

Reclaiming Your Roots with Padma Lakshmi and Uzo Orimalade

Even the most experienced homecooks can feel intimidated when it comes to recreating a prized recipe from their heritage, or that of others. On this week's episode of *Homemade*, to discuss this struggle and how to overcome it, are two women who have championed their own roots in the kitchen, and thus, have inspired millions: First, host Sabrina Medora checks in with Nigerian chef and Allrecipes Allstar Uzo Orimalade, as the pair chat about African cooking and Uzo's hunger to always learn more. Then, *Top Chef* and *Taste the Nation* host Padma Lakshmi visits to talk about how her new children's book *Tomatoes For Neela* was created specifically to inform her daughter about her Indian culinary heritage.

SABRINA MEDORA: Hey food fans! I'm food writer and culinary entrepreneur Sabrina Medora and you are listening to *Homemade* by Allrecipes. Each week we bring you talented home cooks, authors, chefs, and celebrities to discuss the memories and traditions behind their favorite foods, along with discussions on what's happening in food culture today.

This week, we're discussing how cooking plays a very strong role in understanding your own heritage, as well as that of others, especially when you're new to cooking. You'll hear from celebrated television host and bestselling author Padma Lakshmi on how to tap into cooking as a way to reclaim your roots and spread knowledge. But first, please join me in welcoming someone from our Allrecipes Allstars program. Here she is, all the way from Nigeria, Allrecipes Allstar Uzo Orimalade.

Hi, Uzo.

UZO ORIMALADE: Hi, Sabrina. How are you?

SABRINA: It's so good to have you on the show.

UZO: Thank you for having me.

SABRINA: So, Uzo, you are an Allrecipes Allstar. Tell me a little bit about what that's like.

UZO: It's a fascinating journey because I get to 'meet' and I put that in, you know, in quotation marks. I get to meet, home cooks, passionate home cooks from all over the world, mostly in the U.S. but I'm sure there are some from outside the country. And there have been some Allstars that I have interacted with that have been on the platform for over five years. And we share recipes. We share tips. Especially in the last year and a half with everything that's been going on, we have crossed over from just talking about food and recipes to sharing a little bit about our homes and our personal lives. And, you know, it's understandable. It's more of a family than just a collection of strangers at this point.

SABRINA: That's so lovely, I'm always of the opinion that food builds the best communities.

UZO: I agree.

SABRINA: And speaking of family and being in different countries and things like that, you as a recipe developer have great insight on making food that comes from your heritage, your community, but at the same time having to do it living in different countries. And I know that a lot of home cooks, myself included, sometimes struggle with the idea that they really want to cook something that reminds them of home, that reminds them of family or childhood. But then there's sort of this pressure where it's like, I'm too scared to screw it up or I don't have enough time or I don't do it the way my mom would do it. So then we tend to step away from the kitchen altogether. But you tend to take a very different perspective on that.

UZO: Yes, I do. I went to university in England and we really needed to fill the void that came from being away from home and being alone. And I was in university pretty young, at 16. And so all I could do when I was homesick was find food that was familiar to me. But I didn't go to a university in central London where there were lots of ethnic stores or even, you know, regular grocery stores had at least an ethnic aisle. I went to school in a village where the university was pretty much the life of that village. So it was basic English ingredients and we had to make adjustments in our communities. And there's a very huge international community. And I think that also helped me get exposed to so many cuisines. And so we'd all come together to ask questions like you're making this dal, can I have some of your lentils? And then maybe be a substitute for the honey beans that I have at home. And then they would come and say, 'So, you know, I want to make a bunch of chicken but what are we going to do about the tomatoes?'

Because I'm not sure if the canned Roma tomatoes that were 99p at the time would work. And then as I got older and moved to the U.S., it became an extension of me as the hostess. I've always been the rallying point for people, and of course, when people rally around you, there's always food. And then there's the search for ingredients that would work. And then it began to evolve into I have friends with these particular food tolerances or not, and that adjusting the recipes that way. And then it became, you know, I have to keep myself at a particular size just because I'm vain. And it would be good for health reasons. And so making adjustments, what I thought were healthy substitutions. Where I am now is the most important thing is being true to the heritage of the dishes. When you think back about food and food traditions, there's a lot of blood, sweat, and tears before recipes get to a particular point. So you would hear a grandmother say, 'we had no money and so I had to use these ingredients so that we could all eat well because we couldn't afford so and so.' And so to take that heritage and that tradition and the story and turn it into something very blasé upsets me quite a bit. So I try to be as authentic as possible and I will try to stay true to the traditions of the dishes.

SABRINA: Right. And what would you say to chefs and home cooks that aren't of a particular culture but that love the food and want to create it in their own kitchens?

UZO: The approach that I use, whether you're buying a cookbook or anything else, is follow the recipe exactly as it is the very first time. Don't assume you know, don't assume because you've been cooking for ages, you want to slash quantities and make substitutions. Make it the exact way it's been written down the first time. And then after that, you can say for my palate, for my home, for my lifestyle, here's what I need. I need a little more of this. I need a little less of this. Then you can make the adjustments, but you must understand what it's supposed to taste like, what it's supposed to feel like in your mouth, and what your senses are supposed to evoke when you take a bite. You must understand that the very first time before you go into, you know, crazy kitchen experimenting mode.

