

# An Interview with Praveen Anand

Dakshin, Chennai, India

PRAVEEN ANAND IS CHEF AT DAKSHIN, named by the *Miele Guide* as one of the top twenty restaurants in Asia. His embrace of traditional South Indian food is significant in a nation that has begun discarding some of its food customs in a headlong rush into modernity.

**Vijaysree Venkatraman:** *Tell us about the idea behind Dakshin.*

**Praveen Anand:** The word *dakshin* is Sanskrit for “south.” Our goal is to present authentic culinary creations from India’s four southern states: Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. The larger goal is to revive the disappearing culinary heritage of these regions.

**VV:** *How did you get interested in food?*

**PA:** My father worked with the Indian Railways and was constantly getting transferred, so I grew up in my grandparents’ home in Hyderabad. My grandfather was a policeman and a yoga expert, the author of books on this ancient practice. Thanks to him, I got into sports and physical activities. He also inculcated in me the habit of reading. K.M. Munshi’s seven-volume mythological series, *Krishnavatara*, on the life of Lord Krishna—that’s where I started.

My grandmother, who is ninety now, cooked for us all. I would accompany her to the market and carry all the heavy bags. I also tended our backyard vegetable garden. Because my uncles hadn’t married yet, there were no women in the family to help her in the kitchen. So I volunteered to be her assistant. She only gave me simple tasks like peeling garlic or shelling nuts. But being her helper meant I would get a little more than my share of the good food she made—that was my motivation, nothing nobler!

To me, she was like a magician—whatever she touched was perfect. Her cooking was in the traditional Andhra style: hot, with lots of red chilies. We had a separate pantry to store the dazzling variety of mango- and lime-based pickles

she made. Food was vegetarian except on weekends, when we would gorge on chicken, mutton, or seafood. Her simple chutneys, *dals* and *rasams*, fish curry and mutton *khorma*—all were wonderful.

I became the family’s official taster. If I declared (even jokingly) that a dish was not up to the mark, no one would touch it. I wielded a lot of power!

**VV:** *And you went to catering school as a young man?*

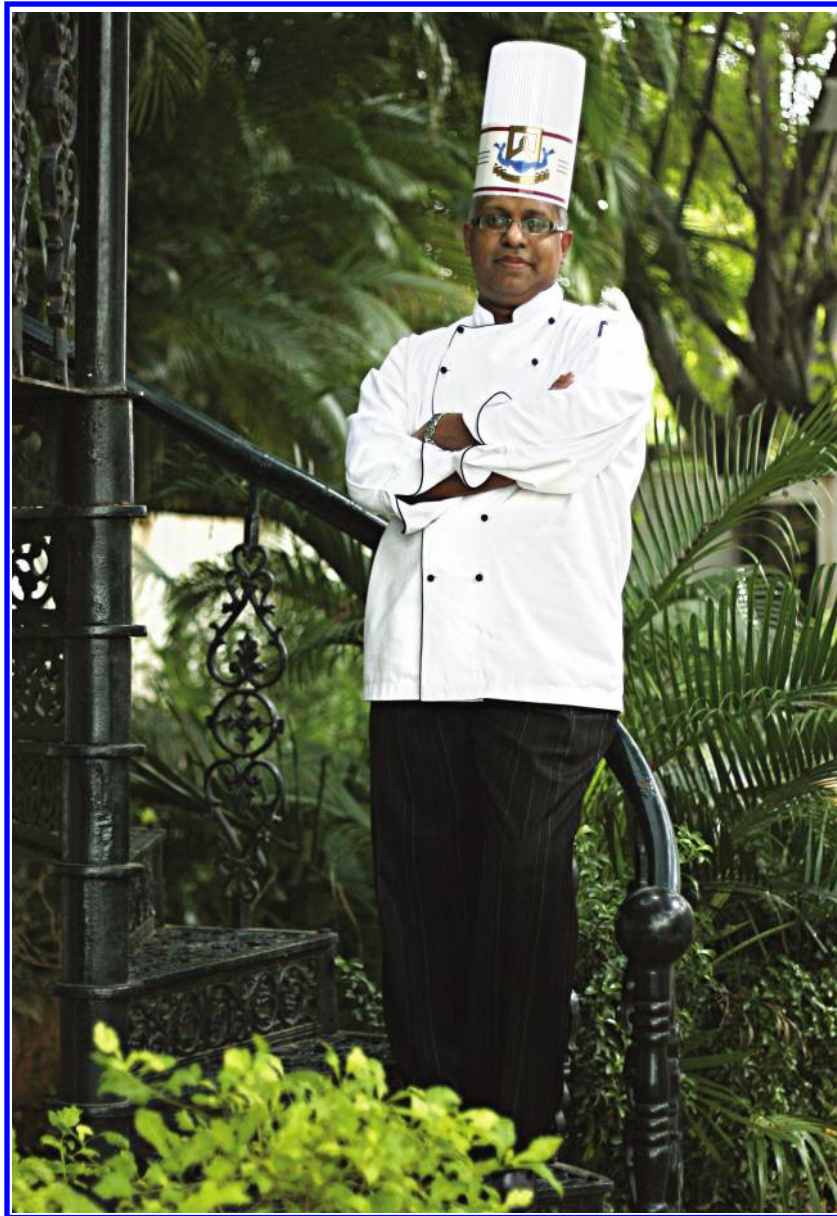
**PA:** When it was time for college, I gained admission into two programs: aeronautical engineering and hotel management. There was no pressure on me to start earning but I wanted to be independent as soon as possible. Going to catering school meant I would be a professional in three years instead of five. So I came to the Institute of Hotel Management, Catering Technology and Applied Nutrition here in Chennai.

