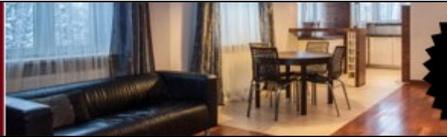


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Sharing India's food and culture is no secret at Hush

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Wednesday - 3/13/2013, 6:30am ET
Rachel Nania, wtop.com

WASHINGTON -- At approximately 7 p.m. on a quiet Saturday night in the District, a man knocked loudly on an old, wooden door east of 14th Street NW.

The door opened just enough to let a sliver of light from the inside of the home shine into the darkness of the cold winter night.

"What is the password?" the woman behind the door asked cautiously.

"Viceroy," the visitor whispered.

The woman warily nodded and slowly opened the door. Two men in their mid-30s entered the living room.

"Welcome to Hush," said the woman. "I'll take your coats."

Hush Supper Club is an educational dining project, founded by an Indian American woman in her late 30s named Geeta. She started the club in 2010 as a way to spark Americans' interest in India, its culture, religions and cuisine.

"This town has some of the most educated people in America, and they know nothing about India. So I've tried to make it a bit sexy," says Geeta, who grew up in Chicago's suburbs and has lived in the District for more than 10 years.

To accomplish her mission of educating Washingtonians on India, Geeta -- who generally greets the public with a gold mask to protect the privacy of her business and to play into the secret and underground nature of supper clubs -- uses food as the medium for her message.

Guests at her supper club experience traditional Indian dishes such as kachori with cilantro-mint chutney, chana chaat (the "street food" of India), saffron basmati rice with masoor dal bhindi masala, bell peppers with besan and jaggery spinach parathas with cucumber raita. The cost to attend the supper club is a suggested donation of \$85.

"This is real food," Geeta says. "That means it's the food that my mother taught me to cook, the food that I love and the food that my people actually eat. The meal that you have this evening is a meal that you can't have anywhere in D.C. You can't really have it unless you know someone's mother."

Even though Geeta cooks for guests in her home, she hesitates to throw herself in the same category as other supper clubs -- or intimate homemade dinners, typically served in someone's private home --



Hush Supper Club is an educational dining project, founded by an Indian American woman in her late 30s named Geeta. Guests eat and learn about India's food and culture in an intimate setting. (WTOP/Rachel Nania)

Gallery: (14 images)



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in the D.C. area.

"This has nothing to do with foodiness or with trendiness," says Geeta, who hosts three to four dinners every month. "That's comical to me. I don't feel trendy, I'm not trendy, I'm not hip and I am definitely not cool. That is now what I was trying to do when I started Hush."

For each course, Geeta gives her guests a detailed description on the spices used in each recipe and explains each spice's significance in Indian culture and the history of her dishes.

Prior to serving the channa chaat, Geeta gathers the guests around the table and asks them to close their eyes and imagine they are standing at a food cart in the bustling streets of one of India's popular cities. She then describes what they would see and smell.

For dessert, Geeta serves homemade masala chai and kheer, with a side of more education. While the 10 to 12 guests who dine at her home relax and digest an evening of food, Geeta whips out her iPad and takes them on a virtual "spice tour" of India, paying special attention to her family's home state of Gujarat.

Minutes after the first guests entered, other trickled in to the cozy living room. Conversations started among strangers and cocktails were poured as the smell of exotic spices tantalized the hungry visitors.

Geeta stood in front of the guests with a cocktail raised in her right hand.

"I've invited you all here tonight because India is on the move," she said.

Sarah LaRosa was one of the visitors that evening. LaRosa lives in D.C. and first heard about Hush through her boyfriend who knows Geeta.

"When he brought the idea of attending the supper club, I was very interested in going," LaRosa says. "I'd never heard of such a thing -- I was really excited for the opportunity to check it out."

While LaRosa joined the evening for a dinner out with her boyfriend, a Maryland couple celebrated their recent marriage at Hush, and a few other guests were college friends, reuniting for the weekend.

Geeta says Hush is not just for 20 through 40 year olds. In fact, her favorite suppers are when there is a span of generations at the table -- she says it fuels the best stories. And storytelling is a major focus of the Hush experience.

"I invite guests to follow my lead and tell stories rather than talk about their jobs," says Geeta, who used to work at the World Bank before starting Hush.

"If anyone has the audacity to say words like 'deliverables' I will shut them down."

Preparing for supper club typically takes Geeta one to two days. It involves hours of shopping, prep work, cooking and several calls to her mother.

For Geeta's first Hush event, she flew her mother from Chicago to D.C. to help her prepare for the dinner, which was publicized when Amanda McClements, a local food blogger, posted the event on her website. Before she could even finalize the menu for the dinner, [The Washington Post](#) called and asked to attend.

"When I started Hush, I didn't even know how to make dessert," says Geeta, who now prepares everything herself. "I learned every dish from my mother, every single one."

The food and conversation usually keep guests, [who register online](#) to attend the dinner, at Geeta's home for six to seven hours.

"By the end of the night, everyone is friends," she says.

After hosting the supper clubs for three years, Geeta is ready to expand her business and wants to reach people outside the Washington area. Currently, she is writing two books: an ebook about Indian geography, culture and food and a memoir about her travels in India and experiences with Hush.

She also hopes to eventually launch a line of her homemade chutneys and start a campaign in D.C. around India's independence.

"I want to do my part in getting the Americans to know the Indians," she says. "So if you are up at 2 a.m. Googling something about India, I'll know I did my job."

Watch a video by WTOP's Rachel Nania of Geeta making chana chaat:



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Editor's Note: Geeta's last name is not printed and her face is not shown in videos and photos as per her request.

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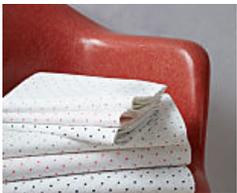
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