SABRINA: Right. I couldn't agree enough. There's so many different ways that even Indians will approach a recipe like — my mother's recipe for something is vastly different to someone else's mother's recipe for that same exact dish. And yet you can always tell the common threads,

the roots that come through those recipes. But I mean, interpretations, even within cultures, are very different.

UZO: Yes, they are. First of all, you must understand this, the regional cuisine things. I really believe that you can tell how I feel on any given day when you eat my dishes because there's also the element of how you're feeling, the amount of anger or love or whatever it is that you put into your dishes, that can give you a different outcome every time. So for you to say that I had Uzo's jollof rice today and I know what it tastes like, is doing that dish a disservice.

SABRINA: I think this is such an important lesson for all of us to learn is that food gives us a wonderful way not only to understand other people's cultures, not only to get a glimpse into how somebody else was born and raised, but also how we can treat the conversation around food and thereby a people with dignity, with consideration, with curiosity, and ultimately with an acceptance of, well, this might not be for me, but I respect what it is.

UZO: And I kind of go through life with a very hyper-imaginative state. Right? So I always challenge myself and I say things like, what if this was the one million dollar question on *How to Be a Millionaire*? And — yeah. I'm used to that because that's the way I approach my curiosity and learning. So when I'm feeling lazy and I'm like, I don't want to read about this, I just think, huh, what if this was the one million dollar question? What if I was the phone a friend? I want to be able to help my friend out. So with that approach, if everyone could kind of think like that and ask questions about why do you cook like this? What does this do? I think it's so fascinating that in this day and age, people still say it's too spicy for me and they mean that to mean peppery hot. That the nuances of spices are still not clear to some people. So there's a perception. Right? Especially by people from the West that, you know, African countries are backward and they don't know a lot of stuff. Now, what happens invariably is those in African countries overcompensate. Right? So you learn about your own stuff, but you learn about everything else about every other culture. So that when you get there you end up being more exposed. You end up knowing more.

SABRINA: Yes.

UZO: And so it saddens me that I have made all of this effort so that I can fit in so that I'm not 'too much' of a Nigerian. I'm not 'too much' of anything just so that I could get educated and work and just have friends and relationships. And it's disrespectful to me and it's lazy that you don't want to try.

SABRINA: Right.

UZO: That you think that what you have is the be all and end all. And so you don't want to learn about my food. You don't want to learn about my culture, you don't want to try it, or you want to come at me with perceptions that are not necessarily yours. I mean, if you hear something said over and over again, you begin to believe that you form that opinion yourself. And you come at me and say, oh, Nigerian food, you know, sucks or it's too hot or I won't like it. And you talk about how it smells and all of that. And I'm looking at you thinking, but you pay top dollar for truffles and that stuff stinks. So why would you come back to me and say a basic umami-like ingredient like locust beans, which is used in my culture, stinks? You know?

SABRINA: Yeah. It's so interesting that you say that because about the whole fitting in thing because I've lived in so many different countries and cities and states, I spent all of my childhood doing my best to fit in. Like, I would watch Mary Kate and Ashley movies and *The Parent Trap*, and I would do my hair just like those girls. And I would be so careful to, like you know, wear very nondescript clothing so that I wasn't necessarily wearing, for example, Limited Too, but I also couldn't be made fun of because I wasn't wearing any sort of what one could call traditional garb. Right? And I made such an effort to whitewash the heck out of myself. And then fast forward to college. I had done it so successfully, I had even distanced myself from any other Indian pupils that actually came from my high school, as well, to the same college because I was like, nope, I'm not associated with you guys. I don't speak Hindi the way you do. And I want to fit in and blah, blah, blah. But I will never forget that some of my happiest moments in college — I went to Indiana University and there was a street called Fourth Street.

And that was the street that was like all of the — I hate this word, but for a lack of a better description — all of the ethnic food. So there was a little house that was a Thai restaurant. There was a little house that was a sushi place. There was a little house that was an Indian restaurant and it was called Bombay House. And I remember freshman year, I took some of my friends to

dine there a couple of them were Indian and a couple of them were white. And I remember the tremendous pleasure that I got from sharing my recommendations on what to order and then watching them transform with delight. My roommate at the time her number one food in our fridge was dino nuggets, like the chicken nuggets shaped like dinosaurs.

UZO: Yes. Yes.

SABRINA: And she sat there eating — eating lamb and vindaloo and naan and drinking mango lassi. And she had this look of absolute delight on her face. And I just felt like I could fly that day because I was so proud that something that I was a part of could bring such joy to somebody else. And it was just a small way in that small moment where it's like, yes, I've been trying to fit in so much, but here I am embracing something that is truly a part of me and how joyful it is to be able to share that with others.

UZO: Yes.

SABRINA: And I just — it's just so powerful.

