

Introduction

MARION KANE: Chef Joshna Maharaj is an innovator, an activist and a seeker. Her mission: to provide joy, healing and even spiritual connection through nourishing, delicious food. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth® and welcome to "Sittin' In the Kitchen®". Joshna has worked with The Stop Community Food Centre, Ryerson University and Scarborough Hospital. Next up: a book and maybe prisons. We had a compelling conversation at her home in downtown Toronto.

Interview

MARION KANE: I'm sitting down with Joshna on her comfortable couch in her room full of cookbooks. Living room-dining room-kitchen. We're having masala chai and Portuguese custard tarts.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Yes, I just was out for lunch in that neighbourhood and I knew that I prefer Caldense tarts in this town. There's two big camps and mine is –

MARION KANE: What's the other one?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Nova Era is the other which I'm sure is a perfectly fine tart but my heart is with what's happening at Caldense. Their pastry is exquisite and what I love especially is the contrast between the pastry and the custard. Because in a tart, it's very easy for that to blend into one homogenous thing and the crust gets a bit soggy with the filling.

MARION KANE: I just saw a British travel show in which they ate custard tarts in Lisbon.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Of course. Oh my God. I feel like that would be the most perfect thing with a glass of port or some wonderful thing, right?

MARION KANE: We're having it with masala chai. I'm going to bite into it.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Right?

MARION KANE: It's perfect.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: It's perfect.

MARION KANE: I like Portuguese food actually.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: I do too. A lot of it is historical because my family is South African so there's a little Portuguese angle that's there obviously with the chilies and the shrimp and the piri piri so it's very familiar and comforting.

MARION KANE: Where did you grow up?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: I grew up here in Canada. We moved to Canada when I was 18 months old. Our first home was in the suburbs. So between Thornhill and Brampton is where my childhood and young adulthood was spent. And so I've lived in the city now only as an adult.

MARION KANE: You have spoken about your Indian family. You were hospitable and you had guests over and you cooked a lot. You said the action always happens in the kitchen.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: There's no question the action always happens in the kitchen. The funny thing was, is I think that my mom and even my aunties and people always tried to set up spaces in the living room, you know that special front room furniture that kids were not allowed to jump on on a regular basis and all of that. But the people were always in the kitchen. The fun was always in the kitchen right? I think that's part of why I loved it. Because people were laughing. That's when people were having fun and that's where you could run in to get a little taste of something too. As a kid you'd get slid little mouthfuls of something and that was much more interesting than sitting on the couch somewhere feeling more proper than you needed to be.

MARION KANE: When did you get interested in cooking as a profession?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: My idea about actually cooking for a living came in 2000-2001 after I graduated from university.

MARION KANE: In what?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: I went to McMaster and I have a degree in Religious Studies and Women's Studies. With full joy and no regret. I loved my university time.

MARION KANE: That course of study doesn't surprise me because you have ethical beliefs, social justice beliefs. You've been called an activist chef. You're a spiritual person on some level.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: It is very true and I love you for having seen it. The truth of it all is my love of cooking came out of living in an ashram in India.

MARION KANE: What's an ashram?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: An ashram is essentially a monastery but in a Hindu context. It's this lovely little place that was tucked away in the foothills of the Himalayas. Most beautiful thing you've ever seen. My love of food came from discovering what a tremendous honour it is to cook for people. I mean that's really it. And the fact that you can imbue both love and blessings and all of it through food. The trick of it all is in this world I don't talk about that because people freak out. It's not an easy thing to talk about God, about blessing, about all of that. Even love because people roll their eyes sometimes. So instead, I talk about things like transparency and trust and accountability and use sort of weird euphemisms. But really my love – the intersection of food stuff and God stuff - is my happy place. Because the connection that exists is so rich. My sense of who I am as a chef and what my responsibility is as a chef is completely driven by a spiritual grounding.

MARION KANE: Another thing you've been involved with is institutional food.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Yes. I've had the delight of doing three institutional overhauls. Two hospitals and one university. Scarborough Hospital, Sick Kids and Ryerson University. The Scarborough Hospital was curious about making some changes to the menu and they cast a net out for some advice on how to do it. And that came to Slow Food Toronto. I happened to be on the steering committee and I was like, "Are you kidding me?" And I jumped and made a meeting instantly and went in and met with the folks there and a meeting that was scheduled for an hour ended up taking three and a half because I was so excited about the fact that they were ready to talk.

