

THE NEXT ACT | LIFE STORIES

THE FOOD EXPERT

Madhur Jaffrey, 84

A taste for life

MADHUR JAFFREY MAY BE BEST KNOWN FOR HAVING REVOLUTIONISED THE WAY WE SEE INDIAN FOOD GLOBALLY, BUT THE POLYMATH CHEF, WRITER AND ACTOR HAS MANY MORE STRINGS TO HER BOW. NOW 84, HER HUNGER FOR ALL THAT THE WORLD HAS TO OFFER IS FAR FROM SATIED.

I've never dreamt of retiring. It has not been in my vocabulary, ever. What do we actually mean when we talk about retirement? We mean putting an end to some kind of drudgery so that we can have a restful, happy time. But I'm having a very happy time already and although rest is ok as an in-between activity, it's not something I aspire to do full time. That would be very dull.

Ever since I was a child growing up in India, I've always had this insatiable curiosity. People tend to associate me with food, but really food was just an excuse for me to explore. I think everyone needs to find this one thing in life that provides a thread to follow. I've been very lucky finding my path and I try to tell my grandchildren that if they discover the thing they love then they'll never have to work a day in their lives. You might 'work' everyday, but it will never feel like it.

We've just come back from Peru for what was supposed to be a holiday, but I still always manage to



find a little work element to tag on. This time I did a research project on potatoes because they originated in that area, so my holiday was given a form, it was given a mission. This project added a sense of intrigue for me and meant I did things that I may not have done otherwise. I was hunting for potatoes and their stories, so I was no longer holidaying in a vacuum but holidaying with a purpose. I wasn't at all interested in cooking until I came to London to study at RADA in the 1950s. British fish and chips were excellent, but there wasn't much else for me to eat, so my mother started sending recipes on little fold up airmail letters. Because I have always had this deep curiosity, I found that I already had all the tastes stored in my head. It was like walking into a fully stocked library where the books were carefully catalogued.

My ultimate taste memory is climbing the mango trees in our family garden in Delhi as a child and dipping thin slices of fruit into little bowls of roasted cumin and chilli powder. Those tastes still sum up the best of Indian food for me; a mix of the sweet fruits from my childhood with the mysterious, heady spices of the adult world. My biography is actually called Climbing the Mango Trees. That's quite romantic, I suppose, but these memories can come from anywhere. I was delighted when I first tasted Boveril on the ship that brought me from Bombay to Southampton, or when I first had Iceberg lettuce sailing from Southampton to New York. That amazing crunch! You learn to be more

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discerning about these things in time, of course, but it's important to indulge in all new experiences, wherever they might come from.

I'm aware that I've had some impact on how people in the West perceive Indian food, but I think weighing your legacy is best left to others. They'll see things far more clearly than you ever can. I don't look back, only forwards. And there are still so many more worlds for me to explore, so much for me to taste. When my body tells me I need to go and sit down then I will, but that's not the message I'm getting at the moment.

My desire and curiosity has not dimmed with age. I never felt like a young person and I do not feel like an old person now: I am just a person. If someone else wants to define me that way then that's up to them, but in my mind and in my heart I'm still that little girl climbing mango trees, yearning to taste all that the world has to offer.

This is the latest in a series of profiles of individuals who are redefining later life that will appear in FT Weekend Magazine and at www.nextact.ft.com.

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