UZO: It is very powerful. And I get the same sense of pride when I introduce people to my riffs on Nigerian food or just authentic Nigerian. When I say authentic, it means like, you know, you come here and take you to a hole in the wall kind of place where, you know, the aunties that are there are like, yeah, are you taking your food and move on? You know, no finesse or anything. But the food is usually so very good. And I just see how mindblown people are. What I will say, though, is I understand the alienness and foreignness of certain things. So what I will try to do is give you context. So I can try and say jollof rice is like jambalaya. So if you like jambalaya, if you like paella — just not as crispy as paella. But, you know, arroz con pollo — if you like all of those dishes, then you will like jollof rice. There's an okra soup that is made here that's chock full of seafood and all sorts of goodies. And I would say things like if you like gumbo, you will like the soup. So I will make that effort to give you a familiar point in the compass because I admit that it can be overwhelming and it can be strange if you don't know what to expect.

In the spirit of making Nigerian food more world accepted. And as much as I want to be arrogant about the beauty of my cuisine, I also understand that the market I'm trying to introduce it to, and the audience I'm trying to introduce it to has never had it before. And if these are the people who

are going to consume my content or who are going to buy any products related to whatever it is that I'm trying to push, they need to have something familiar to hold onto. So I accept that part. And it gives me joy as well just to try and expand people's horizons a little bit.

SABRINA: Yeah, I mean, I feel like this was such a productive conversation just for the two of us. And we are of similar mindsets. And yet I feel I learned more from you, which is great. Uzo, one final question. Tell us a little bit about Uzo's Food Labs.

UZO: Uzo's Food Lab is my baby. It is at this point all I live and breathe. It is a home entertainment and food business. And what we do is we have a retail arm where we make specialized products and, you know, we have, like, a retail line for aprons and sauces and things that we've created. Our flagship product is chin chin, which is like crunchy cookies. So just imagine cookies that are cut into bite-sized pieces, every Nigerian home knows chin chin. But what we've done is create a gourmet line. And what that means is we have 10 flavors of the chin chin. We've got Irish cream and we've got cookies and cream and we've got lemon. All of those things. That's one arm.

And then there's a consulting side of my business where I'm passionate about teaching. So I teach live demos. I work with brands about teaching, as well. We do the YouTube thing. We do television. I write about food. I'm just passionate about food and teaching people about Nigerian food, how to make it your own, how to feed your family in a wholesome way, and we're trying to show people that you can grow at least one thing in your home. And it doesn't have to be imported kale or anything. Like your local peppers and local greens that you can just add an additional nutritional boost to your meals. That's Uzo's Food Labs.

SABRINA: I love that. That's fantastic. Well, congratulations on everything you're doing, and thank you so much for joining us and for teaching me a little something today. I just loved hearing from you. I loved talking to you. And we appreciate your time.

UZO: Thank you, Sabrina. Thank you for having me on and I really hope that something I've said, will add a little something to everyone listening.

SABRINA: Visit UzosFoodLabs.com to keep up on everything that Uzo is up to, as well as Uzo's Food Labs on social media. And remember, she is an Allrecipes Allstar so if you want to

dip your toe into Nigerian cooking, there are plenty of opportunities at Allrecipes.com for you to do so!

Coming up after the break, we've got one of TV's most recognizable food personalities — the host of *Top Chef* and *Taste the Nation*: Padma Lakshmi. Together, we discuss her new children's book and the real-life inspiration that led to it. We'll be right back after the break.

Hey listeners! And welcome back to *Homemade* with your host Sabrina Medora. With two cookbooks and a memoir under her belt, this bestselling author is now entering the world of children's books with the same charm and passion for which she is so beloved. Oh yeah, she also happens to be the host and executive producer of Bravo TV's Emmy Award-winning series *Top Chef* as well as the host and creator of Hulu's *Taste the Nation*.

Her latest book *Tomatoes for Neela* is out now, and for fans of *Taste the Nation*, get ready because it returns to Hulu on November 4. Listeners, please join me in welcoming Padma Lakshmi to *Homemade*.

So Padma, we were just talking to a guest about the importance of staying true to your culture even if you no longer live in a certain country. What's a way that you've communicated your Indian heritage with your daughter Krishna?

PADMA LAKSHMI: You know, I think we do it in daily ways, small and big. It can be anything from lighting incense in front of our little pooja cabinet before the first day of school or, making sure she knows how to eat well with her hands when she's eating dal and rice or dosa and sambar. To just making sure she respects her elders. But for her, it is very foreign because she's been born here and it's not like I walk around listening to Indian music all the time. So, the truth is, she's going to be who she's going to be and she'll find or arrive at those things when her curiosity piques her interest. I don't believe in forcing kids to do a lot. I mean, I have mandated that we do certain things because I think, you have to taste something a few times before you know you like it. And kids can be very opinionated prematurely. But, I also think there is merit in not being so heavy-handed with it. I've tried not to be because I want it to be something that she's proud of and curious of and comes to on her own as much as that's possible.

I think that as you age, you become curious and interested in different parts of your heritage more because it's not being mandated to you by your parents, like studying or brushing your teeth or cleaning up your room, et cetera. I have to admit, like, I never had a Diwali celebration in my home before my child was born. And I did it to use it as a vehicle to give her some of her heritage because I — you know, both my parents are Indian. She's only half Indian. And I went to India every year for summer and certain years I studied in India like third and fourth grade. Whereas Krishna's only been about, you know, five or six times, which is a lot because she's 11, but she's only ever been for like two or three weeks, whereas I was spending three months a year.