**VV:** *When did you turn into an upholder of South Indian culinary traditions?*

**PA:** In culinary school I specialized in Western cooking—I really did not see any value in anything Indian back then. But five years into my job as a chef, management floated the idea of Dakshin. My boss thought I would be a valuable addition to the team. I resisted the transfer as long as I could. My forte was continental food, not Indian!

After I reluctantly joined, focus groups began coming into the restaurant. One group would love what we offered; another would trash much the same meal. What does one make of such conflicting feedback? I remember one prominent visitor saying, “This is going to be such a glorious failure.” Somehow that remark spurred me on. It got me thinking and cleared my confusion.

At Dakshin we re-create authentic recipes. It dawned on me that we had to stick to traditions, analyze dishes, and present them well. For this we would have to study our



local diners and the communities they belong to. Even subgroups within the strictly vegetarian Brahmin caste, the Iyers and Iyengars, have subtle differences in their cuisines. Their palates will tend to resist deviations from the script. So when considering dishes common to many—like the broths known as *rasam*—this would be an issue.

You would be astounded by the culinary diversity we have in this country. Spices are plentiful. The curry that is tweaked out of a given set of ingredients depends completely on a cook's ingenuity. But each community specializes in specific combinations of *masalas*—spice blends—which they have perfected over centuries. We had to appreciate this fact and work hard to understand culinary traditions better. Doing so put me on a path of learning that will last a lifetime.

*Above: Praveen Anand in the garden of the Hotel Park Sheraton, Chennai.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY VIJAYAN.P. © 2010

**VV:** *What are some of the dishes always on the menu?*

**PA:** Rice is the staple in almost all southern cuisines, so you will see plain and flavored rice of various kinds to eat with stews and curries. There is *bisibela hulianna*, a standalone rice and lentil dish cooked with spices. There is *idiappam*—steamed rice vermicelli; the lacy pancake known as *appam*; and crepe-like *dosa* made from fermented rice batter.

We use different types of aromatic spices, regional chilies, and black pepper. The *masala*-coated deep-fried small prawns, for instance, are red in color from the ground *bedgi*

chili, which is mild in heat. People finish with *bhagala bhath*, rice mashed with yogurt. Fresh greens, tempered with black mustard and curry leaf, are always on the menu. Curry leaf is a vital ingredient in South Indian cooking.

VV: *You have now become an anthropologist of sorts?*

PA: Yes, you could say that. My first job was to get the restaurant off the ground, then I had to grow our repertoire of dishes. Initially, getting out into the field for research was difficult, so from the list of hotel trainees I would zero in on people from particular regions. Once I picked Muslims from Tamil Nadu and asked them about dishes unique to their community. They brought me tiffin carriers full of good stuff: rice dumplings with mutton, *paya* (goat's trotters) soup. I invited their relatives, their aunts and grandmothers, to come give us a demonstration. Convincing women from conservative families to come to a five-star hotel was not easy, but some women accepted the invitation. They may have been intimidated by the presence of trained chefs like me, but they loved to teach youngsters. I learned to observe from a distance, to take myself out of the picture.

I also went to research libraries. I pored over the multi-volume *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* by Edgar Thurston, a British ethnographer from colonial times. I attended weddings and welcomed tip-offs about regional foods. I had some unusual sources: for instance, a cycling community. They would report back on unpretentious roadside eateries where food is still made the old-fashioned way on coal stoves or wood fires, with few ingredients. All this networking and reaching out helped me.

VV: *Tell us more about Dakshin's food festivals—foodies in the city mark them on their calendars, I am told.*

PA: The idea behind the festivals is to showcase South Indian food, especially those cuisines with an interesting history. We host two different food festivals a year, each lasting ten days. We re-create lost traditions; we do not innovate. We also celebrate actual Indian festivals like Deepavali and Pongal, when we serve special feast-day *thalis*.

