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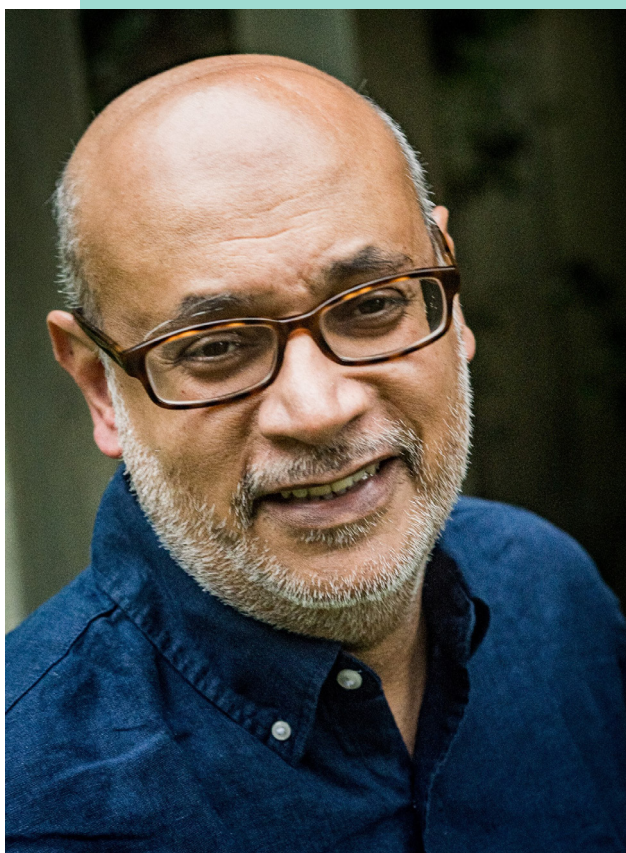
'I Am From Here'



'I Am From

New cookbook by award-winning chef and UK graduate explores his exemplary cuisine

By Tom Wilmes



Vishwesh Bhatt was born and raised in Gujarat, India. He received his bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Kentucky in 1991. He won a James Beard Award for Best Chef in the South in 2019.

Here'

Growing up in the state of Gajarat, India, Vishwesh Bhatt spent most afternoons in the kitchen of his family's home, helping his mother prepare meals. The youngest child in a large extended family, at first tasks like setting the table and filling water glasses helped keep him occupied while she worked.

As he matured, his mother taught him to chop vegetables, measure spices, cook rice, make yogurt, churn buttermilk and help with anything needed to prepare a traditional lunchtime thali — an elaborate meal composed of many small vegetarian dishes.

"Without knowing it at the time, I was learning how to cook — and really enjoying it," Bhatt writes in his new book, "I Am From Here: Stories and Recipes from a Southern Chef."

When he was 17, Bhatt moved with his family to Austin, Texas, where his father, a physicist, had accepted a teaching position at the University of Texas. While the environment, food, and culture of the American South looked and felt quite different from his native India, Bhatt took comfort in the familiar produce and spices he found on store shelves.

"It was like, 'oh wow, they have okra here, too, and they have eggplant — I started seeing a lot of commonalities," he says. "Of course, meals were prepared very differently but the ingredients were here already."

While Bhatt was making those connections and assembling the fundamentals that would one day lead him to be named the 2019 James Beard Award winner for Best Chef in the South, pursuing a culinary career never crossed his mind.

Rather, when his father transitioned to teaching at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Bhatt enrolled at the University of Kentucky with the idea of becoming a bureaucrat, as both of his grandfathers had been in India.

He arrived on campus with just the essentials, including several tins of garam masala, turmeric, mustard seeds and other spices given to him by his mother. Bhatt often cooked for himself and his friends — the dining hall offered little by way of vegetarian cuisine at the time — and frequented Alfalfa Restaurant in its original location on South Limestone Street.

Bhatt also enjoyed eating at Ramsey's Diner and High on Rose Cantina, and he and his friends were Thursday-night regulars at Joe Bologna's Italian Pizzeria and Restaurant. He might also enjoy a meal at Dudley's on special occasions, such as when someone's parents came for a visit.

Bhatt also fondly recalls the view from the top of Patterson Office Tower and hanging out by the fountain in Patterson Square. During the spring and fall meets at Keeneland, he and his friends would head to the track to enjoy the races.

"Everyone would place their \$2 bets and then whoever won would buy pitchers of beer for the guys who didn't win," he says. "I made some really good friendships," Bhatt says of his time at UK.

A few years after graduation — he earned his bachelor's degree in political science in 1990 — Bhatt enrolled in a graduate program to study public administration at the University of Mississippi, where his father was also then teaching. He didn't enjoy the coursework as much as he'd anticipated, but he did enjoy the small college town of Oxford and filling in for his mother at Harvest Café, a vegetarian restaurant where she prepared a weekly lunch thali.

