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CHAPTER 4

‘MANGOES AND COCONUTS AND GRANDMOTHERS’: FOOD IN TRANSATLANTIC SOUTH ASIAN WRITING

Introduction

In Atima Srivastava’s British Asian novel *Looking for Maya* (1999), Amrit sneeringly refers to recent South Asian diasporic fiction as ‘mangoes and coconuts and grandmothers . . . The Great Immigrant novel’.1 This verdict has also been applied to recent Indian writing in English. Thus Graham Huggan argues that ‘India . . . is more available than ever for consumption; and more prevalent than ever are the gastronomic images through which the nation is to be consumed.’2 The tropes of food and eating, particularly in a familial setting, undoubtedly inform much current writing by South Asian Atlantic authors; and, on the basis of titles alone, some recent cultural productions do suggest that food has become a tired means of depicting South Asian diasporic life. This food-title fatigue can be traced to a body of work which includes such films as Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala* (1991) in the United States and Gurinder Chadha’s *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) in the UK,3 and literary texts which include Carmit Delman’s Indian Jewish American autobiography *Burnt Bread and Chutney* (2002), and Nisha Minhas’s British Asian novel *Chapatti or Chips?* (1997). These works, none of which is actually about food, belong to a much longer list.4 What we are witnessing here are, arguably, forms of ‘“food pornography”: [that is] making a living by exploiting the “exotic” aspects of one’s ethnic foodways’.5 That such material is used exploitatively – or is in itself clichéd, as Amrit implies in *Looking for Maya* – is, however, a more vexed proposition. In this chapter, I will propose that the central cultural role traditionally played by South Asian foodways – and their importance, both public and private, to the development of diasporic communities in Britain and the
US$ – make it difficult for transatlantic South Asian authors not to write about them. This is especially the case in the UK where writers seek to understand why South Asian-inspired foods – the hybrid creation chicken tikka masala, for example – have become national dishes.

How, then, should we account for the importance of food in South Asian diasporic literature? According to Arjun Appadurai, ‘South Asian civilisation has invested perhaps more than any other in imbuing food with moral and cosmological meanings.’ Beyond this claim, food offers South Asian Atlantic authors the opportunity to explore a number of major themes at the same time: gender roles; family and especially matrilineal connections; regionalism; and cooking as labour, in ways which sometimes become key to socio-economic status. Writers deploy recurrent tropes to examine South Asian diasporic foodways: mealtimes; shopping, especially for ‘authentic’ ingredients; the cultural and economic importance of restaurants; the binary of South Asian versus ‘American’ or ‘British’ food; and the notion of culinary syncretism. Writers also use food to illustrate the tension between preserving one’s ancestral heritage and the formation of new cultural and social identities. Indeed, as Rüdiger Kunow has noted, food becomes a major means of affirming one’s identity as a South Asian diasporic subject. Mark Stein argues, moreover, that the sheer immediacy of food metaphors means that the reader can engage more actively with the text, since they ‘put . . . readers to work . . . [because they] demand that we become involved, getting our hands sticky’.

South Asian foodways may be regarded as thematically familiar, yet traditionally they have been neglected in studies of South Asian Atlantic literature, despite a widespread scholarly interest in food. By comparing a range of representative literary works from both sides of the Atlantic, and devoting particular attention to the under-researched genre of desi (or South Asian) food memoir, this chapter will posit transatlantic differences and overlaps as it attempts to shed new light on the important ways in which food is deployed across this œuvre. Exploring the problematic, loaded relationship between originality and stereotype associated with food in a South Asian diasporic context, it will ask how these works deal with – and innovate – the ostensibly familiar discourse of food as marker of ethnic identity.

Cooking as Women’s Work?