For the first food festival, Ummi Abdulla, the author of *Malabar Muslim Cooking*, walked us through her recipes. We presented "Moplah Magic"—the cuisine of Kerala Muslims who trace their ancestry to Arab traders. That was a simple cut-and-paste job. Later my quest for festival themes took me to a wedding in Chettinad, in Tamil Nadu, a region that is home to the Nattukottai Chettiars, an ancient mercantile community. Knowing my interest

in local food and history, a friend introduced me to an old English-speaking widow who lived in a humble setting. She told me about the food in the region. As we spoke, she grew excited and pulled out a nearly foot-long key, saying, "Come, I will show you my house."

I followed her through a dense growth of dry lantana bushes, wondering where on earth she was taking me. We emerged from the wilderness into an abandoned mansion. The hall had golden ceilings, Belgian glass chandeliers, and Spanish tiles. In the storeroom were old-style cooking vessels. You could cook for two thousand people and still have dishes left over, so many feasts were hosted there. Unable to maintain this palatial home, the widow had moved into the servant quarters; her only son had left for Malaysia years ago.

Her personal story reflects the history of this arid region. Nattukottai Chettiars had long traded with Southeast Asia and Ceylon, but in the nineteenth century many left to seek their fortunes in Burma, Singapore, and Malaysia. That explains the star anise and fennel seed in their food.

The richness of their cuisine was in evidence at the wedding the next day. There I met the caterer, America Natesan, who had done a stint as a cook in the U.S. He was a valuable resource behind our successful festival "Chettiar Kitchen: The Cuisine of the Nattukottai Chettiars." And the widow's son returned from Malaysia a few months after my visit, I am happy to tell you!

VV: *Your recent festival was based on the forgotten recipes of Pondicherry (now Puducherry), a former French colony.*

PA: I had always asked about local specialties there but never got any good leads. Then I visited on holiday. At a coffee shop I had a salad, langoustine curry, and a chicken dish—the owner just called it "Creole" food. I went straight to the local library to learn more, but my search was fruitless. Then someone brought me a tattered, out-of-print local cookbook. Glancing through it, I realized the ingredients were Indian. Not one was French, and yet the food tasted so distinctive. There was a seafood curry with fish and prawn—such mixing doesn't normally happen in India. There was a prawn curry with ice apple, a small tropical fruit that absorbs spices beautifully. Baguettes, made with rice flour, were excellent for soaking up flavorful sauces. Coconut was used in a lot of the dishes—there was even a coconut-based substitute for mayonnaise.

I pursued this lead relentlessly. My guess is this was not everyday food: local cooks served it to their French masters or prepared it for a special guest, like a son-in-law. That made the food just right for our diners.

**VV:** *You had a vegetarian festival based entirely on a nineteenth-century cookbook. How did that come about?*

**PA:** In his column for *The Hindu*, Chennai city historian Mr. S. Muthiah mentioned that a reader had sent him a copy of *Paka-Shastra*, a 365-page cookbook published in Madras in January 1891—possibly the first modern Tamil cookbook. Women’s education was just then catching on, and one man, T.K. Ramachandra Rau, was concerned that daughters would no longer have sufficient culinary training to be good home cooks. So he set about documenting traditional recipes, including some desserts like gooseberry *payasam* and onion *payasam* that are unheard of today.

That foresighted man left behind such a resource! The book documents Brahmin cooking. What is striking is the simple, austere style of cooking—very few dishes have even onions and garlic. The recipes call for few spices, leaving the taste of the vegetable and of the few spices clearly discernible. This contrasts with the present-day practice of overwhelming a vegetable with many spices, which also tend to crowd each other out.

**VV:** *Rumor has it that you are working to translate an even older cookbook written in Sanskrit.*

**PA:** Yes, this is a book of recipes called the *Paka-Darpanam*. It also lays out the characteristics for a royal chef, good combinations of dishes for a balanced meal, and bad combinations that are to be avoided. It must be one of the oldest cookbooks in the world. Its anonymous author reminds me of the mythological Hindu king Nala, a connoisseur of good food who was also an excellent cook.

**VV:** *What is the future of traditional cooking in India?*

**PA:** It may die out with the grannies of today unless we professional chefs step in and document their culinary knowledge. Over the years I have learned so much from them, and there is much left to learn.

Youngsters are typically rebels—I was like that, too. Everything Western looked great to me when I was young. The French, they say, are enamored of anything that is French. In India, we don’t appreciate our heritage as we should—maybe because we are unaware of its richness and variety. It is my mission to share what I’ve learned over the years.

There has been a tremendous response to our food festivals. Everybody loves the food, but many are eager to learn even more. That fills me with hope. The highest appreciation is when some person says, “This is like the food my grandmother or aunt used to make in the village—I had almost forgotten this dish.” Such simple acknowledgment of my work fills me with joy.