SABRINA: Right, it's funny how that has evolved because I, like you, used to spend all my summers there. I've studied certain years there and, you know, really gone back and forth with all of that. But I highly doubt that my children, when I have them, will have that same experience. So in a way, there's a lot of pressure on the parent, like 'how do I translate our culture so that we can keep carrying it forward, but in a way that fits our children's lifestyles now?'

PADMA: And feels fun you know, it feels like something they want to enjoy and want to embrace. That's the challenge. It's hard at first because Indian culture is complicated. It is. You know, even Hinduism is much more complicated than a monotheistic presenting religion. It's intimidating and it's overwhelming. And so I think you have to give it to them in small doses as much as possible. There are some beautiful children's books way before I wrote *Tomatoes for Neela*, there is a children's version of the Ramayana, which is really nice, that I used to read to Krishna, and that was presenting it in an age-appropriate way, which was really good because now, she knows things that I didn't know and I've learned with her. For instance, what is a pushpaka vimana? Well, it's a flying, floating object that's kind of like a chariot, but kind of like a flying carpet, you know? So things like that that she's able to say and pronounce and understand what they mean because I brought it to her in a form that's entertaining and fun. It does take a little bit of research. But the beauty is that I have so many resources that my mother didn't have with the Internet. And to be able to mail order all the stuff that can come in like Holi powder. Holi is a festival of the birth of spring, and that's actually celebrated in north India. We don't really celebrate it in south India, but there's this company that reached out to me and they make these powdered colors that are nontoxic and safe. And so I was like, yeah, absolutely, send

me some. So we were able to enjoy that. You know, and that is so much fun for kids. So I think just doing things that are at their level that they can understand and embrace is really important.

SABRINA: Yeah, and speaking of children's books, you mentioned *Tomatoes for Neela*, which is your new book that's coming out. Tell me a little bit about what inspired you to write this book.

PADMA: Sure. I'm really excited. It's been a lifelong dream of mine to write a children's book. I love children's literature, and this book is based on a story that I used to tell at bedtime to my daughter, Krishna. She didn't really know when fruits and vegetables grew in what season. Why would she? You know, we live in an apartment in New York City. She goes to the grocery store or a farmer's market, but she's not thinking about when Mother Nature wants us to eat things. And so I started teaching her about when things grow because she came home and wanted pomegranates in July. I think she had had some pre-shelled pomegranates at her dad's house or something. And I said, 'well, we're not supposed to eat pomegranates in July. We're supposed to eat them when they're in season, when it gets cold outside, when the leaves turn, when the pumpkins come out — Halloween, we have big coats.' And so I started telling her little stories about different vegetables and fruits and when they grew. And then I started talking to her about where tomatoes were first discovered. And they were discovered in the new world in Mesoamerica. And, you know, chilies were also discovered there. And so I just started to, in narrative form, start giving her little factoids and fun information. And I also wanted her to write her recipes down. So she has a little notebook that she keeps in the kitchen that she can write recipes in. So, you know, when I was testing recipes for my book, I would just plunk her down on the kitchen counter and give her some grape tomatoes and a little serrated butter knife and let her cut the tomatoes so she felt part of it. So *Tomatoes for Neela* is an intergenerational story about the importance of writing down recipes, knowing when things grow, acknowledging everybody in our food chain, including farmworkers. There's back matter about farmworkers as well as other resources online that you can use to teach your children about that. It has a couple of recipes with tomatoes that are nice to make with your kids, and it just talks about the importance of saving our family recipes and writing them down. Because through writing recipes down, you can teach children a lot of academic skills they're learning anyway, like spelling, like sequential ordering, clear instruction taking or giving, fractions, math — simple things like that

that are fun to extrapolate. And then a kid that is involved in making their own food, is more likely to eat it. More interested in their food feels a proprietorship over it and feels proud of it. And giving a child the gift of good food and good eating when they're young is a gift that will serve them all their lives, And so it's very important to set a child's eating patterns in the first four or five years of life, in my opinion.

SABRINA: Yeah, there really is so much in this book and it is so beautiful. And one of the things that struck me is it's so gorgeously illustrated.

PADMA: Yes, we were very lucky to get the wonderful Juana Martinez-Neal, who is the Caldecott Honor recipient to do this book. She is a very busy artist and we were over the moon when she found time to make this one of her projects. And I think the illustrations are so warm and beautiful and I'm very thankful to her.

SABRINA: It really takes you back because it sort of places you in this unspoken moment and place and time that feels very warm and Indian and soothing and kind of like you're at your mother's house or your grandmother's house. And no matter what age you are, I think this book is really going to resonate because we've all had those moments. I remember I must have been about six and I came home saying, 'Mom, I want some grapes.' And my mom was like, 'well, you can't have any right now.' I was like, 'OK, well, give me some strawberries.' 'Uh, no. You can't have any of those either.' And I just looked at her like, what are you talking about? And then that's the moment that I learned that, you know, fruits and vegetables are seasonal. And then forever I was going into the kitchen and asking, you know, 'well is this in season? What about this? Can we eat this?'

PADMA: Yeah, that's great.

SABRINA: And, you know, there's that curiosity.

