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## Adventures in the kitchen

By Vijaysree Venkatraman

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Swati Banerjee barely knew how to cook when she came to this country five years ago from India. Now the Boston University biochemistry doctoral student always cooks dinner after she gets home from the lab. Leftovers are for the next day's lunch. All of this and her other kitchen adventures are recorded on her blog, *The Whistling Pressure Cooker*.

Banerjee is a quick study. She began cooking as a graduate student in Rhode Island. Dishes from home were initially explained to her on the phone by her mother. The novice cook also turned to [www.rouxbe.com](http://www.rouxbe.com) to learn traditional Western cooking techniques. Once she mastered the fundamentals, she started experimenting. Soon, she picked up a bit of HTML programming as well, and the blog was born. It is named for the pressure cooker because that's a vital piece of kitchen equipment that many students from India bring with them. Indian families have pressure cookers in all sizes because they're energy efficient. When the food is close to done, steam escapes through a valve and emits a sharp whistle.

Indian cooks are not frightened by the noise; they think of it as a timer. Three whistles indicate that rice is done; you have to wait for more whistles for foods that take longer to cook, such as tough cuts of meat.

"The first time my Bosnian housemate heard that whistle and saw the plumes of steam, he rushed to the rescue with a fire extinguisher," says Banerjee.

This was in 2006 when Banerjee was studying for a master's degree at the University of Rhode Island. Tired of cafeteria food and limited to restaurants in Kingston, she started requesting recipes from her folks in India. "Cooking my own food meant less processed food," she says. "But most of all, it allowed me freedom to experiment with different combinations of ingredients, spices, and flavors."

By the time she moved to Boston two years ago, she had grown passionate about cooking. Sometimes, she goes to the South Asian shops along Moody Street in Waltham to stock up on ingredients. The familiar sights and smells delight her.

But Banerjee's blog is not limited to Indian cuisine. Her repertoire includes a French bistro-style steak with sherry-port sauce, Chinese braised chicken wings, "busy night" tandoori shrimp, and udon noodle soup made with leftover holiday turkey. Her posts may have inspired fellow graduate students to follow her example.

At their request, she came up with Six Days of Chicken Breasts, recipes that include murg kebab, marsala, and souvlaki with homemade tzatziki sauce. Her favorite in that weekday series is chicken saltimbocca, which, she writes, "does not take more than 30 minutes to put together and is fancy enough to serve to guests or as the main course in a romantic dinner." When she cooks for potluck dinners and lab parties, the most requested dish is the Indian restaurant staple, chicken tikka masala.

Banerjee's own favorite recipe is a slow-cooked goat meat curry from home in Calcutta. "On Sundays, families have this dish, called kosha mangsho, for lunch," she says. "No one is in a hurry to go anywhere, so everyone enjoys the food at leisure." In fact, the entire neighborhood is filled with the aromas of simmering curry on Sunday afternoons, she says. This is a weekend tradition she has carried over from Bengal.

Her cat, Oscar Schindler, may never get accustomed to her pressure cooker. He has been with her for a year, but every time he hears its sonorous whistles, he still dives under the bed.

The blogger now has two pressure cookers. One is a durable 40-year-old model, a gift her parents received for their

wedding in 1971. The other is sleek and futuristic-looking.

It whistles just as loudly as the older one and the cat still heads for cover.

To read Banerjee's blog, go to [www.whistlingpressurecooker.blogspot.com](http://www.whistlingpressurecooker.blogspot.com)

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