Amulya Malladi’s South Asian American novel *The Mango Season* (2003) appears at first sight to reinscribe stereotypical preoccupations through its choice of title and content: a composite of the ‘mangoes’ and ‘grandmoth-
ers’ mocked in Amrit’s earlier description in *Looking for Maya*. Yet Malladi’s narrative avoids this putatively formulaic status through a subtly shifting treatment of food which focuses on regional details, and signals the link, for Indian women, between food and maternal discourse, inherited gender roles, and the ancestral home. Indeed, *Mango Season* indicates that some women actively resist the politics of food preparation and the personal limitations such daily activities can impose. In Chapter 2, we saw that the novel’s protagonist, Priya, feels culturally displaced in India after seven years in the US. This sensation is underlined by her ignorance of how best to chop mangoes back in her parents’ Hyderabad home: kitchen missteps which are as metaphorical as they are literal. And her awareness that wrongly wielding the ‘sharp . . . heavy knife . . . used’ for mango-chopping could result in ‘missing a few fingers’ seems to symbolise the hazards for unmarried Indian women in returning home and attempting to negotiate a safe path through traditional culture. In Priya’s case, the knives are, quite literally, out.

In *The Trouble with Asian Men* (2006) – a British play by Sudha Bhuchar, Kristine Landon-Smith, and Louise Wallinger, which brings together real-life interviews conducted with British Asian men – the witty playing-out of the ‘chapatti versus naan’ debate shows that, within the diaspora, South Asian women are often still expected to do the cooking. According to the play, the debate in question concerns the preference by some busy British Asian women to heat up ready-made, shop-bought naan bread, rather than make chapattis from scratch: arguably, a reaction to the time traditionally involved in preparing home-cooked Indian food. Vicky Bhogal, a British Asian food writer, anticipates such discussions in *Cooking like Mummyji: Real British Asian Cooking*, her 2003 cookbook. Here she recalls her aunt’s complaint that ‘so many Indian girls . . . don’t know how to cook. Nowadays, girls are either . . . busy studying or they . . . have no interest. Gone are the days when they used to stay in the kitchen by their mother’s side.’ This attitude, recounted in a text whose very title draws on a matrilineal discourse, reflects a diasporic desire to maintain tradition and, as discussed in Chapter 1, it is women who are expected to perform this work of cultural preservation, especially within the home. And for many immigrant women in South Asian Atlantic literature, cooking is simply part of everyday life. Sometimes, it is even a necessary component in their psychological survival. Thus, in the less-than-welcoming 1960s Britain recalled in Meera Syal’s novel *Anita and Me* (1996), Meena’s mother cooks Punjabi food every day because it is ‘soul food . . . the food . . . far-away mothers made . . . seasoned with memory and longing . . . the nearest [Meena’s parents] . . . would get for many years, to home’; and in Jhumpa Lahiri’s
South Asian American short story ‘Mrs Sen’s’ (Interpreter of Maladies [1999]), the eponymous protagonist’s peace of mind and sense of ‘pride . . . [and] self-worth’ as a new immigrant in the United States become entirely dependent upon the daily preparation of traditional Bengali fare.\(^{18}\)

Yet the insistence that, among later generations, it should be women, rather than men, who learn to cook – clearly implied by Bhogal’s real-life anecdote and by her own direct appeals to second-generation British Asian women – seems a reactionary one. Seen in this light, Priya’s ignorance of culinary methods in Mango Season might be regarded less as local and cultural ignorance resulting from her ‘America-returned’ status, as discussed in Chapter 2, and more as a conscious questioning of – and opposition to – broader gendered traditions and, specifically, to a kind of culinary drudgery. One can read in similar fashion the recollection by the South Asian American writer Meena Alexander of her mother’s overriding concern that, as a future wife, Alexander should ‘learn how to make good sambars’:\(^{19}\) a statement which clearly troubled Alexander as a young girl. It is worth noting, too, that promotion of Chadha’s British Asian film Bend It Like Beckham (2002) included the strapline, ‘who wants to cook aloo gobi when you can bend a ball like Beckham?’ This suggests that, for the film’s protagonist – a twenty-first-century British Sikh girl – the decision to play football, and thus to assert a more mainstream, gender-neutral identity, must come at the expense of learning to cook traditional Indian food, a dialectic Winnie Chan has intelligently explored.\(^{20}\) It is surely no coincidence either that, generally speaking, the mother–daughter relationships in which food becomes a casus belli are already fraught.