PADMA: It's wonderful that your mom did that. I think a child that is aware of the seasons is also aware of the environment, is also more in tune with the rhythm of the planet, and hopefully will be a better caretaker of our planet as they grow into adulthood. I think it's all connected. And that's what this book in a narrative form, you know, that kids can understand is trying to do.

It's trying to say the recipes you make with your family members are important. They're valuable. You should write them down. It's fun. It's tomato season. Let's go to the market and get tomatoes and while they are ripe and juicy and at their sweetest and most delicious and most nutritious, by the way, because if you're eating in season, not only is the taste better, but it's also better for you. And let's make some tomato sauce. Let's freeze them. Let's can them. Let's put them in the freezer and fridge and cupboard for later. I remember when we were kids, there would be this ritualistic grape juice making or ritualistic, you know, spinning of murukku or chakri, which are these Indian snacks. And other families in other parts of the world, my girlfriends who are of Mexican descent say, 'Oh, yeah, it's the same thing. We're making tamales. It's a huge production and event in the house.' And those are really how family memories and childhood memories are made. And so to me, all of these little moments are not only teachable but are opportunities for love and comfort and getting together and just relishing each family's personal history together.

SABRINA: Absolutely, you know, there's a lot of people that discovered their kitchens for the first time last year during COVID, and there's so many people that I know that don't have family recipes to look back on. Like, I consider myself so lucky that I have traditions like that to reference and that I have my mom around to ask all these questions to. But how would you guide someone who was not part of a very food-focused family, but that now wants to create food traditions of their own with their family?

PADMA: I honestly would say, look online and buy a very simple cookbook full of recipes that you like to eat anyway. You know, just write down your five favorite things that you like to cook or eat or take out with your family. Like what are your family's favorite foods to eat even if you're not making them. And then buy a book that teaches you how to make them at home that's simple and clear and then create those rituals and create a library of personal favorites that you explore making and the first time you make a recipe with your family. Don't do it at like 7:45 at night on a weekday when everybody's got homework and e-mails and school the next day. You know, have it be a fun, relaxed, creative activity. Pick a recipe Saturday morning. You know, go to the market, come back home and give everybody a chore. You know you wash the vegetables, you cut the onion, I will boil the water you want to make it fun and make it an adventure, you know? And also give your kids a say in that, because if they, again, are participating in the food

they're making, they'll get excited about it. Food can be a chore. It can be a joy. It can be a salve. It can be relaxing. It can be nerve-wracking, all of those things. So cook with intention and give you and whoever your loved ones are doing it with you, give yourselves time and patience. Get out all of this stuff you need. Chop all of the ingredients before you even turn on the stove, so you're relaxed. Do what they do on the cooking shows, which is have everything laid out on the counter in the order that it's going to go into the pan or pot. And that is what I suggest for new cooks because it takes out the stress. You know, read the recipe through more than one time.

SABRINA: That is such a key piece of advice, read the recipe, reread the recipe, and it's OK to reread it a third time because chances are if you don't, you'll probably miss something.

PADMA: Definitely. That's what I do and I'm a professional. You know, I read a recipe over a few times, I look the directions over. I look at all the ingredients, I, you know, chop or julienne or peel or blanch or whatever all that stuff is. So I've got everything chopped and ready to go. I just want to stack the deck for success and I want it to be a fun experience.

SABRINA: And we do have so many resources now with the Internet where, you know, you were mentioning blanching and julienned, all it takes is a quick YouTube tutorial. It's like three to five minutes and you can follow along. You can watch it as many times as you need to so that you can start to perfect those techniques. No one comes at it perfectly. I think it took me months to learn how to dice an onion properly, you know?

PADMA: Oh, yeah. I'm not sure I still dice an onion properly, you know, or evenly. There's always a couple of pieces that are double the size of the others, you know, and that's OK. It's all right. The reason you chop all the vegetables the same size is so that they cook evenly. But just knowing that makes you aware of why it's important to take the time to chop that onion, you know, gently. And if you can't get it that small of a dice, as long as they're all the same size and a little bit bigger, that's OK. They'll just take a little longer to cook and just give yourself permission to be OK with the dish not being perfect because it is your first time.

SABRINA: There is so much stress associated with the kitchen because, you know, people feel compelled to put — especially recently — three meals a day and how can we make it as fast and easy as possible? You know, five ingredients in five minutes or less. And there's something lost

about those long, lazy Sundays that are spent, you know, in the kitchen together, communally bonding and storytelling and sharing over, you know, bites taken from the saucepan and a piece of bread dipped in here and there.

PADMA: Yes, it's true. I mean Neela — the reason she has that name is Neela, is my aunt. She's my mom's younger sister, but she's close in age to me, so she's like my sister. She's seven years older than me. And when we were little at my grandparents' house, we would spend all our afternoons experimenting in the kitchen and just tinkering around. You know, we loved aam papads, which are these dried fruit leathers from north India, and we moved down to south India and we missed them. And in those days, you didn't get everything all over India. So we would experiment, trying to make that at home and or making churana, which is this other powder, you know, very savory digestif that they give you. And so, we would do all these experiments to try and reproduce tastes that we had in our sense memory live — you know, in our, in our heads. And I remember doing that for hours. I remember burning pans and our elders getting really upset at us. And saying you should be napping. It's hot. It's the afternoon and we'd be tinkering away in the kitchen. And so that is the spirit that I'm always trying to invoke in all of my writing. You know, that feeling of let's just see where this goes. Let's not stress out. Let's just see. And the fun being the actual cooking. It's not always like that because, of course, we have to get food on the table, seven days a week, but at least on the weekends, you know, if we don't over-program ourselves, you know, as fall comes and it'll get cooler. I think just being at home, it'll be safer. It'll also be healthier. The most healthy thing you can do for your family, which I always tell everybody, is to cook at home. Even if you're not using everything fresh, even if you have to use a can here or a frozen thing there, that's OK. You still are in control of what you're putting into that dish. So it will still be more wholesome than anything you could get at a restaurant. And probably cheaper.

