



Photograph: Dhiman Chatterjee



# Culinary entrepreneurs

If Marwaris are known to be connoisseurs of food, going to great lengths for their love of good *khana*, then something has to be said of Marwari women who have mastered varied cuisines. From traditional Marwari food to the best in European fare, the Marwari kitchen today boasts of a superior palate. In this milieu, we spoke to three women—Suman Agarwal, Deepa Jain and Bharti Sanghi—who have transcended the kitchen to create a business out of their love of food.

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If cooking today has become more of a hobby, indulged in because of passion rather than necessity, the love for good food remains eternal. Women may still be homemakers, but no longer does the pressure of being a good cook fall on their shoulders. Many, however, continue to cook out of love and conscientiousness, especially with the advent of so many disorders arising out of poor eating habits. As we have learnt to become healthier and more calorie-conscious, more women have chosen to get back in the kitchen to provide wholesome, healthy meals for their families. Bitten by the business bug and, no doubt, influenced by their own trust with food, Suman Agarwal became a nutritionist, dietician and an author, Deepa Jain, a gourmand and a businesswoman and Bharti Sanghi, an entrepreneur who heads a food retail brand.

## Food, unravelled

Radiating freshness and youth, Suman Agarwal looks so young that you would never be able to tell that she is a mother of three, the oldest being 24! With an infectious vivacity she tells us that her relationship with food started because of her father. Born in Kolkata at a time when eating fresh foods was in vogue, she was inspired by her father, who

taught her what to eat—whether it was to cure minor ailments or to ensure a glowing complexion. “My father’s generation always had natural cures for illnesses and never believed in taking medicines. That is what pushed me to study nutrition—to know what combination of foods I could eat to get rid of the common cold. I can’t remember the last time I had a cold!” she beams.

Agarwal took her understanding of nutrition for granted until she noticed how easily she lost weight after her pregnancies in stark contrast with the painstaking but ineffective efforts of those around her. This was the push she needed. After her girls were old enough, she pursued her quest to gain a formal education by taking courses in food and nutrition from the ORT India Institute, which in those days offered such courses in affiliation with Oxford University. Soon, Agarwal had established her own practice under the name *Self Care* in 2001, advising people to live healthier lives by making positive nutritional choices.

Having opened three successful clinics (two in Mumbai and one in Kolkata), she tells us that in her experience among Marwaris, it is the ones in Kolkata who continue to cook all their food in pure ghee, who struggle to

Facing page: Cucumber *Sev Puri* from Suman Agarwal’s book *Unjunked*; dumplings and vegetable puffs from Yauatcha; sugar-free *rabi di* from the Bharti Sanghi’s kitchen



Suman Agarwal

maintain their weight and health. “Such is their love for food that if I tell them that they have to stop their samosas their jaw drops, and they beg me to at least let them have their treats on Sundays,” she laughs. “But all we need to change is to cook vegetables in oil and add ghee only on chapattis,” she explains. Apart from advising her patients, she tells us that some businessmen bring their cooks to her too, so she can explain healthier cooking methods directly to them!

Though she has achieved not only commercial success, but also created a name for herself within the community and outside, Agarwal remains modest. What sets her apart from other dieticians is the fact that her diets aren’t about starvation or eating unappetising food. “When I devise a plan for someone I keep in mind their tastes and preferences, because a diet will only be successful when it doesn’t feel like a diet,” emphasises Agarwal.

Joining the literary list of books on healthy eating, Agarwal released her book titled *Unjunked* just last month.

Hitting the culinary jackpot, her book offers healthy recipes for attractive junk food—with her own version of everything from *vada pavs* to pizzas! “Something about junk food is very appealing to dieters that makes them keep going back for more. I have written *Unjunked* to help them overcome this trend,” she explains. Substituting the high-fat *puri* with cucumber in her version of the *sev puri* and swapping the whipped cream with custard in the healthy concoction of the Banoffee Pie, she has truly made her book a dieter’s bible.

To ensure that her long-standing list of clients, both Marwaris and others, keep to her diet plan, Agarwal explains that she has devised menus that are both healthy and exciting. “In my book you will find recipes for healthy *parathas*, *upma*, *idli* and *dosa*. After all, Marwaris like variety in their food.” After changing perceptions on junk food and eating trends with *Unjunked*, she is now working on a book that will guide health-conscious Mumbaikars to choose

the healthiest entrées at gastronomically tempting restaurants that the city is known for. The book is expected to be out in two years, while Agarwal’s clinics will continue to dish out healthy advice.

### Personalising dining

The change from a food lover to a connoisseur requires dedication rather than degrees. Food blogger and self-taught chef Deepa Jain made her debut in food by blogging about recipes. Her site was so popular that soon, she found herself selling dips and fat-free cheesecakes under the same label, *Recipe Mobile*, which delivers in and around Mumbai, where Jain now resides. You won’t find a recent update on the blog at the moment as Jain is busy with her highly successful venture *GourmetItUp*, a concept that took Mumbai by storm with 2,000 registered members even before the soft launch!