MARION KANE: That's a big challenge. I imagine that there were lots of meals on a grand scale and of poor quality. What were you faced with?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: We got some great funding from our friends at the Greenbelt Fund - they've been extremely supportive with all of my institutional work - and that was about putting more greenbelt food into broader public sector institutions. The way I saw it is it's sort of foolish to imagine you'd do something like that in isolation. That you wouldn't consider the rest of the foodservice at the same time because that's just not the way it works. We're not going to be able to isolate local ingredients like that. I thought, while I've got my foot in the door here of a hospital that's ready to rethink what's on those trays, let's overhaul as much as we possibly can. It became very clear to me early on that the problem with institutional food is not just about where we're shopping and the recipes that we're using. It is about the culture of food that exists in the institution and the level of priority that the food is given. The reason that institutional food is so bad is because the people in charge don't think it's important. It's as simple as that.

MARION KANE: It's the highlight of some people's day.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: It is the highlight of most people's day when you're all tubed up and locked into that bed. The fact that a tray arrives three times a day is the loveliest thing that's going to happen. So here it is, Marion. The thing that was most stark to me as somebody who believes that any plate of food anywhere is reflective of the attitude that produced it. I would see those trays and I would say to hospital administrators: You have to know that all this tray is doing is telling a patient that they are not worth any more effort than this and that you're doing that three times a day. And that the average patient's stay is 4 to 6 days so, at a minimum, you're telling patients 12 times that they are not worth any more effort than this tray of processed, imported, mostly garbage food. It rolls out when you see a campus food court that is just a bunch of global franchise brands that is also telling students that their health is not worth any more effort than outsourcing.

MARION KANE: How many meals were you in charge of in a day at the hospital?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: At Scarborough I think we had 370-some beds so those patients got three meals a day, so just under 1,000 meals.

MARION KANE: A thousand.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Save the tube-feed purée, you know what I mean. Because there's also 35-some therapeutic diets that we had to consider but it was about 1,000 meals a day.

MARION KANE: Would you say you were effective?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Yes. People constantly would ask me, "You figured it out. You figured it out a way to make it work. To make it cost less." And I'd be like, "Please stop asking. It's the most ridiculous request to suggest that real food cooked by a human being is going to cost less than processed food from the industrial food system made by a machine. Please stop asking for that and please stop exclusively valuing our food by money." Right? That's all it is. It's just, "Give me the cheapest thing," because institutional food is an irritating necessity.

MARION KANE: Did you get a bigger budget?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: No. But I was convinced that in-season food is very affordable. When you buy local food in season it is affordable. And I was convinced that, once we got over the hump of the transition, there was upscaling and all of the change-making about sort of rebuilding the functioning of that kitchen I was convinced, and I still believe it to be true, that the prices can be flat. I think that the one thing that people aren't really aware of is how expensive processed food really is. That to a certain degree that onions and carrots and potatoes are cheap.

MARION KANE: Can you describe a dish that was a hit in every way?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Yeah, there were a number of them in fact. Nothing on the hospital tray can be sent up to the patients uncovered. Infection control policies mean that that sweaty dome has to go over every plate. Lids have to be on everything.

MARION KANE: That eliminates crispness.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Precisely. And so, more importantly, we could never serve toast well. Toast was always soggy. I said we cannot do toast well so let's just take it off. Let's lean in to the cooking apparatus that we've got with us and make things that work best in those contexts. I thought let's make things that use steam. My answer was a frittata. Of course I wanted to crack eggs and use whole eggs instead of liquid eggs from a carton. This is the best example. In order for me to make this substitution, we had to figure out how long it took to crack the eggs and prep the frittata for everybody for breakfast because I'd have to find that labour from somewhere. In this particular context, we had to take the toasting labour, had to be repurposed to become frittata labour. What that meant was, for trial purposes, I had to go in and crack 210 eggs that we needed and prep all the pans for the morning. I had to time it from when the case of eggs went on the counter 'til when I wiped everything down and figured out that that was 90 minutes. We had 90 minutes but the trick of it all was that that was in the production budget line whereas the toasting labour came from the tray belt line budget line. It was that painful. However, on that next morning when we sent a frittata up, because the frittata – you can pull it out just before it's done and you portion it nicely and by the time it's under that dome it's actually in pretty good shape when it gets to the patient.