SABRINA: Do you have, like, a farmer's market ritual that you do with Krishna on the weekends? How do you sort of plan that out?

PADMA: Totally. We love to go to the farmer's market here in Union Square. We were just there yesterday, actually. They had some really beautiful variegated tomatoes and different heirlooms coming in. Wednesdays and Saturdays are the best days to go to the market here in

New York. But, Mondays and Fridays are good, too. Like I would pick her up after school and we would go straight there. Or we'd go on a Saturday morning and pick out what we wanted and then just make something and let it bubble away and play on the carpet in the living room with magnet tiles or Legos or whatever, while the sauce was simmering or the stew was cooking low and slow. And, Krishna likes to bake, too. So we try to do a little bit of that as well. I just brought some peaches from the market yesterday. So I'm hoping to do something with those, maybe a cobbler or something.

SABRINA: Yes, I just had the best cobbler where they, instead of having the crumble on top, they made a yellow cake.

PADMA: Oh.

SABRINA: And then the peaches were, like, macerated and baked underneath.

PADMA: Oh, nice.

SABRINA: Just a little dollop of, like, sour cream on top and — oh, my God, it was absolutely delectable. I can't wait to make it at home.

PADMA: That sounds delicious. It sounds absolutely delicious.

SABRINA: One of the things I wanted to ask you, you seem so comfortable and familiar and almost confident when it comes to cooking Indian food and food that you grew up with. I'll share a little story about myself. You know, like I said, I grew up between India and the United States and for a long time there, I sort of was rejecting my culture and my heritage because it was the only way for me to fit in, as so many immigrant children experience. But, like you said, as I started getting older, I started feeling more curious about my own heritage, my religion. I'm Parsi. So, you know, there's a very small sect of us in the world and we have very specific foods that we — you know, Parsis are all about food. I mean, funerals are filled with food and, you know, any function is food. And we have our ritualistic, prayers and stuff, they always involve coconut and pomegranate and eggs and rice. So I'm starting to learn more about my own traditions. But I'll never forget my grandfather passed during COVID.

PADMA: I'm so sorry.

SABRINA: Thank you. And my parents were in another country and my grandparents were in another country. And I've never felt more separated than in that moment. And I just remember sitting on my couch thinking, I need some comfort food. But it wasn't a burger and it wasn't pasta. Like I wanted something that I remembered eating with him.

PADMA: Yeah.

SABRINA: And that was the first time that I stepped into my kitchen and made Parsi food.

PADMA: Really?

SABRINA: Yes. And I was 30 at the time, and I remember thinking I was on WhatsApp with my mom and it was hilarious because she was calling out just a handful of this, take a dash of that. And like me, the recipe developer...

PADMA: Oh, yeah.

SABRINA: ...I'm like, 'What is a handful? Is it a cup?' And she's like, 'no, no, it's one of my coffee cups.' I'm like, 'OK, your coffee cup and a regular cup cannot be the same thing.' But, you know, we muddled through and we figured it out. But there was so much pressure that I think I put on myself because I felt this strong sense of, what if I get it wrong? And then it's like I'm doing my whole culture a disservice and you know...

PADMA: No, you're not. Because you're trying. You're trying. As long as you're trying, I think just the act of trying to reach towards something is valuable. Like, that's what I was talking about earlier. You don't have to have it be perfect. You know, you're led by this beautiful sense memory of what you ate as a child with your grandfather and other family members. And that flavor memory, that taste memory will lead your hands and will lead you to something. And even if it's not exactly the way your mom or your grandma made it or whomever was cooking, it's all right. It's a beautiful thing that you're doing. We toss around these platitudes and they're kind of corny about food bringing people together. But what you were doing was exactly that. You were trying to be closer to someone you really, really missed. And it's comforting and it's wonderful because in that act of trying to make, whatever dish you were making, you were actually reaching for your grandfather through love.

SABRINA: Yeah, cooking is a very big act of love. Especially, when you approach it from that standpoint as opposed to 'I just need to get a fuel on the table,' so to speak.