"At first it was essentially just for beer money, but I soon realized that I really enjoyed it, and I had a knack for it, so I stuck with it," Bhatt says.

Bhatt took a position in the kitchen at City Grocery, owned by restaurateur John Currence and where he was a frequent patron, before continuing his training at culinary school in Miami. Restaurant jobs in Denver and Jackson, Mississippi, followed — where he also met and married his wife, Theresa — but Bhatt was always on the lookout for a way to get back to Oxford.

That opportunity came in 2002 when a chef position opened up at City Grocery. Bhatt was by then well-versed in both Southern cuisine and traditional French cooking techniques, and he helped further establish City Grocery's reputation with elevated takes on classics like fried chicken and shrimp and grits.

Bhatt's growing culinary prowess took centerstage at Snackbar, which he and Currence opened in 2009 in a strip mall not far from Oxford's town square and where Bhatt remains executive chef. It's there that Bhatt, inspired by his upbringing and by the memory of his recently deceased mother, started to incorporate Indian spices and preparations into his cuisine.

"The inability to contain that which drives your passion, and the ability to communicate that passion through food, is what marks the difference between an excellent cook

and a chef," Currence writes in the forward of his friend's book. "It was in this moment that people started to take notice of Snackbar and to become deeply interested in this Indian man in a small Southern town hawking the food that he loves."

The broader culinary community took notice, too. Other chefs sought out his food when visiting the area, and Bhatt became involved with the Southern Foodways Alliance, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, dedicated to the study of the diverse cultures of the American South.

"I learned how to cook professionally here in the South," Bhatt says, "and part of that was being a part of the Southern Foodways Alliance and meeting and learning from folks like Ben Barker, Frank Stitt, Ed Mitchell, Mashama Bailey ... the list goes on and on."

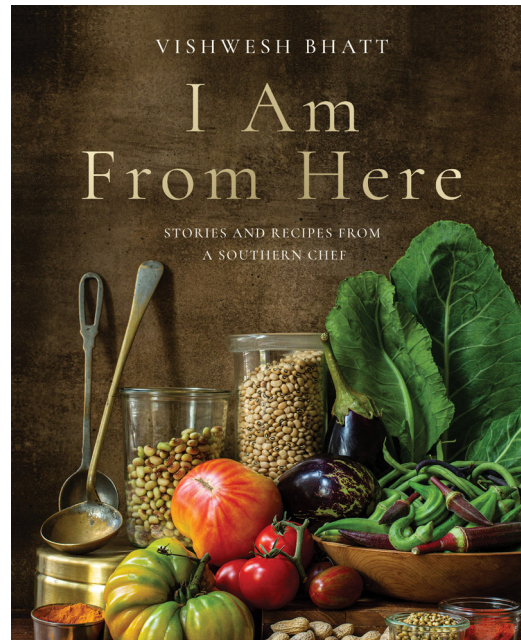
At an SFA event, Bhatt met chef and fellow UK graduate Ouita Michel. "He's one of the premier Southern chefs in America," Michel says. "And now he's had this amazing book come out and it's my new favorite."

Michel said Vish, as he's known among friends, taught her how to make his famous okra chaat at a fundraiser event several years ago. It's since become a staple on the summer menu at Holly Hill Inn, one of her several Central Kentucky restaurants. Michel says she also enjoys making his Mousaka recipe because it reminds her of her own mother. Both recipes are included in "I Am From Here," which Michel said she is cooking her way through.

"I find a lot of books contain the same information and I might not be as interested in them, but this book is a completely personal story and filled with fantastic recipes you would never find anywhere else," she says. "Some of the recipes are his mom's, some his aunt's, some his dad's and some are his recipes from his professional life as a chef. They're all delicious and also somewhat surprising."

Bhatt's ability to draw from and contextualize his myriad influences and experiences in his food has led to numerous accolades, including the 2019 James Beard Award for Best Chef: South.

"That's recognition by your peers that people are noticing what you're doing and it's important work," Bhatt says of the honor. "It's also a huge recognition for our team, who have stuck with me on this journey."



Bhatt's new cookbook, "I Am From Here: Stories and Recipes from a Southern Chef," includes family recipes as well as recipes he's developed throughout his culinary career, many with an Indian-inspired preparation of classic Southern dishes.

Bhatt is also a co-creator, along with chef Meherwan Irani, of "Brown in the South," a collaborative dinner series that celebrates the work of Southern chefs of Indian and Sri Lankan descent. Samantha Fore, a young first-generation Sri Lankan-American chef from Lexington, met Vish via Twitter and has since become involved with the group.

"Without chefs like Vish, I don't think my culinary journey would be as embraced," Fore says. "Vish is relentlessly honest yet approachable when I need guidance, but more importantly he's become a mentor and friend. He's extended opportunities to many of us through his extensive work in the South. I can't imagine what my career would look like without his influence and guidance."

Bhatt is looking forward to connecting with Fore and other Lexington friends when he returns to town in December for a book signing and culinary event hosted by Michel.