MARION KANE: Did you put vegetables in the frittata?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Yeah. We had onions, red peppers, and fresh herbs which was a huge win in that context, the fact that we got to do that. People loved it; patients loved it. One of my other attempts was a biscuit because we couldn't do toast. Toast just wasn't working. I loved the idea that we could send warm biscuits up in the morning. I made this Red Fife biscuit. Of course I wanted to get the heritage grains and all of this stuff. We found a really simple recipe that can be made large quantity and ice cream-scooped out onto a tray so it's nice and simple. We went back and forth, me and the dieticians about butter.

MARION KANE: They wanted to ban butter?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: They kept on asking if I could make it with margarine which I just wouldn't even entertain. The next move was if I could make it with canola oil. I was like, "But a biscuit is flaky and the only thing that makes... I need butter." I need a solid fat, essentially. With a lot of wheeling and dealing, I got them to give me a butter portion that worked. We tried the recipe over and over again and we figured it out. To their credit, the team was extraordinary. They played my game. They understood what we were trying to do and they really came to play. We portioned them out the night before, put them in the oven and then took them up to the mother-and-baby unit. Honestly Marion, it was the highlight of my time to be able to put two - we could give them two because they had just done this most glorious thing. It was 7:30 in the morning and it was winter and so it was still dark. I remember taking those trays up to the mom-and-baby unit and delivering them and you would lift it and the smell of this freshly baked buttery thing with good whole grains to honour what this woman has just done. It makes you weep when you think about the disconnect that the more conventional tray is resulting in. I was so proud to be able to give - and you could see the look on their face. They were like, "You baked it fresh? Here?" Yeah.

It just seems like a ridiculous luxury but why? Why do we live in a world where a fresh-baked thing is a luxury for somebody in a hospital? It's just such backward thinking. Ideally, our hospitals should be the place where the best food that we have is served. Grown the best. Cooked to maximize nutrition. You know what I mean? A nutrient delivery to people. But it's completely the opposite right now. Those few moments where I was able to take fresh trays with colourful bright food up to a patient and see there was no question that it was both their eyes, their spirits, appreciated knowing that there was a human being in the kitchen, on site, that cared about them.

MARION KANE: Joshna, what's your next step?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: I'm excited to tell you. I'm about to start writing a book which I'm thrilled about. It's a non-fiction book about my take on the institutional food revolution. I'm very thrilled. It's obviously based on the three projects I've done. It's been the last six years of my working life. But I do a lot of public speaking now about this and about the possibilities of rethinking institutional food because they are huge and glorious. We haven't even touched what this means in the education context and how that changes, and what we were able to do on that campus at Ryerson because we brought things to life in the most beautiful way just with a better focus on good food.

MARION KANE: How did you get to be this way, Joshna, with your beliefs in social justice and spirituality and caring for others?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: The social justice stuff and the caring and kindness is my father. He grew up in a very, very poor family in South Africa in a small town outside of Durban, the south part of the country. All the stories that he would tell my brother and I were almost exclusively of either Gandhi or Nelson Mandela. So much so that Nelson was like my far-away grandfather. When you hear stories of dudes like that who decided to take on giant monsters of an institution and resist and push back and endure violence and incarceration and all of this, it became very clear that there are always things to fight for. There are always people to advocate for and that if you have means it is your responsibility to do it. No question that was my dad.

MARION KANE: Wow. Do you want to add anything?

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Yeah. My perpetual goal is to get people to reconnect themselves to a better relationship with their food. I heartily encourage people to not think of time in the kitchen as slavery or as something they're a fool to do. To know that the joy of being in the kitchen, of caring for yourself, of making something delicious for somebody that you love fills you beyond the calories in the tank. Food is much, much more than just filling our tank. It is a really deep connection to our humanity and look, I understand, we all have super-busy lives and there's never enough time for anything so do what you want to do, live how you want to live, but are you really going to say that you are too busy to connect yourself to your life force? Is checking your likes on Instagram really more important than nourishing yourself or feeding yourself. Do what you want but have your eyes open to the choices that you're making about your own life. I think that there is a lot of joy and satisfaction that is missing in this world with time spent in the kitchen.

MARION KANE: Couldn't have said it better myself.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: Thanks.

MARION KANE: Thank you Joshna.

JOSHNA MAHARAJ: My pleasure.

MARION KANE: Wow.

Conclusion

MARION KANE: That was my conversation with Joshna Maharaj. Her website is joshnamaharaj.com. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®. You can find more stories like this one at marionkane.com and in Apple Podcasts. Thank you for listening.