know, we would pull up chairs and on corners and whatnot, so... But that was my mother's realm. You know, she would be in there, and most people would come in through the side door and she would be there to greet them or talk to them, whether it was the milkman or the, the vegetable vendor or whatever, they had to go through her first.

**Sid Evans:** (laughs).

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Same with anybody else, same with the kids. If, you know, we had been out playing and we ran in the house, I mean, she would say, "Okay, time to go clean up. Wash your hands." You couldn't really sneak past her, uh... I mean, it's a fun memory. Uh, at times, it was annoying because you were trying to like sneak in late or caught a couple of tadpoles after a monsoon, and you were trying to sneak them in the house and, you know, it was really difficult to do but... (laughs).

**Sid Evans:** (laughs).

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Some tea would be had around 3:30 or 4:00, and after tea got cleared up, the dinner prep would start. So, she, she would sort of start with making the dough for the flat bread for the chapati. So, she would knead the dough, set it aside and then turn her attention to whatever else. Generally a pressure cooker would go on with, with the lentils and, and stuff so, that took up one eye and then the second eye she would start the vegetable prep. And as that was going on, you know, people would start coming in. I would be one of the first ones back, so she would give me little jobs like, "Cut these cucumbers for a little salad" or whatever. You know, some simple stuff like that. Around five o'clock my sister would be back and Dad would be right behind. So, then they would clean up and they would join in with whatever other tasks needed to be done because by this time, she would almost be done, but they would help, you know, clean up or set the table or whatever. And right around 7:00 or so-

**Sid Evans:** It sounds like she was running a restaurant.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Yeah, I mean, it felt like it, you know? Right around 7:00 or so, everybody else would show up, my aunts and uncles and whoever else. Then it would be all hands on deck and start eating. And you know, a lot of cacophony of voices and arguing about politics or sports or some other random stuff and they would go until about 9:00, 9:30. Then we would clean up and then Dad usually would put on a record in his old Magnavox stereo or we would listen to the radio and then the kids were sent off and the adults stayed up a little bit longer.

**Sid Evans:** And then do it again the next day (laughs). So, you've talked about how your mother was a huge influence on you. Talk to me about some of the dishes and some of the things that she made that really stayed with you from those dinners.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** I mean, the first one, is the, uh, is the chapati, because she would make them fresh twice a day. There were no leftover chapatis. We didn't eat leftover chapatis. They were made fresh every day and I always hung around for the first one to come off the griddle and she knew that. So, as soon as the first one came off the griddle nice and hot, she would put a nice generous portion of ghee on it, sprinkle a little sugar, roll it up, and hand it to me. And that was sort of our, our little tradition if you will. So that's one. The other thing I really enjoyed watching her do was put on a pressure cooker because I was fascinated by that, you know, aluminum thing where she would put other containers in and then she would close the lid and the little weight would start bobbing and making a hissing noise. And so whatever was in it was always interesting because I knew that once it was done whistling, dinner was very close and so that was sort of my cue to-

**Sid Evans:** (laughs).

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** If I was outside, we kind of listened for that. But as far as the dishes that really, really resonated with me and stayed with me, she did Gujarati food, but she was also very adventurous and she would look up recipes from other Indian cuisines and, and cook them. So, she would make matar paneer, which is a Punjabi dish and the house would smell very different than it normally would because all the spices were different, lots of onions and ginger and all that stuff and cream. So, that's one dish that stays with me. I mean, even though it's not a traditional Gujarati dish. The other one is her stuffed okra, the recipe for which is in the book. First of all, I love okra, but when she made that particular dish, the dish requires toasting chickpea flour for the filling, and so when you're toasting that chickpea flour, you know, the house starts smelling really sort of this fragrant nutty flavor. That's a memory that, it still lingers for me.