But the connection between food, mothers, daughters, and domesticity is also presented as life-affirming. In Lahiri’s novel The Namesake (2003), for instance, Sonia Ganguli’s desire to learn from her mother, Ashima, how to cook ‘the food [she] . . . had complained of eating as a child’\(^{21}\) marks a touching moment in their growing intimacy. In a non-fictional context, British Asian writers and film-makers have, moreover, celebrated their mothers’ cooking. With the exception of Bhogal and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, it is telling, perhaps, that they are usually men. In other words, they have enjoyed such food without experiencing the pressure of learning to make it. In such recent memoirs as Rohan Candappa’s Picklehead: From Ceylon to Suburbia – A Memoir of Food, Family and Finding Yourself (2006), Sarfraz Manzoor’s Greetings from Bury Park: Race. Religion. Rock ‘n’ Roll (2007), Sathnam Sanghera’s The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton (2008), and Hardeep Singh Kohli’s Indian Takeaway: A Very British Story (2008), the writer’s mother is presented, in matter-of-fact
fashion, as an exceptional home cook. Indeed, it becomes a point of honour to claim one’s mother as the finest cook imaginable of Indian cuisine, especially in a particular regionalised form. This also belongs to the political aim of remedying an earlier ‘tendency for Asian women’s efforts to feed their families to be overlooked by their children and husbands. Their craft went emotionally unrewarded.’22 I will offer some reasons for why writers now seek to recognise such work a little later in this discussion.

In *Indian Takeaway*, Kohli pays particular tribute to the culinary creativity and ingenuity of his mother, Kuldip, and to her budgetary skills. As I noted in Chapter 2, this text achieves a kind of rhetorical emphasis from its repetitions and, since this is a food narrative, Kuldip’s cooking takes on a special significance. As Kohli puts it, ‘I am the way I am about food because: My mum is an amazing cook of Indian food.’23 Touchingly candid about failing to match her apparently formidable skills, he admits that

> I have rarely tasted Punjabi food better than that lovingly prepared by my mum. So good is my mother’s food that I have stopped cooking Indian food myself, knowing that I will never come close to her standard. My lamb curry will never have that melt-in-the-mouth consistency, the sauce will never be as well spiced and rich, my potatoes never as floury and soft. My daal will be bereft of that buttery richness, that earthy appeal that warms you from inside. My parathas will never be as flaky and delicious and comforting. (16)

It is worth noting that, like Candappa in *Picklehead*, Kohli has no sister to record – or indeed continue to cook – the type of food made by his mother and described in varying degrees of detail: for instance, a rhapsodic account of Kuldip’s mackerel curry, doubling as a makeshift recipe. It is makeshift in that no ingredient amounts or cooking times are included. This fits with the notion that Indian women are instinctive cooks,24 or as Bhogal’s mother puts it: ‘we don’t use measurements. That’s for English people’ (*Cooking like Mummyji*, 16).

Kuldip’s syncretic British Asian dish, which illustrates ‘the story of a work ethic . . . running a family on a limited budget’ and the way in which ‘Glenryck mackerel fillets in tomato sauce . . . [were] somehow elevated to another place’ (82–3), actually enjoys an earlier appearance in *Picklehead*. Noting that mackerel provided ‘a flash of iridescent colour . . . in a still drab, grey and sensationally rationed post-war London’ and that it ‘actually tasted of something’, Candappa recalls his mother’s ‘cheap . . . tinned’ version, boasting that ‘you won’t find [it] in any other recipe book’.25 It is, moreover,
completely inauthentic [in a traditional sense] . . . but, in so many other ways . . . as authentic as it gets. Because it gloriously illustrates what immigrants anywhere in the world have to do when they find themselves surrounded by unfamiliar choices and strictly limited options. You take whatever you can get and . . . make it work. And maybe, if you work hard . . . and your kids knuckle down . . . years down the line, you’ll discover that tinned fish curry has become a thing of the past. (156)

