

# A Dash Of Spice

As a contestant on Bravo's "Top Chef," **Radhika Desai** mingled the spices of her mother's cooking to create dishes that wowed the judges, **Joanne Flynn Black** writes

**I**t took five seasons for Bravo TV's hit series "Top Chef" to include an Indian-American chef. But it was worth the wait! Chef Radhika Desai wowed the judges with Indian-inspired dishes such as kebab-style sausage with caramelized onions, cucumbers and tomato jam and her challah bread pudding with lavender, peaches, roasted cashews and ginger frozen yogurt.

Desai took an nontraditional path to "Top Chef." After graduating from The Ohio State University in 2003 with a degree in environmental sciences, she spent a year as a park ranger in Death Valley National Park in

California. "It was the most unique experience I've had," Desai said. "I feel fortunate; not many people are able to something like that."

For that year, Desai's only contacts were other park rangers. "Living in the desert gave me time to learn lots about myself. It was quite spiritual." She spent a great deal of time cooking in her trailer.

"With my dad being an engineer and my brother a doctor, it took some convincing for my parents to accept me pursuing becoming a park ranger. I enjoyed it – however, my passion was food," Desai says. Her family cooked together every day and

loved to try new recipes. "My parents are artists and musicians at heart. They always taught me to express myself," she says. Her family was her inspiration to learn to cook.

Growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio, Desai visited friends' houses and shared their meals. Returning home at night, she told her mom about the food she'd tasted, such as burgers and meatloaf. "My mom would try to cook American food and would always incorporate some Indian element like jalapeno and cumin," Desai says. It is possible that the growing popularity of Indian fusion cuisine can be attributed to Desai's

mom and other mothers like her.

"My dad is very particular about his food. If it's not the right temperature, he won't eat it," Desai says. "It's funny because people send back food in restaurants for that same reason. So in a way, my dad helped me to adapt to the restaurant environment."

And her dad possibly helped her adapt to the high stress of "Top Chef," where 17 contestants compete in the high-pressure lifestyle of a master chef. Each week, one chef is asked to "pack their knives and go."

In one episode, Desai paired up with Ariane Duarte of CulinAriane in Montclair, **▶**

**Radhika Desai's  
career path**

**Aioli Bistro,  
Cincinnati, Ohio**

**Shangri-La Hotel,  
Dubai, United Arab  
Emirates**

**Burj Al Arab, Al  
Muntaha, Dubai**

**Vermilion  
Chicago**

**Mesh  
Cincinnati**

**Between Boutique &  
Lounge  
Chicago**



**“Radhika had a different approach. A global way of looking at food. The show made it appear that we did not get along, but we did get along.”**



**Stefan Richter**  
**Stefan's at L.A. Farm,**  
**Santa Monica, Calif.**



◆ N.J., and Jamie Lauren of Absinthe in San Francisco. Together, they created the winning dish, lamb marinated in French and curry spices, with vadouvan carrot purée and wilted kale. “Radhika was great to work with,” Duarte says. “I use more Indian spices in my own restaurant after cooking with her that night. I even put the lamb dish on my menu when I finished the show.”

“Restaurant Wars” is the episode on Top Chef that splits the contestants into two groups and gives each group 48 hours to open a restaurant. Desai won the “Quickfire Challenge” at the beginning of the episode with her sambar-crusted butterfish with sautéed spinach, corn, chorizo and saffron beurre blanc. This win entitled her to be the restaurant leader. She was thrilled to name

the restaurant Sahana, after her niece.

Desai’s job was to delegate duties to her team. She assigned one member, Jeff McInnis, to work the “front of the house,” to greet people and make sure the restaurant guests were happy. McInnis refused stating he wanted to work in the kitchen.

Instead of insisting, Desai reluctantly agreed to work the “front of the house” herself, even though she knew it was not her strong point. “Radhika is very soft-spoken and has a hard time delegating,” Duarte says. “Radhika did not want to have a confrontation so she did what she thought was best for the team.”