**Sid Evans:** Do you feel like you've inherited some of that adventurousness when it comes to cooking?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Possibly, yes. A lot of it has to do with where I grew up. Growing up in the neighborhood we did in Ahmedabad... Because my father worked for the federal government and we lived in this housing that was part of the job, there were several other families who lived there who were from different parts of the country and I wouldn't have had the experience I had if I didn't live in that particular neighborhood because, you know, our neighbors were from Maharashtra and then we had a couple of neighbors from Kerala and then dad had some Punjabi friends and Kashmiri friends and we would all once a month or so get together, eat at somebody else's house. So, I was getting exposed to regional Indian food, that I wouldn't have if we hadn't lived where we lived. so some of my cousins didn't-

**Sid Evans:** Yeah.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** ...eat the way I did because they lived in a different neighborhood. That had a big impact on how I cook and, you know, my acceptance of things that may look different, for sure. And then the other part was traveling. We liked to travel, whether within India or once we moved west, you know, traveling somewhere else. Because Mom and Dad were vegetarian, they had to figure out how to make

use of vegetables that were available wherever we were. And so she would take, ah you know, when we were living in France, I had never seen an asparagus and I doubt she'd seen one before, but she had to figure out, "Well, here's some fresh asparagus. Looks good. Let's figure out what to do with it." She tried to cook it like she would do green beans and it turned out magnificently. So, you know, things like that were always fun.

**Sid Evans:** So, Vish, you moved to the U.S. when you were 18, and you started going to the University of Kentucky not long after that, which had to be a pretty dramatic transition for you. What were some of your first impressions of the South?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** So, our first landing spot was Austin, Texas. We were there for a year because my dad had a project he was working on, a research project there and, you know, this was Austin, Texas, in '84, '85. What sort of surprised me was the amount of space there was between, you know, houses and lack of public transportation because I had grown up in a city where public transportation was very reliable. And that, that was a, a much bigger shock than anything else. Maybe I, you know, I had less of an adjustment because my family was with me, right? So I, I had a support system. So, if I'd come by myself, like a lot of young folks do for college, yes, it would have been very difficult, but I, I had a safety net of my mom and dad and my sister, I could go home to. So, that was very helpful. But what I did find welcoming from the very beginning was people were genuinely curious. You know they, they would ask questions about where I had grown up or what did we eat. "What do you mean you're vegetarian? Tell us about it." It was not a judgmental sort of like, "You don't eat brisket? What's wrong with you?" It's just like, "Oh, interesting. What do you eat?" You know? By the time I moved to Kentucky, I, you know, I had had a year to kind of break myself in to being in the U.S. Language wasn't an issue, so that was very helpful, and I'd been looking forward to going away to college for so long, you know, I sort of jumped in full bore and had a lot of fun. I wanted to take the most of that experience and, and I did, which is probably why I'm cooking for a living instead of doing something more important.

**Sid Evans:** (laughs). So, tell me when you start to discover what we usually define as Southern food and by that, I mean, when did you really start to discover things like fried catfish and barbecue and black eyed peas and collard greens?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** There's two parts to it. So, the vegetables right away because that's what I knew how to eat, right? So, all of a sudden, we had, you know, black eyed peas and collard greens and okra and stuff in the house, things that we had had before, or some version of, right? I mean, you know-

**Sid Evans:** So very familiar to you.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Right. The meat part came sort of very gradually. Of course, I had friends in India who ate meat. I tried when I was in India too and there's a story in the book. I think it's one of the, the funniest stories I have ever been part of. We tried to sneak off and go eat chicken and it didn't go very well, but then we lived in France and folks would invite us to dinner and you know they would have this meal where there was a some sort of a protein and then all the vegetables and cheeses and all that. So,

there was always plenty for us to eat, but I always felt like I was missing out on some of the experience because they would be waxing poetic about whether it was puli breast or whatever it was that they were eating and how special it was and, you know, friends from Normandy talking on and on about Coco Sidra or whatever. So, I was like, "Okay, I'm not getting that experience." As much as I'm enjoying what I am eating and having fun being with these people, it always felt like I was missing something. Uh, there was never any restriction from my parents that said, "No, you can't eat meat." It was just, "Well, we don't cook it. We don't eat it. So, if you're eating with us at home, then you're going to eat what we have." I think the first thing was probably like tasting a piece of chicken somebody had and I was like, "Okay, I don't understand what the big deal about this has been. You're clearly describing-