After Candappa’s tribute, there is a touch of déjà vu to Kohli’s account. To read them alongside one another also renders Candappa’s claim about the unique nature of ‘tinned fish curry’ invalid, even if individual ingredients in the two recipes differ. And Kohli’s straightforward affection for the dish diverges from Candappa’s notion that increased financial stability will allow immigrants and their descendents to discard ‘tinned fish curry’ and the ‘limited options’ it embodies. In The Settler’s Cookbook: A Memoir of Love, Migration and Food (2009), Alibhai-Brown is more dismissive still of the ‘curried tinned sardines’ her mother, another much-admired cook, produced through dire economic necessity, remembering the dish as revolting – ‘yuk’ – and refusing to include a recipe for it in her otherwise compendious collection. This may also be a matter of taste – tinned mackerel and sardines are not to everyone’s liking, after all – but for Candappa and Kohli, the memory of this particular curry is used to celebrate a mother’s culinary ingenuity.

Relevant to the idea that different gender dynamics in Kohli’s family might have produced a different result – a son less interested in cooking, perhaps – is the author’s brief questioning of his mother’s designated role as cook. Thus he recalls his father’s propensity to bring home ‘random produce’, in particular a foul-smelling Bombay duck which Kuldip was expected to turn into a meal: ‘such was the patriarchal system she’d married into, Mum tugged her metaphorical forelock and put the deep fat fryer on the stove’ (81). But this moment of implied critique is actually rather unusual. Indeed, Kohli shares the cultural values embodied by his cherished parents; and by recounting the particular appeal of specific dishes, Indian Takeaway becomes his major chance to proclaim his mother’s skills publicly and do justice to a lifetime of maternal love as expressed through cooking.

In his short film A Love Supreme (2001), Nilesh Patel goes a step further, making his filial tribute to the cooking of his mother, Indumati, the film’s sole thematic basis so that the literal focus of the camera is on her hands preparing food. The use of black-and-white photography both aesthetisicises and de-exoticises what the film synopsis terms ‘the making of a humble samosa’. As Sukhdev Sandhu puts it,
we are forced to attend more closely to a process that we would normally regard as humdrum and prosaic, an aspect of female domestic work that tends to be ignored even by historians of ethnic communities. . . [Indumati’s] hands become historical texts that tell hard, complicated stories about female labour, migration, domestic economy.30

In the film’s final dedication – ‘to my Mother, her Mother and your Mother’ – Patel assumes that it is mothers, rather than fathers, who cook: a point which draws on traditional gender patterns across cultures. Indeed, the mother who prepares the food, and what she represents, is as important as the food itself. Beyond its perceived deliciousness, that food is part of a whole milieu: one’s childhood home and the parental love and protection with which it is associated here, and the sense that as an adult, one is allowed to retreat from day-to-day worries when with one’s parents. This may explain why Kohli, for instance, uses emotional language to frame Kuldip’s cooking: ‘lovingly prepared’, ‘earthy’, ‘warms you from inside’, ‘comforting’ (16). Whether it is daughters or sons, however, who assume responsibility for recording and celebrating, learning and therefore perpetuating South Asian culinary skills in the diaspora, these varied tributes across different forms actually spell out the fear that such skills are nearing extinction. Thus, beyond a sense that one cannot match the older generation’s culinary skills,31 love for an ageing mother, now appreciated through the eyes of an adult rather than a child, becomes intricately and intimately bound up with the preparation and consumption of traditional foods.32

Women are also shown to take a specific pride in their kitchen expertise which can become an important, even primary, ‘vehicle for . . . creative expression’ and a marker of ‘status’.33 In Delman’s Burnt Bread, female relatives display ‘a kind of culinary bravado which asked boastfully: Why should I eat that thing that has been made by strangers and machines, when I could cook something so much better myself from scratch?’34 And in Mango Season, Malladi makes clear that Indian women’s home-cooked food will always be favoured over that of restaurants, while Kohli notes that, growing up, ‘we would never have gone out to eat food that Mum could have made at home’ (Indian Takeaway, 45). It is revealing, then, that in Chitra Divakaruni’s South Asian American short story ‘The blooming season for cacti’ (from the collection The Unknown Errors of Our Lives [2001]), South Asian immigrant men have come to depend upon Indian restaurants in the United States precisely because their wives are absent and because, by implication, they cannot cook. Thus the restaurant in which Mira works principally attracts
men . . . usually middle-aged, balding, a little down at the heel. H-1 visa holders whose shoulders slump under the hopes of wives and children waiting back in the home country. Who want a down-home meal that doesn’t cost too much and like to order the specials.35