PADMA: It's both, right? So, I mean, some days it's one, some days it's the other, hopefully, many days it's both. That's why I wanted to do this book. For instance, had you had a little spiral notebook that, you know, you kept when you were going to your grandparents' house or your mom's house over the years and just written down stuff that you loved to eat, even if you didn't cook it just to watch them what they were doing and write it down, you know, you would have this beautiful, precious, archive of recipes that you could make now. Right? I'm glad that your mom was on WhatsApp with you. I mean, I also FaceTime with my mom or Skype with my mom all the time because I don't make pakoras and other fried foods. It's like, oh, the whole house is gonna smell. So I don't make them often. So I don't have that much practice in doing them. So I'm like, 'do we put rice flour in there or not?' She's like, 'yes, we do.' You know, so, those recipes — that's exactly what *Tomatoes for Neela* is about. It's about writing down the recipes that are important to your family so that you guys can be together even when you're not together. And in doing so it shows respect for your heritage, respect for all of the bonding that your family does. And that's really what this is about. Because *Tomatoes for Neela* there's also a grandmother in the story who's not with the mother and daughter in New York in their apartment, who is somewhere else in India and will come in the winter to visit them. And so they make this tomato sauce so that she can share in that end-of-summer bounty when she comes in December. And that is the whole premise of it. That's it. That's the narrative arc. But in the process of telling the story, the kid gets to learn exactly how to make a very simple tomato sauce, by blanching the tomatoes so that they can be peeled, by cooking the garlic really, really, really slow. And actually, kids like everything to be explained slowly. They want to understand. They want to grasp everything. So slowing it down. I really struggled with this when I was writing the recipe for the tomato sauce because it's really long for as few ingredients as it has...

SABRINA: Right.

PADMA: ...But I wanted to explain to kids, like, how from a young age, this is how you cook garlic properly. If you cook it too fast, it will burn. It will make whatever sauce it's going in too bitter and the inside will be raw. And that's also when you get indigestion from garlic, by the

way. You know, I don't go that deep, but I do say you can cook it even lower and slower. And if you have time, that's even better, just because if you tell kids that they will never forget it. So I want kids to read this book and when they're older, you know, one day randomly, I want them to be in a store somewhere with their kid and be like, did you know that tomatoes come from Mesoamerica? Did you know that tamati was actually an Aztec word? Did you know that at first people in Europe were afraid of tomatoes? They thought they would be poisonous because they're from the nightshade family? You know, all of these little fun facts. Kids love that.

SABRINA: And that's one of the things that I found so fun because I didn't know those facts when I was reading. And so I was learning about a whole new world that I had never really considered before. I knew there were different kinds of tomatoes. I knew about the seasonality. Of course, I know about farmers. But to think about the history of it and those little fun facts like those are the things that really stick with you. It's never too late to learn about them and appreciate them and then pass that same knowledge along.

PADMA: Oh, that makes me so happy. Thank you.

SABRINA: Yeah, for those listening, if you have kids that are adults, it's still not too late. If you have recipes that you want to share with them, like Padma says, get out a little spiral notebook, and note it down. I think if I had something that was handwritten from, you know, my mother or my grandparents, I mean, that's a real family treasure. And more than anything else they could leave me.

PADMA: Exactly, you know, every family has their own culture. You know, it's like the culture of the family, as I like to say. And so to incorporate food traditions into that is really vital. It really, really is fun and important and is very enriching for every member of the family.

SABRINA: Absolutely. I also found it really comforting that in the narrative of the story, you referenced certain words and relationships with family members like, you know, Amma and Pati, and you don't make any concessions. You don't sit there and explain and you don't italicize the words. It's just a very natural progression. It's like these words belong in anyone's culture and it is such a good way to connect people to the Indian culture. Was that a very deliberate thought that you had writing the book?

PADMA: When I was shopping for books for Krishna, there weren't really a lot of books with brown kids in them or any kind of storylines that — I didn't want to do a book just for Indian kids. I wanted to do a book for all children, but with an Indian family at the center of it, because I hadn't seen that a lot. And I know that a lot of kids have Indian friends and stuff, too. So I felt like it was totally fine and totally approachable to have this particular family be Indian. You know, they could have been Korean, they could have been Peruvian, but they're Indian. And so I gave the mom a little tiny nose ring. And, they're wearing Western clothes. And what they're doing is so universal and simple. And, you know, the recipe for tomato sauce is very approachable. The recipe for tomato chutney is not spicy at all because it is geared toward children. And I say, you know, add a pinch of cayenne. If your kids really don't like any spices, just use black pepper a little bit. You have to use your judgment so that it's approachable. Like, I think kids can also explore spices. They just have to do it in a gentle and methodical way. And there are spices that also are good for your gut and your stomach lining and things like that.

You know, I reject when people say, 'oh, my kid doesn't eat anything but pasta.' Well, how do you eat? You know?

SABRINA: Right, right.

PADMA: When people ask me, you know, how do I get my children to eat well? I always say, eat well yourself and just make everyone in the family eat the same thing. In my house, we have a policy where, you know, we have what's for dinner. We usually cook one meal a day fresh for dinner. And then I'm having leftovers of that meal for lunch the next day. And that's what's for dinner. And that's it. If there are leftovers from the day before still in the fridge and somebody wants that, that's great. If they don't like the meal, they can have a scrambled egg wrapped in a tortilla with some cut veggies like cucumber, carrot, bell peppers, celery, etc. that we always have in our crisper. So those are the things that are on option. I am not a short-order cook and we are not cooking like a million things. Two years ago, Krishna used to say, I don't like dal and rice, I don't like lentils. Now she loves dal and rice. So it is just a matter of being patient with everyone.

