

IN CONVERSATION WITH...

MIRA MANEK hosts supper clubs, holds Soulful Retreats and authored *Saffron Soul* – a cookbook that aims to challenge misconceptions about Indian cuisine with its collection of healthy recipes that have been given a modern twist. Here, we chat more about these dishes and her culinary journey

What inspired your passion for cooking and eating healthy Indian dishes?

I was brought up eating healthy, balanced Gujarati meals such as home-made curries packed with greens, beans and *dhal*. It really was as good as any vegetarian diet can get in terms of variety. But later on, I moved abroad and sort of lost my way in food and health. I started snacking on low-fat and low-calorie foods, I had digestive and gut issues, I would yo-yo in terms of my weight and diet and my hair even started falling out. It dawned on me one day that the food I grew up eating was what I needed. All along, I had thought Indian food was too oily, too calorific, but in retrospect, it was nutritious. I realised this was also a universal perception and I wanted to change that.

Who taught you about Indian – and specifically Gujarati – cuisine?

My grandmother, mother and aunts. It was really a joy to be able to learn from my family and to discover from a point of fascination.

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What defines your recipes and cooking style?

I combine Indian heritage recipes with modern flavours – so traditional foods that I transform by adding elements and experimenting with different ingredients.



Mira Manek, the author of *Saffron Soul*

Which recipes in *Saffron Soul* best represent your cooking style?

My *masala* grilled aubergine is a take on one of my grandmother's signature dishes, where she would combine seven or eight spices with nuts and jaggary – a wholesome, natural sweetener – to make a mixture that she'd use to stuff aubergines used in a curry. Rather than doing that, I layer already-cooked aubergines with her mix, grill them further and top them with dill yoghurt, a sprinkle of pomegranate seeds and coriander. The dish is one of contrasts – it's soft and crisp, sweet and spicy. *Shrikhand* is a thick, rich and creamy yoghurt infused with saffron and cardamom, which is traditional to Gujarati cuisine. I loved to eat this as a child. I use this on top of a date and nut base to make a vegetarian mango cheesecake. It's customary to top the yoghurt with pistachios or pomegranates, but I use mango purée and, instead of using sugar, use honey to sweeten the dish.

What's your favourite spice?

Turmeric – even though everyone goes on about it. This healing and necessary spice is powerful and good for you. I also love cinnamon and sprinkle it everywhere.

Is there a second book on the cards?

Yes! And it will be out in September this year. It's called *Prajna: Ayurvedic Rituals For Happiness*, and it offers a lifestyle reboot, things you can practice and do daily to live life with more zest.

Interview by **Tiffany Eslick**. Recipes and images supplied by **Mira Manek**

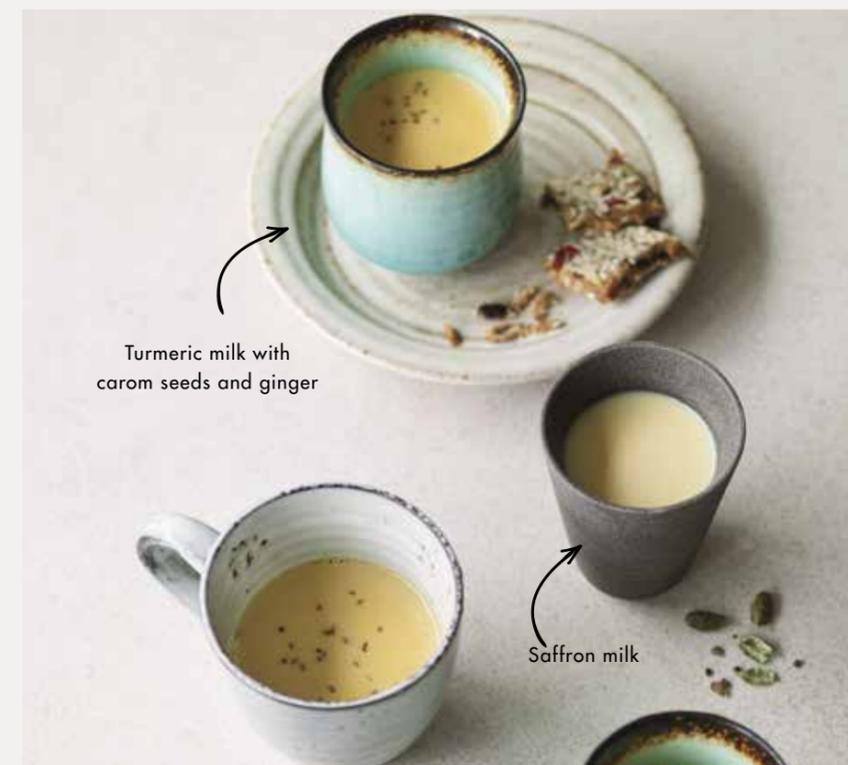
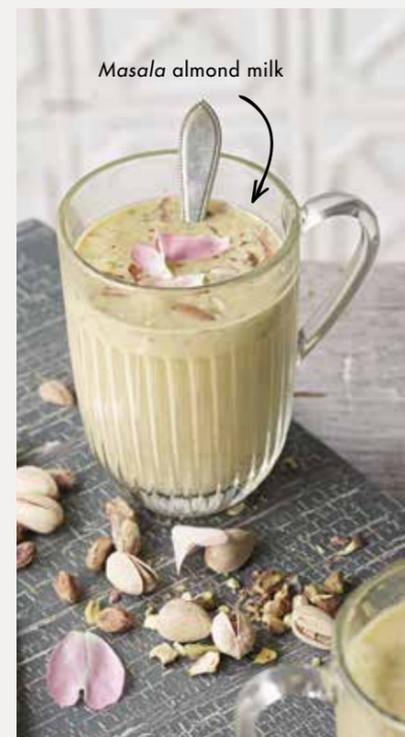
THE Milky Way