**Sid Evans:** (laughs).

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** ... this as, you know, transformative and I don't get it." I mean, you know, in college I had roommates and we would order pizza and I would order mine without pepperoni and they would order one with and like, "Okay, I'm gonna try a slice," and I was like, "Well, it's nice and salty. I don't... There's nothing too terrible about that." And so those are little small steps like that, that got me into... And then barbecue came much later. I was flying from Lexington to New Mexico for some sort of a college conference and I had a layover in Dallas and I was hungry, and I was at the Dallas Airport and I was like, "I need to eat something," and my options were hamburger, which I didn't eat because I knew that was beef and, you know, I hadn't quite made it there yet and then so there was this one place that had chicken fried steak, which I didn't know was beef.

**Sid Evans:** (laughs).

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** I had heard the chicken part and I said, "Okay, well, I can eat that." And so I ordered it and it was like I ate half of it and then I was like, "Well, this is the strangest chicken ever. You know, I've never seen chicken this color," or, you know, "What kind of chicken is this?" And, "Well, it's not really chicken. Well, it's too late now. I'm already in it." So that was sort of the put-me-over-the-edge thing, like, "All right. I can eat that. I can eat anything after that." So...

**Sid Evans:** You got tricked (laughs).

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** (laughs).

**(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)**

**Voice over from Sid:** I'll be back with more from Chef Vishwesh Bhatt after the break.

**(AD BREAK)**

**(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)**

**Voice over from Sid:** Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans and I'm talking with the James Beard Award-winning chef, Vishwesh Bhatt.

**(Music fades out)**

**Sid Evans:** So, Vish, you came to Oxford, Mississippi after college because your father was teaching there, I believe.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Yeah.

**Sid Evans:** So did it ever occur to you that this might become your home and the place that you would start your business?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** No, no. I mean, I came here very unwilling to be here, but, you know, I had a lot of fun in college, and so when it came to picking graduate schools, my options were limited. I could come here and because my dad worked at the university I would get in-state tuition and so that, that made the decision, uh, very easy. But my idea from the very beginning when I got here was like I'm gonna spend a semester maybe to bring my GPA back up, take my GRE again and, and transfer out to, you know, bigger school, if you will. I don't want to be in Mississippi. And a couple of months in, the place got a hold of me. Just made some really good friends and of course, you know, there's Square Books, you know, anchoring the square and, and, uh, the Hoka Theater, which was, you know, legendary Ron Shapiro running the Hoka, which was a great sort of avant-garde movie theater/meeting place where people would just go hang out and, you know, spend endless hours and, you know, John had just opened, uh, City Grocery, so things were just happening in Oxford at that time. John Grisham was about to blow up and Barry Hanna was here still and writing and hanging out at Square Books and, you know, playing tennis. I met all these people and all of a sudden realized what a special place Oxford was and two semesters turned into, you know, four and then five years and 30 years later, I'm still here.

**Sid Evans:** (laughs). So, Vish, you mentioned John Currence, and you've been partners with John for a long time and, and John owns a lot of restaurants in Oxford. He owns City Grocery and Boure and Big Bad Breakfast, and of course, Snackbar, which is your place. Tell me how you met John and, uh, ended up working for him and with him.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Yeah, so John and I got here about the same time in, in '92. He'd come here and, you know, getting ready to open City Grocery. We met, essentially, at the City Grocery Bar because that was the place I would go in the afternoons for happy hour and then he would come up after service and so we sort of started chatting, which then followed by me opening a coffee shop just down the road, where he became a regular. Uh, he would come in and get a, you know, cappuccino, and we were the first coffee shop in Oxford that did coffee drinks, like, we had an espresso machine and cappuccino and whatnot. So, he would come in, late morning, sit and visit for a minute. So, we started talking and even



more. Then I started working next door to City Grocery at a place called the Harvest Café, which was an all-vegetarian restaurant and I was working there a couple of days a week, but, yeah-