Often central to the economic survival of immigrants,36 restaurants are of course a classic means of representing diasporic cultures, as demonstrated in a British context by such novels as Timothy Mo’s Sour Sweet (1982), Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses (1988), and Zadie Smith’s White Teeth (2000). Beyond this, men’s reliance on restaurant meals in the US context of Divakaruni’s story suggests the need for different kinds of nourishment. As Kunow puts it, ‘under exilic conditions . . . food is increasingly consumed as . . . material and emotional sustenance’.37 And, like Priya’s unease in the family kitchen in Mango Season, the connection between male immigrants and restaurants is another example of the ways in which transatlantic South Asian writers use food metaphors to signal gendered displacement.38

The reality that the food in such restaurants is usually cooked by men—a cross-cultural idea, since chefs the world over are more likely to be male than female—is notable by its absence here. Perhaps this reflects the greater emphasis by these South Asian Atlantic writers on food in the domestic, and thus feminised, sphere, which in turn takes us back to the importance of home as material space in these works, a point I argued in Chapter 1. In Picklehead, Candappa offers a different, second-generation perspective on eating out from that experienced by Divakaruni’s lonely, fictionalised, immigrant men. It is not until he has left home that the author ventures into ‘an Indian restaurant’ (269). Once there, he recognises ‘very little of what was on the menu . . . I’d grown up with curries that didn’t have names’ (270–1); similarly, perhaps, Bhogal is ‘really confused’ by ‘Indian’ food in restaurants which ‘bore no resemblance to anything I ate at home’ (Cooking like Mummyji, 124). The commonplace British popular cultural experience of ‘going for a curry’—where, to an uninformed ethnic outsider, ‘Indian’ food is served up39—is defamiliarised, then, by both Bhogal and Candappa. But Picklehead goes on to celebrate the joys of UK restaurant curries because, however inauthentic, they bring together friends and colleagues in a congenial experience which offers ‘far more than a pile of poppadoms, a korma and a pint of lager’ (301). He is also careful, however, to expose the unpromising, altogether more frightening, context faced by earlier waves of South Asian restaurateurs in Britain, whose eating establishments often formed a mainstream racist, alcohol-fuelled ‘front line between certain sections of Asian and white society’ (238).
Indian Food and Otherness

Dietary Laws and the Breaking of Taboos

South Asian Atlantic writers also demonstrate the power of food to contain traditions and guard against Otherness, particularly in the context of Hindu dietary rules: that is, religious laws – subject to wider interpretation, of course – dictating which foods can and cannot be eaten, with a particular emphasis on the avoidance of animal-based products, and how such food should be stored, prepared, and served. In Divakaruni’s short story ‘Mrs Dutta writes a letter’ (*Unknown Errors*), the preparation of Bengali food in America becomes a battleground between Shyamoli and her mother-in-law, Mrs Dutta. According to Appadurai’s formulation of what he terms ‘gastro-politics’, ‘disharmony’ between Indian female in-laws ‘revolves critically around food transactions’.40 In Divakaruni’s fictional scenario, the clash between old-style Bengali values and immigrant compromise is illustrated on one level through Mrs Dutta’s insistence on the right way to prepare and store food: ‘Surely Shyamoli, a girl from a good Hindu family, doesn’t expect her to put contaminated jutha things in with the rest of the food?’41 On another level, the sharp contours of the gap between generations and in-laws – a gap only intensified by migration – become apparent through the ritual of family mealtimes. The third-person narrator reveals that

at first Shyamoli had been happy enough to have someone take over the cooking. It’s wonderful to come home to a hot dinner, she’d say . . . But recently she’s taken to picking at her food, and once or twice from the kitchen Mrs Dutta has caught wisps of words, intensely whispered: cholesterol, all putting on weight, she’s spoiling you. (9)

