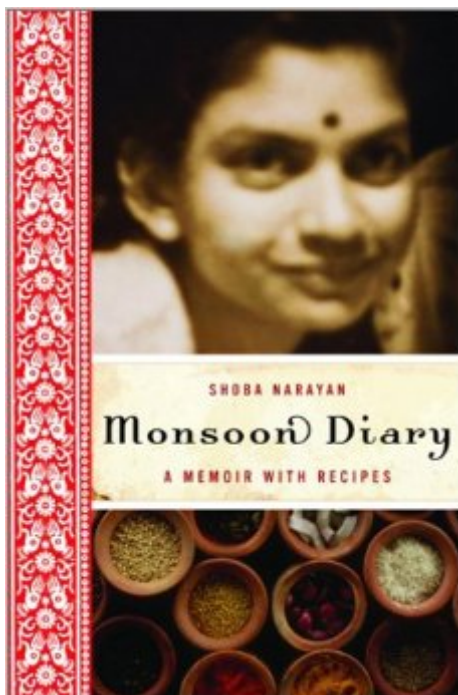


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Monsoon Diary: A Memoir With Recipes



Synopsis

Shoba Narayan's Monsoon Diary weaves a fascinating food narrative that combines delectable Indian recipes with tales from her life, stories of her delightfully eccentric family, and musings about Indian culture. Narayan recounts her childhood in South India, her college days in America, her arranged marriage, and visits from her parents and in-laws to her home in New York City. Monsoon Diary is populated with characters like Raju, the milkman who named his cows after his wives; the iron-man who daily set up shop in Narayan's front yard, picking up red-hot coals with his bare hands; her mercurial grandparents and inventive parents. Narayan illumines Indian customs while commenting on American culture from the vantage point of the sympathetic outsider. Her characters, like Narayan herself, have a thing or two to say about cooking and about life. In this creative and intimate work, Narayan's considerable vegetarian cooking talents are matched by stories as varied as Indian spices—at times pungent, mellow, piquant, and sweet. Tantalizing recipes for potato masala, dosa, and coconut chutney, among others, emerge from Narayan's absorbing tales about food and the solemn and quirky customs that surround it.

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Customer Reviews

Ms Narayan's first attempt is a good starter, keeps the reader engaged and has some good descriptions of culture and background. As someone coming from the same culture/background though i was able to see that she has been quite liberally creative in some areas..and given the # of readers who think this is an accurate description of culture - i want to clarify a few things...1 The

author's story appears to have been set in 90s-early 2000s. Indian cabbies (and passengers!!) are a dime a dozen in NYC during this time. She talks of a cabbie who is so carried away by a passenger from his part of the world that he gives up his fare, takes her and her friend home, feeds them and drops them home, like he never gets to drive any passenger from his part of the world. Totally unrealistic, unless something happened that we don't know of. Just simply put you get a nod or a few words of exchange in your native tongue with a cabbie from your part of the world generally, not this.² The average indian middle class brahmin family (or Tambrams as we are commonly called) - do not expect women to cook to judge whether or not they can go abroad on their own. Like it is everywhere some families are liberal and send their kids, some are more conservative and need more persuasion - persuasion commonly comes with some 'male' who can 'take care' of you, like a husband or a brother or someone. Cooking skills are important but no, setting deals with unrelated skills simply do not work, or generally setting deals itself with parents or people in authority rarely works. The author has spun a nice story out of a possible situation she had - by her description of her parents they seem quite liberal and may not have had big objections.

In all cultures, traditional foods shared with family become so integral to our inner lives that certain occasions are associated with certain foods forevermore. From her childhood though her arranged marriage twenty-five years later, author Narayan shares her own memories, recalling the foods which made them rich and vivid. Filled with sense impressions, her earliest years are characterized by memories of Raju, the milkman who milked Tiger, his cow, on demand; Chinnapan, who set up his iron and ironing board under one of their trees and kept the iron hot by loading it with coals he picked up in his bare hands; and Jaya, his wife, whose face was bright yellow from the turmeric paste she habitually applied. In school Narayan and her friends would barter their lunches, trading back and forth in the currency of their mothers' specialties. Holidays and vacations were filled with memories of pungent family feasts. During her college years in India, she applied surreptitiously to Mount Holyoke College for a fellowship and won it, only to run into significant opposition from her family. Her uncle suggested that if she, who had never cooked a full meal, could cook a vegetarian feast like those her mother cooked for the extended family, and have them like it, she might go. She did, and she went. Two years later, she won a scholarship to graduate school at Memphis State, this time cooking up a feast for potential donors in the U.S. in order to raise some of the extra money she needed. Later she would learn to cook traditional foods for her husband in the traditional ways. Narayan's memoir is charming and sensitive, both to the cultural differences between South Asia and the United States, and to the realities of family life in both places.

Shoba Narayan's "Monsoon Diary" is about her memories of growing up in Madras, South India, before immigrating to this country, and, about South Indian food: "A Memoir with Recipes". She delivers on both counts. (You know the author is going to stick to her roots, a true writer from Madras, when she starts by thanking her neighbors: "Prabha-mami, Nagarajan-Mama, Sumathi-ka, Babu-anna, Vijaya-aunty, and Nithya-uncle"). As memoir, it is for me, an immigrant from Madras, what "Midnight's Children" is for immigrants from Bombay: stories of growing up there, scenes of life in the city, and intimate portraits of family and friends. She transported me to familiar events and landmarks in Madras: Mardi Gras at IIT, Pondy Bazaar, Alsa Mall, WCC, Music Academy, Grand Sweets, Adyar Woodlands, Ambika Appalam Depot, Hotel Saravana Bhavan and yes, even Naidu Hall ("famous for its bras and "nighties," airy nightgowns made from the softest cotton"). Narayan, a recipient of the M.F.K. Fisher award for distinguished writing, writes well about idli-sambar and rasam, but when she writes about the art of eating off a banana leaf at South Indian weddings, and riffs on the real soul of South Indian food (largely still unfamiliar to most foodies), she does for Madras what Calvin Trillin does for New York City -you want to go there right now and eat it all: puli-kaachal, vatral kuzhambu, agathi keerai, murunga kai keerai, sojji-bajji, bonda-burfi, thaiyru saadam, narthangai uruga, upma, venn-pongol, murukkus, and cheedai. But don't be intimidated by this list; according to the author's mother-in-law, only "Three things are dear to a South Indian's heart: Hot Coffee, good yogurt, and pickles.

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