**Sid Evans:** And your mother worked there as well, right?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Yes, that- which is how I got the job there or I was volunteered into a job there because she and my dad were going on, on a vacation and the owners were like, "Well, who's gonna do this Indian thali that you do?" And she just said, "Oh, my son will come and do it." So that was my (laughs) introduction to restaurant work. Anyway, so we, you know, we would be next to each other and kind of talk and I would watch him look through produce as it was delivered and being very meticulous about, you know, "Yes, I want this," and "I don't want that." So I was learning from that and, and sort of saying, "Oh, this guy is clearly really focused about his place and, and he cares about stuff." And it, it brought back memories of, you know, going to the market with my dad and him being very meticulous about what sort of produce was selected and stuff. So that resonated with me. And then I knew, you know, as I started getting deeper and deeper into cooking and less and less into studying, I realized that City Grocery, what, what that restaurant was doing, was very special, uh, not just in Oxford, but in the, in the grand scheme of things as far as restaurants went, and I wanted to be a part of it. And so I would talk to John about it at the bar in the evening, in, you know, late evenings when I've had a few drinks and he would say, "Yeah, come by in the morning and we'll talk about it." Which is- of course, in the morning I, I, I was a little more sober and then I would chicken out and not go talk to him. So (laughs) that went on for, you know, about a year and a half. Finally, he's like, "Look, you're just gonna... I mean, either if you, if you want to work, then, then, you know, come on, but we're not playing this game anymore." And I did show up and I did get hired and, you know, here we are again 30 years later, but we became friends as I was working. I mean, you know, being the same age helped. You know, having similar tastes in food helps, of course, and I always wanted to learn. So, you know, when I, when I went to that kitchen, I wasn't really afraid to ask questions and I think that certainly helped develop a friendship because instead of just muddling my way through, if I didn't know something, I would ask questions and, and make sure I was doing it the way it needed to be done because again, a lot of these things were new for me. It wasn't stuff I had grown up with. And so I think that helped as well.

**Sid Evans:** So, Vish, you opened Snackbar in 2009...

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Yes.

**Sid Evans:** I've been lucky to eat there a few times. Tell me a little bit about the concept and what's unique about your restaurant.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** (laughs). So, the concept from the very beginning when John and I opened it, we wanted it to be a French bistro or a brasserie where it's a neighborhood place that can be as casual as you want it to be. You can come in and, you know, get a dozen oysters and a glass of wine and leave and go eat somewhere else or you could have a really nice meal. Um, but we also wanted to be a place that was communal and wanted to make sure that people felt comfortable coming in and they could relax.

And so when we first opened, the menu was very much full of dishes that he and I both liked, things like duck confit and salad lardon and, you know, French onion soup and it ran the gamut like that. At some point – and I'm not exactly sure, you know, what the transition was – it wasn't really conscious on my part. What I had always done when I worked at City Grocery, you know, when I was, I was the chef of the cuisine there, do sauces with, with Indian spices and, and things like that and so I started doing that gradually for specials at Snackbar. And at some point the realization came to me that that was very much a part of who I was and that's what people enjoyed and that that is what was different about what I did in this world of so many chefs that I admire and, you know, having the Southern Foodways Alliance Symposium and then having chefs from across the country down here who would actually come in and say nice things about my food, that was, that was something that was at once very heart-warm, but also very intimidating because it was like, "Wow, now I need to keep up this work. I mean, I can't disappoint them the next year they're here." So that, that was a fun challenge, but also I realized that what people enjoyed most and what I enjoyed most were the dishes that had the influences of my childhood in them. And, and while they looked very Southern and, and the concept was very Southern and, you know, the ingredients were definitely very Southern, adding those flavors was the turning point for me as a chef and as somebody who wanted to share stories.

**Sid Evans:** So, John said in his foreword that a lot of your cooking is dedicated to recreating dishes that your mother loved. Do you find that to be true with regard to Snackbar?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Uh, yes and no. I'm not recreating dishes that she loved, but recreating her passion for cooking, right? I mean, because I have not met anybody that used food as, as a means to make connections and transform people and transform a room like she could. I mean, I would love at some point in time to be able to emulate that. I don't come close yet, but yes, that would be something-

**Sid Evans:** (laughs).

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** ...I really look forward to if I can make it happen. But, uh, the other part is yes. I mean, the not necessarily recreating dishes, but not being afraid to use flavors that may not necessarily be something that is thought of as is very traditional for certain dishes but still go ahead and do it and hope that people enjoy it.