Demonstrating how food can reflect shifting, strained in-law relationships, Divakaruni elucidates the perspectives of both Mrs Dutta and Shyamoli. Combatting her feelings of isolation in the US, the older woman uses food to maintain homeland culture, while making herself useful, even indispensable, to her son’s family by cooking for them. On the other hand, Shyamoli – affected by American-inspired medical concerns – senses, through these food-based power struggles, that she is losing influence over her husband and children. The story thus reflects Krishnendu Ray’s notion that migrant mealtimes become ‘acts on a gastronomic stage on which the American Bengali reenacts larger concerns about ethnicity, patriarchy, and modernity’.42 By contrast to Mrs Dutta’s largely
intransigent stance, the visiting Tamil grandmother in Shoba Narayan’s South Asian American memoir, *Monsoon Diary: Recipes and Reveries from South India* (2003), goes from denouncing any American food ‘she hadn’t cooked with her bare hands. This was a foreign land . . . and one never knew if errant cooks had accidentally dumped lard in the supposedly vegetarian items’ to an overland trip where, satisfied that she can compare them to particular Indian foods, she consumes a range of ‘“outside” food’ including yogurt, coffee, doughnuts, fried rice, crisps, and ice cream.43

In Anita Desai’s South Asian American novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), the Pattons’ attempts to Americanise Arun, an Indian student in the United States, through food are, however, doomed. Thus Mr Patton’s attempts to draw Arun into his family’s life through barbecues can never succeed. T. Ravichandran has observed that food becomes a prison for Arun since he never manages to liberate himself from tastes developed during his formative years, no matter how far away from India he ventures.44 Mrs Patton’s food cannot provide sustenance, moreover, in much the same way that America cannot become Arun’s home. From Arun’s closed third-person perspective, the narrator asks, somewhat plaintively: ‘how was [Arun] . . . to tell [her] . . . that these were not the foods that figured in his culture? That his digestive system did not know how to turn them into nourishment?’45 But such reactions are complicated by Arun’s own desire to be as physically strong as Rod, the Pattons’ athletic son: a notion apparently rendered impossible by diet and culture, rather than genetics. Striking a note of compassion but also, in a manner reminiscent of V. S. Naipaul, one of ethnographic detachment, Desai writes that

the idea, in one sense glamorous and flattering, of jogging beside the transcendent Rod, is too fanciful to be entertained. There is no way that a small, underdeveloped and asthmatic boy from the Gangetic plains, nourished on curried vegetables and stewed lentils, could . . . even keep up with this gladiatorial species of northern power. (191)

**CONFLICTING ATTITUDES TO VEGETARIANISM**

In this sense, to be vegetarian is explicitly associated with the negative properties of being ‘small, underdeveloped and asthmatic’. In Ginu Kamani’s short story ‘Just between Indians’ (from the anthology *Junglee Girl* [1995]), it signals a life-denying attitude, moreover, when Daya – a free-spirited, meat-eating, sexually liberated, non-religious Indian American student – dismisses the emotionally repressed, British Asian Patel family
as ‘uptight vegetarians’. By contrast, Narayan implies in *Monsoon Diary* that, synonymous with Hinduism, vegetarianism is simply the Indian national standard, while suggesting that vegetarians are more peace-loving than meat-eaters. This discourse is taken significantly further in a much earlier text, Kamala Markandaya’s novel *The Nowhere Man* (1972), where the life-long vegetarianism of Srinivas, an ageing Indian immigrant in postwar Britain, is both a passionately moral point and a polysemic metaphor.

