

# Cooking by the numbers: At lunch with Nobel laureate Abhijit Banerjee

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## FULL TEXT

India, Nov. 13 – Flipping through *Cooking to Save Your Life*, Nobel laureate Abhijit Banerjee's cookbook, readers will grow hungry - the recipes are excellent - and also a little flummoxed at some of the instructions.

Here he is on Orange, Avocado and Asparagus Salad: "Remove the skin and the stone (of 2 slightly overripe avocados) and cut the flesh into half slices the thickness of your earlobe or less"; in the Kachumber recipe the cucumbers need to be cut "into slices no thicker than 3 playing cards stacked together"; and the Zaalouk calls for "4 cups of eggplant, cut into cubes about the size of the top phalanx of your thumb in all directions".

I ask him about these unusual specifications as he stirs a pan of Meghalayan Pork with Black Sesame Seeds in the kitchen of publisher Chiki Sarkar's home in south Delhi.

"The idea is to give the reader a sense of the size without actually using measurements like millimetres. It's easier for people to compare things to a thumb and there's not that much of a variation," he says, adding that he himself just throws stuff in that's in the general range. What a relief; the thought of shuffling a deck of cards in one hand while cutting veggies with the other was anxiety-inducing.

The cookbook's French illustrator Cheyenne Olivier, who is working alongside Banerjee, on a pan of South Indian Style Stir-Fried Brussels Sprouts, pronounces that it's dangerous to get into comparing body parts, and elicits a chuckle.

Food prep under control, we move to the book-lined living room to munch on slices of baguette slathered with marinated robiola cheese. I could have made a meal of the hors d'oeuvre but before anyone can say "Please, sir, I want some more", lunch is served. Tucking into the Potato and Tomato Soup served with a dollop of fragrant pesto, Banerjee notices a tattoo on my forearm. It's a verse from the Bhagavad Gita: *Karmany vadhikaraste ma phaleshu kada chana*. Olivier wants to know what it means; I tell her about the idea of action without expecting rewards.

"That's the meaning that a lot of people accept, but in the context of the battlefield in the Mahabharata, I've interpreted it as the 'adhikar' of Brahmins doing Brahminy things and others doing only what they are meant to do, and that's a frightening idea to me," Banerjee says. "I wrote an essay arguing about it when I was 18."

A discussion on two familiar translations of the Gita, the Swami Prabhupada version and the one by S Radhakrishnan, follows. I have always favoured the latter. "Yes, the Radhakrishnan one is good. He does talk about action in the sense that you take it but I always suspected that he was twisting it in his own image as a liberal," Banerjee says, as we move on to the dal.

"I consider dal to be India's greatest contribution yet to human civilisation. Ahead of chess and zero," begins the cookbook's section on dals. "We cook about 70 dals at home," he says.

The Meghalayan marvel with its "nutty sweetness" is next. We eat in respectful silence and I think with deep affection of Meghalaya, a state I've never visited.

By now, 60-year-old Banerjee, who grew up in Calcutta and now lives in Boston with his wife and fellow Nobel laureate Esther Duflo and their two children, is looking a little tired. He's been through multiple interviews and had his recipes recreated and discussed by 25 members of a cookbook book club, many of whom were professional chefs. But he proceeds to talk about the witty scenarios that introduce many of his recipes: "I like writing. I like

sounds and words and it's, maybe, what's most organic in me. Chatty text I can produce very fast and it's related to the way I talk. It's often my voice and I like telling stories."

And then there are the serious essays introducing each section that elevate this volume to more than a cookbook: one shows the reader how "taming vegetables tends to be classic women's work" unnoticed and unsung even when it involves, as it does in West Africa, grating and drying hundreds of kilos of cassava to extract the cyanide and turn it into flour; another explains how the universal love for Basmati has led to environmental catastrophe in Punjab; a third touches upon how the poor are forced to constantly make difficult choices, a situation relieved only by the "occasional act of defiance".

"Economists have this idea that poor people should somehow invest in nutrition not recognising that they also have to have the energy to live," Banerjee says. "It's very human to occasionally blow off steam, to get drunk or eat at stalls selling fried foods. They are exciting and your mouth is grateful though your stomach may not be. Then you go home with that memory and it gives you a little bit of the spirit you need to go on. That's a very important psychological phenomenon, which, as economists, I think we never fully take cognisance of."

We end the feast with a fat wedge of store-bought Shor Bhaja, a Bengali sweet made up of chunks of fried cream. But it was a close thing. "He was going to make Lauki Kheer for you but decided to get this instead," Sarkar says. Having spent an entire childhood dodging that execrable gourd, I have a quiet panic attack. I say my goodbyes and slip out feeling incredibly lucky.

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## DETAILS

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