Getting into the practice of cooking and experimenting with dishes like cheesecakes and baba ghanoush while she was living in Manhattan, Jain



Deepa Jain

Location courtesy: Yauatcha, BKC, Mumbai; Photograph: Dhiman Chatterjee

certainly knows her food. Ask her about any cuisine, available in any restaurant in Mumbai and she will suggest a dish that will instantly make your stomach growl! An extension of her love and knowledge of food then, *GourmetItUp* is a service that provides specially customised gourmet experiences at affordable prices at fine dining restaurants that Jain has tied up with. “A customer can go online, look at our website, and choose from various experiences—from three course meals and a wine and tapas pairing to a ‘masterclass’ with a famous chef,” Jain explains. Keeping in mind that no two people will choose to eat the same predesigned meals, she even assists restaurants in making menus that consist of ample options for vegetarians, non-vegetarians, seafood lovers, weight watchers, mushroom haters and even those with egg aversions.

Jain’s website features quite a list of epicurean restaurants including *The Table*, *Le Pain Quotidien*, *Indigo*, *Hakkasan* and *Fenix* (The Oberoi)

offering mouth-watering dishes from smoked salmon to vegetarian tagine. If you’re wondering why you haven’t seen it on any billboards around town, entrepreneur husband, Kunal, who runs an e-retail site, *indianhanger.com*, and who also handles the IT, finance and marketing of *GourmetItUp* gives us the answer. “Our marketing up till now happened by word of mouth. We did not wish to advertise in the first six months since it would create a more powerful and credible impact to have people who, on experiencing our website and the subsequent meal, would recommend our services to friends and family,” he explains.

Now that the concept has gained credence and popularity—as evidenced by the quality of partner brands and the fact that the website is already breaking even—the Jains say that publicity campaigns are underway. As a business idea, no one can fault the Jains’ concept, which is modelled on the convenience of restaurants, which only compensates them based on numbers. Though a

low-risk tie-up from the restaurant’s point of view, the website certainly has achieved its targets, having doubled in size from January, 2013, to now!

Ask Jain why food excites her so much and she will tell you that it is the incredible variety and complexity of flavours, and the fact that it works as a de-stressor. “The permutations of various cuisines, different tastes, varying ingredients and cooking methods make tasting an adventure that never ends, and cooking is a skill that you can never truly master,” she says, with a smile. From the perception of her customers, Jain doesn’t just strive to provide an excellent experience, but also money-saving deals. The reward system that she recently introduced online has kept her loyal following coming back for more, while inducing other foodies to join the bandwagon. With each reservation, customers get points that can be redeemed for various gourmet products like breads, dessert or gift vouchers.

With the launch of the brand's gift cards in the near future and the promise of expanding to five cities across India, including Delhi and Pune, in the next year, Jain's enterprise certainly has a lot on its plate!

### Taking off from her kitchen

She named her brand *Home Alone Foods* because the idea of starting a business out of her love of cooking struck her when she was alone at home while her husband was away at work. Practical and innovative, Bharti Sanghi has succeeded in changing the dynamics of foods that are usually off the shelves by catering to a niche. Nothing sums up her business better than this anecdote in her own words: "One day I told my husband that his friend Hemant was going to China that night. He replied saying, 'Nice.' The next day I told him that his cousin's nephew was going abroad. He said, 'That's good.' The third day when I told him that his friend's son was flying overseas that night, he said, 'Three times can't be a coincidence! How do you know the exact dates and departures of my friends?' I told him that they had all ordered *theplas* to be delivered to the airport!"

Running *Home Alone Foods*, Sanghi offers over 300 items with dishes ranging from Rajasthani and Gujarati to Maharastrian. She sells chutneys, chaats, *namkeens* and *mithais*—even taking customised orders. Under a separate brand called *LIFE*, she also sells ready foods like *parathas*, *gatte ki sabzi* and *sangri* that can last up to six months. The secret to the long shelf life of these normally easily perishable foods is the silver-lined packing technology—one which Sanghi learnt about at the NASA space centre in Houston! "I was fascinated to learn that the food that astronauts carry to space has a shelf life of five years, using a system of thermo-stabilising, which is unlike freeze-dried food," she explains.

While she may use the latest in technology, she traces her food to the age-old recipes of her *nani's* house. It was a common practice in the Morarka household for the women to sit together in the *chowk* and marinate delicious combinations of pickles, roll out papads and more! No surprise then that today Sanghi caters to a lot of Marwaris who miss their traditional food. She tells us that her most popular dishes are *dal*

*ki puri*, *gatta*, *thepla*, *matar* and *dal ki kachori*, *pista barfi*, *white dhokla* and *mathri*, which are all made using less oil and fresh ingredients. Catering even to those with health restrictions, Sanghi believes in simple rather than rich cooking. "Marwaris love their mithais, so I have made sugar-free *rabdi* for diabetics," she adds.

Experiencing hordes of orders, Sanghi, in true entrepreneurial spirit, has now started a website for her brand that has a downloadable menu. Soon, she will add 25 new dishes to that menu, to keep foodies on their toes! With her delicious dishes, Sanghi has become a household name among the Marwari community in Delhi, and we cannot wait to see what she comes up with next.

Food is a unique unifier—able to create the intimate bond of a family or the larger tie that connects communities. The four corners of the kitchen no longer confine women, but can lead them to entrepreneurial ventures, dispelling all notions of inequality. As India approaches the West in terms of obesity, while also leading the statistics in malnutrition, perhaps food is what we need to focus on. 🌱



Bharti Sanghi