Try three of Mira's milk-based drinks at home

MASALA ALMOND MILK

“Also known as *badaam doodh*, this is the ultimate welcome or festive drink. Traditionally, it is made with cow's milk, but works just as well with almond milk, or your preferred type of milk. The thin slices of almonds and pistachios add a lovely crunch and texture, and the sweetness of the honey brings out the flavours of the *masalas*.”

500ml almond milk
2 tbsp almonds, chopped or sliced
1 tbsp pistachios*, chopped
3 tbsp spinneysFOOD Honey
½ tsp cardamom, ground
1 pinch of saffron
A few ice cubes, to serve, optional
Rose petals, to decorate



1 Heat the milk in a saucepan on a low heat until it starts to boil, then add the rest of the ingredients, except the ice cubes. **2** Leave to simmer on a low heat for around 10 minutes. **3** You can drink this hot, but it's best served chilled. Leave the milk to cool down, then place in the fridge to chill. **4** When ready to serve, place a few ice cubes into each glass, pour over the *masala* nut milk, decorate with rose petals and serve.

**If you prefer, you can use just almonds in this recipe – simply omit the pistachios and add 3 tbsp of almonds.*

TURMERIC MILK WITH CAROM SEEDS AND GINGER

“An age-old recipe, turmeric milk is the perfect winter tonic and is used to help keep a cold at bay, as well as for treating congestion and coughs. Adding *ajwain* (carom) seeds is beneficial for coughs and colds and is also good for digestion.”

A few drops of coconut oil or ghee
¼ tsp carom seeds
250ml milk of choice
¼ tsp spinneysFOOD Fine Turmeric
1.5cm piece of ginger, peeled and grated, optional
1 pinch of Himalayan salt or spinneysFOOD Sea Salt, optional
2 tsp Manuka honey or spinneysFOOD Honey, optional

1 Heat the coconut oil and carom seeds in a small saucepan on a low heat. **2** Once the seeds are slightly browned, pour in the milk.

3 Add the rest of the ingredients and leave to boil on a medium heat for a few minutes. Pour into a mug and sip once cool enough.

SAFFRON MILK

“Saffron milk is great to have at bedtime, especially if your mind needs to be calmed or you are prone to insomnia, as its known benefits include promoting a sound night's sleep. Just a few strands of saffron will do the trick.”

250ml milk
1 pinch of saffron (2-3 strands)
2 tsp Manuka honey or spinneysFOOD Honey, optional

1 Place the milk and saffron into a saucepan and bring to the boil on a medium heat. **2** Add the honey, if you're using it. **3** Pour into a mug and sip once cool enough.



To win a copy of *Saffron Soul*, visit spinneys-dubai.com