"These days I visit more as a tourist, but I'm amazed

by how much Lexington and the campus has grown. There are so many new buildings it's almost hard to recognize," he says. "But then you get out into the county a little bit and it's just so gorgeous, and of course the food scene is fantastic." ■

Vishwesh Bhatt honored with the James Beard Award

Bhatt's Okra Chaat has become a signature dish at Snackbar, his Oxford, Mississippi, restaurant. Thin strips of flash-fried okra are seasoned with chaat masala spice and mixed with jalapeños, red onion, tomatoes, peanuts, cilantro, cayenne pepper and lime juice. Chaat is a catch-all term for savory snacks in India.

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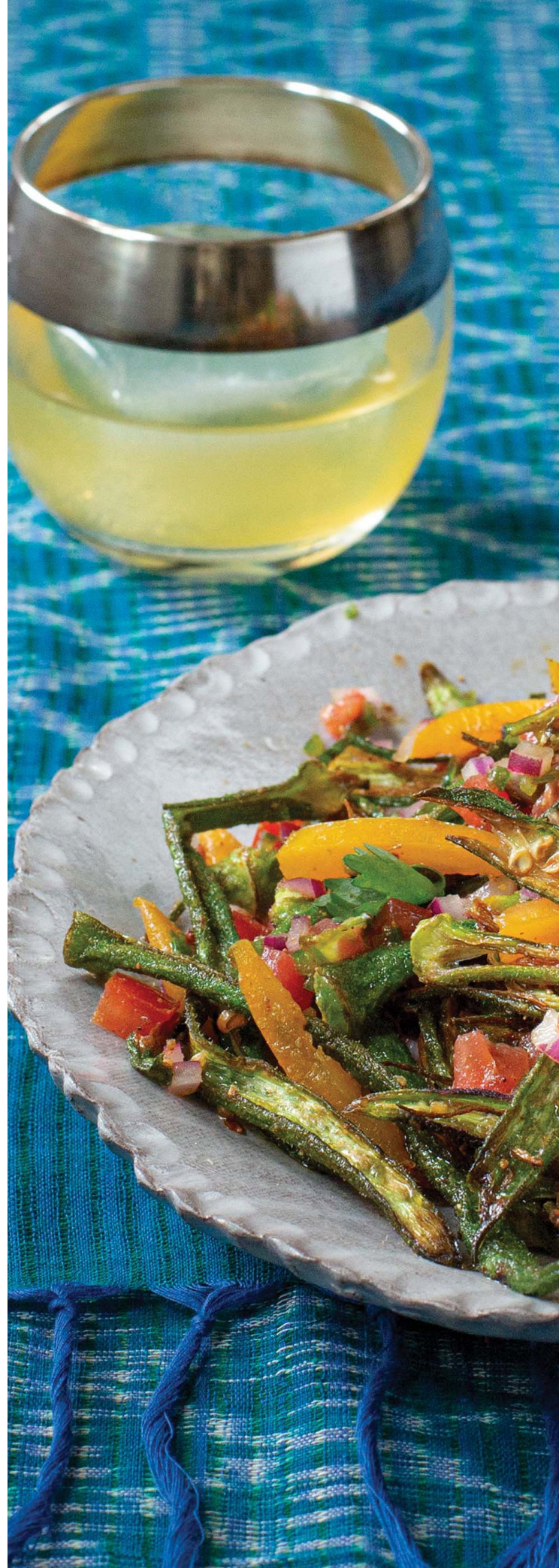


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Okra Chaat

Serves 6 to 8

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- 3 C. neutral oil, such as peanut or canola
- 2 lbs. okra pods, wiped clean and tough tops trimmed
- 1½ Tbs. chaat masala (store bought or find Bhatt's recipe in his cookbook), divided
- Salt
- 2 jalapeño chiles, stemmed and minced
- 1/2 C. diced red onion
- 1/2 C. seeded and diced tomatoes
- 1/3 C. chopped dry-roasted peanuts
- 3 Tbs. chopped fresh cilantro leaves
- 1 tsp. ground cayenne pepper
- 2 Tbs. cane syrup or sorghum syrup

Pour the oil into a Dutch oven or other large, heavy-bottomed pot and heat to 350°F over medium-high heat.

Slice the okra lengthwise into very thin strips (1/8 to 1/4 inch). When the oil is hot, carefully add one-quarter to one-third of the okra to the hot oil. Fry the okra until it is dark and very crisp, about 1 minute. (You'll notice that the water bubbles begin to subside when the okra is done.) Use a slotted spoon to transfer the okra to a paper towel-lined plate. Immediately season it lightly with a couple of pinches of the chaat masala and a pinch of salt. Repeat with the remaining okra. Once all of the okra is fried and cool enough to handle, gently toss it in a medium bowl with the jalapeños, red onion, tomatoes, peanuts, cilantro, cayenne, cane syrup, lime juice, and remaining chaat masala. Serve immediately.