

Sarah Henry | August 5, 2011 | 0 Comments

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Photo credit: Hush Supper Club

What's a former World Bank worker doing running a secret supper club? Meet the accomplished amateur cook who goes by the name Geeta and hosts the [Hush Supper Club](#) in her Washington D.C. home. This weekend, Geeta brings Hush to the Bay Area, where she'll serve up culinary storytelling along with vegetarian Indian food.

Geeta grew up in Chicago eating the food of the Gujarati region in northwestern India. Her family followed the dietary restrictions of people who practice the ancient religion known as [Jainism](#), a vegetarian cuisine that prohibits eating root vegetables that can't regenerate on their own (think potatoes, onions, and garlic). Well, there was that brief period when her father, worried about his children's ability to assimilate in America, took them out to eat hamburgers for a year or two. But otherwise, Geeta told me, she's led a meatless life.

Around three years ago, Geeta's mother became ill and she worried she might lose her (she's well now). But at the time, Geeta was struck by the fact that if her mother passed she'd take with her all the recipes to the food Geeta grew up with. She vowed then to learn the food traditions of her family and to master the comfort dishes from her family home.

Now in her late 30s, Geeta recently gave up her World Bank job traveling to Africa to devote much of her time to educating people about the food traditions of her culture and the stories behind these classic dishes.

Her Supper Club's are popular in D.C., where word spread quickly. Prominent media coverage in [The Washington Post](#) and on [Rachel Ray's blog](#) has helped.



Hush Supper Club. Photo: Pam Rutter

Last Friday she held a Supper Club in a friend's home in The Elmwood neighborhood of Berkeley. Tonight Hush comes to San Francisco's Potrero Hill and on Saturday to Oakland's Jack London Square. Geeta spoke with Bay Area Bites earlier this week.

What can attendees expect at a Hush Supper Club event?

I think of it more as a salon than a trendy underground dinner. There's a playfulness to these salons, a sense that people can be kids again. I want to challenge the hipsters who aren't bothered to get bothered (or involved) with something. We'll start with a cocktail, which allows people to get the "What do you do?/How did you get here?" questions out of the way. I don't socialize with my guests at this stage, I like them to get to know each other, as it's often strangers coming together.

I like to keep it small; 12 is ideal, sometimes we'll have up to 16. The more intimate the better. The evening typically lasts four to five hours and the suggested donation is \$75.

Why did you start the supper club?

For three reasons: One, India is on the move and I wanted to tell the story of my people and my culture. Secondly, before there were celebrity chefs and fetishized food, there was just food and the stories behind the dishes we eat, and I want to continue that tradition. And three, as someone who likes to tell stories, I like to question people's assumptions about culture and provoke them to think through food.

What are some misunderstandings about the Jain diet and how closely do you follow the food regimen?

Some people think we don't eat dairy, but yogurt is a big part of our diet. It gets kind of complicated with the food rules but essentially we don't eat any plant that can't regenerate itself, which is why tubers like potatoes are off limits, as well as garlic and onions. When I traveled to Africa a lot I found myself eating eggs, which is a big no-no in the Jain world, but I needed to find protein sources. As a rule, Jains don't drink, but this Jain likes a cocktail.

What's on the menu this weekend?

We'll probably start with a saffron-cardamom infused cocktail. Since it's summer I'm thinking mangoes. Mango lassi, of course, but also mango soup which is savory. I'll do a chaat making demonstration. I'll probably serve a *chana chaat* (chickpea snack), which is the quintessential Gujarati street food.

We'll have *dhokla* (steamed lentil-and-rice cakes), a chana masala, and a classic corn dish, with green chili, coconut, and raisins. Maybe some okra.

And then falooda, a cooling, creamy, rose-scented dessert with basil seeds and gooey noodles, that you mix all together. It has this wonderful perfume. Chai, of course.

Have you noticed differences in the dinner conversations in the D.C., Chicago and Bay Area Hush Supper Club events?

In D.C., since so much of Washington life involves international travel, you can literally verify headlines at dinner parts with people just back from Uganda and Iraq. I challenge people there not to ask "What do you do?" In Chicago I suggest people find something else to talk about beyond the bears, bulls, cubs — in other words sports. Here in the Bay Area, there's a lot of talk about the food and food culture, so I encourage guests to mix it up.

What are some of the signature flavors in your cuisine?

Common spices used in Jain cuisine include saffron, cinnamon, cardamom, chili, coriander, cumin, and turmeric. Fresh herbs include cilantro and mint and curry leaves in the winter. We get a lot of protein from chickpea, lentil, or bean flours. And we use yogurt in our flat-bread doughs.



Photo credit: Hush Supper Club

What's the secret ingredient in your spice box?

The mystery ingredient is [hing \(asafoetida\)](#) which is a pungent garlic-like flavoring and a digestive aid, known for its anti-gas properties, as my mother likes to say.

What's next for Hush?

I'd like to write a memoir about my food and culture, and my experience sharing it through the supper clubs. I walked away from a life at the World Bank for a spice box. But that kind of entrepreneurial pluck is respected by my people.

Details:

For up-to-the minute info on ticket availability — a few seats were still left at press time for both Hush Supper Club events this weekend — visit the [Hush Supper Club Facebook page](#). To reserve a spot visit the [Hush Supper Club site](#). Follow [@hushsupperclub](#) on Twitter.

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[Sarah Henry](#) hails from Sydney, Australia, where she grew up eating lamingtons, Vegemite, and prawns (not shrimp) on the barbie (barbecue). Sarah has called the Bay Area home for the past two decades and remembers how delighted she was when a modest farmers' market sprouted in downtown San Francisco years ago. As a freelance writer Sarah has covered local food people, places, politics, culture, and news for the [San Francisco Chronicle](#), [San Jose Mercury News](#), [California](#), [San Francisco](#), [Diablo](#), [Edible East Bay](#), [Edible Marin & Wine Country](#), and [Berkeleyside](#). A contributor to the national food policy site [Civil Eats](#), her stories have also appeared in [The Atlantic](#), [AFAR](#), [Gilt Taste](#), [Ladies' Home Journal](#), [Grist](#), [Shareable](#), and [Eating Well](#). An epicurean tour guide for [Edible Excursions](#), Sarah is the voice behind the blog [Lettuce Eat Kale](#) and [tweets](#) under that moniker too.

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