Unfortunately this led to Desai being eliminated. Would she have had a chance to be one of the Top 3 finalists if she weren’t eliminated in this way? “Absolutely, she ◆

## Recipe

### **10 Spice Crusted Sea Bass, Butter Braised Corn Ginger Lentils** Serves 4



#### **Ingredients**

8 oz sea bass filets  
4 ears fresh sweet corn  
2 cups dry green lentils  
2 tbsps minced ginger  
1 tbsp minced garlic  
3 tbsps butter  
2 tbsps canola oil  
Salt and pepper to taste

#### **For spice mix**

2 tsp cumin  
2 tsp black cardamom  
2 tsp dried red chilies  
2 tsp mustard seeds  
2 tsp white sesame seeds  
2 tsp ground peanuts  
2 tsp dry coriander  
1 tsp asafetida (found in any Indian market)  
Salt and pepper to taste  
Combine all ingredients in a blender

#### **Method**

In a pot, combine rinsed and drained lentils with 4 cups water. Bring to a boil and then bring to simmer. Lentils will require 30 minutes or so to cook. They are ready when just tender but not falling apart. Season with salt and pepper. Just before serving, add chopped fresh ginger.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Husk, clean and cut corn. Add butter to a small pot, when melted, add garlic. Sauté the garlic for 3 to 4 minutes. Add corn and season with salt. Cook corn for at least 30 minutes or until tender and delicious.

In a hot pan, add canola oil. Season both sides of the fish with spice mix.

Add fish to pan and sear both sides.

Transfer fish to sheet tray.

Cook in oven until cooked through, about 7 to 9 minutes.

In a plate, arrange lentils, then corn, then fish on top. Garnish with chives or cilantro.

**“On the show, she stayed true to who she is and her style of cooking. Radhika’s very sweet. We get along really well. When she comes to New York we try to see each other.”**



**Ariane Duarte,**  
**CulinAriane,**  
**Montclair, N.J**



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◆ had a chance,” Duarte says. Desai writes on her blog, “If I had to pick an episode to go out on, this would be the one because I got to name our restaurant after my adorable little niece, Sahana, which means strong, powerful and resilient.”

Desai last worked as executive chef at Between Boutique Café & Lounge. She used small plates to experiment with exotic spices and flavorful combinations. Her concept was to let guests taste a variety of food without being overwhelmed in a single dining experience. Some of her signature dishes include Lobster Trifecta, lobster empanadas, lobster and bacon mac and cheese and lobster cakes; and Duck-Duck Goose, leg of duck with sweet potato pancakes, gooseberry jam and orange black

pepper sauce.

Desai was the recipient of a critic’s choice award from Timeout’s 2008 Eat Out Awards. She is a strong supporter of Cooking For Life, a voice for social issues around the world. Most recently for this cause, she helped to cater a 700-guest event in Chicago for Apna Ghar, an agency that shelters and rehabilitates victims of domestic violence.

Up next for Desai? She is figuring that out now. Possibly a cookbook or her own restaurant. “I’m still learning every day,” she says. “I’ve learned from people like James Beard Award finalist Floyd Cardoz to line cooks I’ve worked with in restaurants. Even the dishwashers have taught me about being in the food industry and working hard.”

## Recipe

### **Blackberry Beignets** **Serves 4**



#### **Ingredients**

1/4 cup warm water  
1 package active dry yeast (1/4 ounce-2 1/2 teaspoons)  
1/4 cup sugar  
2 tablespoons unsalted butter  
1/2 tsp salt  
1 pint fresh blackberries  
1/2 cup boiling water  
1/2 cup heavy cream  
1 egg, beaten  
4 to 4 1/2 cups flour  
Oil for frying  
Powdered sugar

#### **Method**

Preheat the fryer to 375 degrees.  
In a mixing bowl, dissolve the yeast in the water, for about 2 to 3 minutes. Set the yeast aside in a warm place for about 10 minutes, or until the yeast bubbles up and the mixture almost doubles.  
In a mixing bowl, combine the sugar, softened butter, salt and blackberries.  
Stir in the boiling water.  
Using a fork, lightly mash the blackberries against the side of the bowl.  
Cool the mixture.  
Stir in the cream, yeast mixture and egg.  
Add 2 cups of flour and blend well. Stir in the remaining flour, 1/4 cup at a time until the dough is smooth and not sticky.  
Turn the dough out onto a floured surface and pat the dough into a rectangle about 1-inch thick.  
Lightly dust the surface of the dough with flour.  
Roll out the rectangle to at least 25 inches long by 10 inches wide and about 1/4 inch thick.  
With a sharp knife, cut the dough into 10 five-inch square beignets and deep-fry them immediately. Fry the beignets, a couple at a time until golden brown and crispy on all sides, about 3 to 5 minutes.  
Remove the beignets from the oil and drain on a paper-lined plate. Sprinkle the beignets with powdered sugar and serve.