

A return to her roots

Costco member Anita Kerai wants to teach the world to cook healthy meals and enjoy vegetables

by ANNIE MAKOFF



COSTCO CONNECTION

Costco carries a wealth of vegetables, spices and other ingredients for creating your own vegan and vegetarian dishes.

Vegitarianism and veganism may be the current foodie zeitgeist, but Kenyan-born chef and TV presenter Anita Kerai, a Costco member, has been banging a drum about the importance of a meat-free diet for decades. She knows more than most about plant-based diets—her Hindu faith means she’s been a vegetarian since birth. “Vegetarianism for me was in-built,” she says. “It’s in my DNA.”

Food has always played a huge role in Kerai’s life. She grew up as a third-generation Indian in Kenya. In Kenya, food brings communities together and the entire cooking and feasting process becomes an experience in itself. “It’s something Mum always taught me,” Kerai

recalls. “The best gift you can ever give someone is to feed them.” Yet she believes there’s an even greater gift, and that is to teach someone how to cook.

A love of learning

Her faith in teaching is why Kerai set up her Harrow-based cookery school, Anita’s Kitchen (anitaskitchen.co.uk), in 2017. Her mission is to teach people how to cook healthy, well-balanced, meat-free meals. Prior to that, her career couldn’t have been more different—she worked as a qualified accountant in the media industry. But Kerai’s love of cooking has always been there, on the back burner. And when a

Shocking revelation

Anita Kerai visits schools, teaching children about healthy eating and reducing food waste.

“Food waste shocked me

the most when I first came to the UK in 1997,” Kerai says. She had never come across sell-by dates or best-before dates. “Supermarkets were throwing away perfectly good produce that was fine to use.”

She tells students that they can often still cook wonky vegetables, use fruit that is just slightly soft and evaluate items past their sell-by date, instead of blindly throwing them away.—AM

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media company she was working at went through a restructure, she decided on the dramatic career change. It was, as much as anything, a return to her roots.

Kerai is self-taught, but her cookery skills have been passed down from generation to generation. Now she hopes her school will inspire others to experiment with meat-free Indian and Kenyan dishes. She has her own TV series, *Return to Kenya*, and is the author of *Flavours of Kenya* (TTAT Limited, 2018), which features Kenyan-Indian vegan and vegetarian recipes.

The variety of life

Kerai is a big fan of lentils because they’re a great source of protein and extremely versatile. “People think you need to replace meat with substitutes like tofu or soya, but there’s no need,” she explains. “I use lentils in so many dishes. I love them.”

Spices also feature heavily in Kerai’s recipes, and not just because of her Indian heritage—they bring a lot of health benefits, too. But in a departure from traditional Indian cooking, she oven-bakes spices because it’s healthier and easier than sautéing them in oil. Kerai’s recipes are all about taking traditional Indian or Kenyan dishes and modernising them. It’s what makes her different from other chefs.

“I am Kenyan in my heart, Indian by origin and British by choice, so I like to bring all these influences and cultures into my cooking,” says Kerai. “Kenyan cuisine in particular is not very well known in the Western world, and I want to change that.” ■

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Sweet and Spicy Watermelon Curry

2 tsp sunflower oil	1 green chilli, chopped
1 tsp mustard seeds	½ tsp ground turmeric
1 tsp cumin seeds	Salt, to taste
2 cloves	Juice of ½ lemon, to serve
1 garlic clove, minced	Coriander leaves, to garnish
1cm ginger, minced	
1 small watermelon, seeded, rind removed and flesh cut in 5cm chunks	

Heat the oil in a large pan over medium heat. Temper the mustard and cumin seeds in the oil by slowly increasing the temperature till they start crackling, and roast them for a few seconds. Add the cloves, garlic and ginger, and cook until golden brown.

Add the watermelon, chilli, turmeric and salt; mix well. Cover and simmer over medium heat for 10 minutes.

Sprinkle with the lemon juice, garnish with coriander and serve with rice or chapatis. Makes 4 servings.

Ethiopian Cauliflower Curry

1 tbsp plus 1 tsp oil, divided	to taste
1 cauliflower, cut into small florets	½cm ginger
1 small potato, cubed	1 garlic clove
1 tsp Ethiopian berbere	150g peas
1 tsp mustard seeds	¼ tsp turmeric
1 tsp cumin seeds	Salt to taste
	1 tsp tomato paste
	Coriander leaves, for garnish

Several curry leaves,

Preheat oven to 200C/gas mark 6.

Drizzle 1 tbsp of oil on the cauliflower and potatoes. Mix in the Ethiopian berbere, and bake 15 to 20 minutes until tender.

Heat remaining tsp oil in a frying pan. Temper the mustard and cumin seeds, plus the curry leaves, in the oil by slowly increasing the temperature until they start crackling and roast for a few seconds. Add the ginger and garlic, and cook until golden brown. Add the cauliflower, potato and peas. Mix in turmeric, salt and tomato paste. Let this cook for about 5 minutes. Garnish with coriander leaves. Makes 4 servings.

Recipes and photos courtesy Anita Kerai.