**Sid Evans:** Yeah. I want to ask you about a couple of specific dishes. And one of them is something that's on the menu. It's in the book. It's called Punjabi style fried catfish.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Mm-hmm.

**Sid Evans:** And I just love this one because catfish is such a Mississippi staple. It's so much a part of the culture there, but you've put this very personal spin on it that reflects where you come from. What's the story behind this recipe?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** We've always had catfish on the menu at Snackbar because we're in Mississippi. So, shrimp and catfish have stayed on the menu from day one and then the thing is about catfish is, it's pretty versatile, but when it's been on the menu for, you know, 13 years, you gotta keep finding new ways to, to make it interesting. And so like what do we do? And it's like well, you know, I can do things like Kung Pao catfish and I can do catfish with tandoori spices. But this dish came about because I came to the realization that fried fish is a thing in Punjab. I did not know that for a very long time, and it's like why didn't I know this? Because clearly this is a region that has all these rivers, and so, as soon as I learned that, I was like, "Well, I wonder what those flavors- how they work with catfish?" First, I had to find the right recipe and so I was like, "All right. Well, you know, there's some online, but those don't look right." And I would watch YouTube videos of these streetside fellows making these fish and, you know, and I had eaten it and was like clearly I haven't gotten my spice combination right. It tastes pretty good, but it's not where I want it to be. So, I got on the phone with the Punjabi people I know. A couple of them happen to be chefs and so I was like, "Hey, you know, how do you make your rotisserie fish?" And so they gave me some ideas and so I took those ideas and put this dish together and, as soon as I did, you know, it was like, "All right. This needs to go on the menu and, and this is something that people are going to enjoy." And it's- that has been the case and it's a fun way to change up this notion of a fried fish in Mississippi. I didn't want to really try to compete with beautiful fish that comes out of Taylor Grocery or at Ajax.

**Sid Evans:** (laughs) Well, it makes me very hungry talking about it right now. So, I also want to ask you about your mom's rice pudding, which is in the book and which you said was one of the first desserts that you ever learned to make.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Right.

**Sid Evans:** I should also note that you put pudding in quotes. What kind of memories does this dish conjure for you and why did you want to put it in the book?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** (laughs). That is one of those dishes where, you know, one of the first dishes where she put me to work because this requires it to be cooked on the stove on low heat and you know, that the pudding part comes from reducing the milk till it gets nice and thick and of course the rice in there and the rice starch. And so if you're not stirring, it can scorch very easily. And so this was a task given to me to constantly stir. So, I actually had to work, you know, to- a-a-a-a-and not mess up in order to get the finished product and get to enjoy it. So that's the, you know, that's the one memory (laughs) of, you know, mom saying, "You can't stop stirring. No, it's not time yet. It's not done." It's because it, you know, it takes a while and as a kid, you're like, "Is it done now? Can I quit? You know, my arm hurts. This, that," like no. "You want, you want it right. You're gonna have to sit here and stir this until it's ready," and so that's certainly one of those memories where, you know, I thought my mom was being mean to me.

**Sid Evans:** But she knew you were pretty motivated to get to the finish line and, and get to taste it...

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** I was. Yes, I was, but I was, I was looking for shortcuts if there was one. I was like, “Can I turn the heat up? I mean, can I do something to speed this up?” Like, “No!” So, it taught me patience, like if you wanted something done right, you had to wait for it and do it right from the beginning. But what I really enjoy about this is it's a, it's a very, very simple dish. It's rice and milk and some spices and some sugar, but then it's patience and some attention and then you've got the little nuts in there, chop pistachios or chop almonds that add that little crunch But so, it's just this flavor of rice that's really well-developed and which I really enjoy. It's not super sweet, but it's sweet, but then it also has a little bit of cardamom in it, a little bit of nutmeg. So, all that going on. And then I like to actually chill it and, and eat it that way, but you can also eat it warm like a porridge

**Sid Evans:** Which is how you ate it as a kid, I'm guessing: right off the stove.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Yes. Yep. I mean, what fascinates me about that dish is it's just so simple with such simple ingredients, but just the finished product is so much more than, than the sum of the parts it is.