SABRINA: And your taste buds do change every seven years. They evolve.

PADMA: They do change. And, you know, that's another thing like you just have to keep at it. You have to play the long game with kids.

SABRINA: Yes. I used to hate capsicum, which is green peppers here, and eggplant or brinjal as we used to call them. I could not stand it. Oh, my God. My mom would put brinjal on the table roasted with mustard seeds...

PADMA: Me, too!

SABRINA: ...And curry patta — oh, my God. And I would look at it be like, oh really? And now it's like bring it on. I love it so much.

PADMA: Yeah. I didn't like eggplant when I was a kid. I think it's just like the texture. It's just the kind of slimy thing. But now I love eggplant because of course, it acts like a sponge. So, you know whether it's Sichuan eggplant or Indian eggplant or parmigiana. I love eggplant.

SABRINA: Oh, Sichuan eggplant. Now I'm hungry. So good.

PADMA: I know. Me, too.

SABRINA: What is a go-to favorite for you and Krishna on weeknights that you can just whip up and you just love?

PADMA: Literally dal and rice or kitchari. You know we make a savory porridge, but we like it separate usually so that we can also have yogurt rice. So I'll just boil some yellow or masoor lentils and then I'll chop up a little bit of onion, ginger, tomato, chili, sauté that in some oil with a few spices and curry leaves. And then I'll put that into the boiled lentils and, sometimes I'll purée it all, sometimes I won't. You know, with a handy blender and then we just eat that with basmati rice, plain steamed rice and we make a yogurt raita with cucumber and mint. — very simple, just salt. Sometimes we may temper some mustard seeds into that with oil, but we don't usually. It's pretty, pretty tame on a weeknight and a sautéed vegetable curry. That is like a very simple home-cooked meal then I can make in about a half an hour.

SABRINA: Right, and so healthy.

PADMA: Yeah, totally healthy. We love roast chicken. We also love [fried rice](#) or fried noodles, just sautéed, pan sautéed with tofu that we've soaked in black garlic and hoisin sauce. So that's also a staple at our house. You know? And we put a pinch of curry powder as we're sautéing the vegetables. So it's more like Singapore rice noodles. But we love that.

SABRINA: Right, oh, black garlic magic words for me. I literally just had to mute my mic because my stomach started growling.

PADMA: Me too. I'm afraid you can hear my tummy. So we're in the same boat.

SABRINA: This interview is actually very special to me because, after publishing, I went and got my master's in creative writing, and then I got a job in advertising. And it was a job that I despised. It was a dangerous work environment, not good. And something that got me through my last year there. My office was a little secluded and I got my work done so I would start watching episodes of TV on my phone. And I discovered this show on Hulu called *Top Chef*, and I had never heard of it before. And I thought, oh, OK. I love cooking. And so I started watching. And then it became a thing where every day I'd be at work and *Top Chef* would be running in the background on my phone. And I'll never forget, this is very emotional for me. But season eight, the first all-star season. It was the finale. And you turn to Richard Blais and said to him, 'why do you want to be a top chef?' And I stopped working and I looked right at my phone and Richard starts talking, and he was so passionate and emotional, and as I was watching him, I burst into tears at my desk just like heavy sobs, praying no one would hear me.

PADMA: Oh.

SABRINA: And I thought, 'I want this. Like I want to feel this passionate about something.' And I couldn't stop thinking about it all day. I felt this, like, crazy pull inside of me. And before I went to bed that night, I thought, what am I doing? I already feel this passionate and I already feel this passionate, by the way, about food. Except I'm not much of a cook. I'm more of a writer. And within days, like not even a whole week. I walked right into my boss's office, I quit my job. I had five hundred dollars in my bank, lost my work visa because I quit my job. But I just started sending out pitches to newspapers and magazines and that was it. I became a food writer and I literally owe my entire career to that one question that you asked on the show. So *Top Chef* is

very special for me and for me to be interviewing you now, four years after I quit my job is just very special to me.

PADMA: What a wonderful story. Thank you for telling me that story. I'm so pleased to hear it. That's so amazing — warms my heart. It's just so nice to hear. Thank you for sharing that. And thank you for featuring *Tomatoes for Neela*. I'm so glad you enjoyed it. It means the world to me, really.

SABRINA: Thank you, Padma, it was such a pleasure chatting, and hopefully someday down the line we'll get to meet in person. I'll get to thank you in person for changing my life.

PADMA Yes. Yes. Thank you so much, Sabrina

SABRINA: There you have it. Padma's new children's book *Tomatoes for Neela* is out now. Padma is also the editor of the 2021 edition of *The Best American Travel Writing* and that will be available on October 12. You can follow her on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and, of course, keep up with *Top Chef* on Bravo TV and *Taste the Nation* on Hulu, which returns for holiday episodes on November 4.

Next time on *Homemade*, I'll be chatting with two iconic *Top Chef* contestants from the show's most recent season, Chef Maria Mazon and Chef Byron Gomez.

MARIA MAZON: Food, alone, is the only thing in the world that can make you travel in time. For those five seconds, you're a kid again. I guarantee if you close your eyes and you see your grandmother or your mother and you tried an item of food it will take you there.

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This is Homemade, I'm Sabrina Medora, and remember: Cook with love, eat with joy.