**Sid Evans:** So, Vish, I've spoken to Cheetie Kumar and Maneet Chauhan on this podcast and we talked about this incredible community of Indian chefs in the South. What has that community meant to you during your career and, and, and also personally?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** So I didn't meet them until much later in my career, right? So, the folks that I looked up to, were Raji Jallepalli who was... I don't know if you remember her. She was in Memphis.

**Sid Evans:** I'm from Memphis. Yes, I knew her son and I knew her cooking.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Yeah, so Raji was, was the first, and then Floyd Cardoz. They were freaking brilliant. And then I met, much later, in 2008 or maybe 2009, when I met Meherwan Irani immediately followed by Cheetie and then Asha Gomez, and then a year later, I met Maneet and realized that there were several of us in the South who were cooking, uh, you know, in the business of feeding people. And that all of us had similar stories of, of moving and spending time in the States before deciding that we were going to, you know, go into this line of work. Cheetie clearly, you know, had been in the music and then when, you know, Meherwan had been in marketing and in cars and Asha was doing- running a spa and that sort of stuff and so, you know, just all these stories like, “Wow, you know? This is really fun. We should get together and tell our stories and, you know, maybe encourage people, the younger generation of folks that look like us that there are other careers besides just being an engineer or a doctor or IT person – that you could go out and, and be creative and do something else and let's use that platform that we have to tell that story and while we're telling that story, let's also figure out a way to raise some money for, uh, something we believe in. So, initially, it was for Southern Foodways Alliance because that's how we all came together and met each other. So it, it was an automatic thought in most of our minds that that's a great place to start, uh, supporting. And so that's what we've done, and then we hope to come back. Because of COVID and many other things, you know, we sort of shut that down, but we've been having these discussions. I mean, we just... Cheetie, Meherwan, and I just cooked a dinner last week in, in, uh, Spartanburg, South Carolina, where this came up again. A lot of other folks have asked, like,

“What are you guys thinking about?” You know, then, “What's the next step for brown in the South?” We are coming back in, in some shape or another, but, but with a little, little more focus on fundraising for causes that help immigrants. We need to use our recognition to sort of then shine the light on these younger folks who are doing what we started off doing and, and hopefully that creates this movement that is more dynamic and more self-sustaining.

**Sid Evans:** Well, we'd love to have you in Birmingham sometime.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** We'd love to be there.

**Sid Evans:** So, keep us in mind as you're, as you're making your plans (laughs). Well, Vish, I just have one more question for you. What does it mean to you to be Southern?

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** That's a hard one, right? I mean, I, I don't really know if I've really thought about that, but it does mean that I have a place that I belong to, where I have a place that I can call home. For someone who's, for a very long time, had to struggle with, you know, “Where do I belong,” it's a great feeling to be in a place that you're surrounded by, uh, friends and family, and to have a place to call your own because a lot of people are not that lucky. Even in this day and age when, you know, we have so much technology and so much other good stuff happening, there are so many millions of people that don't have a home, are displaced for, for many number of reasons. So, whether it's the South as, you know, as I claim it or, or wherever else your home may be. If you have a home, or if you have a place you can call home, you're way ahead of a lot of people.

**Sid Evans:** Well, Chef Vishwesh Bhatt, thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

**Vishwesh Bhatt:** Oh, thank you so much for having me.

**(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins)**

**Sid Outro:** Thanks for listening to my conversation with Vishwesh Bhatt. His new cookbook, ‘I am from Here: Stories and Recipes From a Southern Chef,’ is available wherever books are sold. For more information about Chef Bhatt, go to [kissmybhatt.com](http://kissmybhatt.com) or do yourself a favor and make a reservation at Snack Bar in Oxford, Mississippi. Southern Living is based in Birmingham, Alabama. Be sure to follow Biscuits & Jam on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen. And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at [southernliving.com/biscuitsandjam](http://southernliving.com/biscuitsandjam). Make sure to come back here next Tuesday for my conversation with the author, actress and singer Chrissy Metz.

**(Music ends)**