Set against an unexciting, predominantly meat-based, 1950s and 1960s British food culture, the rejection of meat by Srinivas serves as a dominant metaphor for a traditional Hindu belief system, amplified by exile. Although he tries to exonerate British ‘butchers’ shops’ by viewing them as ‘barbaric necessities of a carnivorous people’, his revulsion towards meat consumption is signalled by a re-imagining of Christmas as ‘round-the-clock carnage . . . farmyards falling silent, one by one’, rather than a communal feast celebrating peace on earth, in the popular expression. Attitudes towards animals become powerfully symbolic later in the novel. Feeling increasingly alienated in an ever more racist Britain, Srinivas effects a devastating, anti-imperial, anti-Christian slippage between memories of animal testing for scientific purposes; the hubristic, wanton destruction of nature in India by (carnivorous) British colonialists; and his bitter recognition of a mainstream British failure to grasp the sacred Hindu tenet that animals and people are equal. Thus,

> the boundaries . . . of a narrow white ethos . . . unable to assimilate the totality of creation, or perhaps finding it inexpedient, introduced puerility in its own image. In the shape of grids which it laid upon natural patterns . . . So then there were areas for compassion, and for indifference, of conservation, and expendability, of animals to cherish and experimental animals, and (extending the same . . . imaginary line . . . ) white men and other men, the degree of concern for each being regulated by the grid. (236)

It is consistent, then, that within this bleak context, Srinivas sees himself as being goaded like an animal, while discovering that dead animals have literally been placed on his doorstep. Later he is tarred and feathered ‘like . . . a chicken’ (252) by Fred – a white tormentor who, in the Western formulation, behaves like ‘an animal’ – and the death of Srinivas, following Fred’s sadistic arson attack, suggests that, like the innocent animals consumed by Britain’s uncaring non-vegetarians, he has been sacrificed. And Markandaya’s suggestion is that this sacrifice has taken place on an altar of xenophobia and postcolonial hatred.
Significant and even shocking, therefore, in the taboo-breaking contrast they present to Narayan, Srinivas, Arun, and other observant Hindu vegetarians in this body of transatlantic writing, are Daya’s sensuous savouring of ‘red meat’ in Kamani’s ‘Just between Indians’ (172) and Gogol’s enthusiastic consumption in early life of ‘hot dogs’ and ‘cold cuts’, ‘bologna or roast beef’ in Lahiri’s *Namesake* (65): preferences which recall Geetha Kothari’s particular craving for ‘bologna, hot dogs, salami’ in her autobiographical essay ‘If you are what you eat, then what am I?’ (1999). Unlike either Narayan or Arun, the figures of Daya, Gogol, and Kothari are all US-raised. Within the context of Kothari’s essay, Anita Mannur has argued that the impulse to eat ‘American’ food signals Kothari’s childhood belief that she can ‘fuse seamlessly with her friends, and move beyond her racial identity, an external mark of difference – if she eats like them, then she becomes more like them’. This notion that the eating of ethnically other, and indeed traditionally forbidden, foods – particularly meat – will enable assimilation into mainstream America is also played out in Philip Roth’s novel *The Plot Against America* (2004). Here Sandy, a Jewish American boy from New Jersey, spends a wartime summer in an agricultural, Gentile community in Tennessee. Most crucially, perhaps, it is his non-kosher consumption of ‘bacon, ham, [and] pork chops’ on the farm which results in noticeable physical change. Thus his younger brother, Philip, observes that on his return, Sandy is ‘some ten pounds heavier than when he’d left . . . his brown hair blondish from working in the fields . . . he’d grown a couple of inches . . . altogether my impression was of my brother in disguise’.

Hindus in South Asian American literature often fail to resist the lure of beef – which can be hard to avoid in any case, given its central importance within American cuisine. But their reactions to this forbidden gastronomic act diverge sharply, an act of consumption which is, in any case, more commonplace than might be expected. Dimple in Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* (1975) initially shrinks in horror from the ‘nightmarishly pink roast beef’ at a Jewish delicatessen shortly after her arrival in New York. But later, her purchase of this outlawed meat suggests an increasing acculturation. Indeed, it is only a short step from buying ‘pinkish red hamburgers . . . dripping blood’ to the spiritual contamination of getting ‘the pinkish meat . . . under her nails’ (175–6) to her physical consumption of it (although she consciously vomits away the abomination) to the sexual treachery of her brief affair with the beef-eating, Jewish American Milt Glasser, with whom, significantly, she bought the beef. In a further, unset-
ting set of slippages between animal and human flesh, a white American woman, Leni Anspach – as seen through Dimple’s estranged gaze – has ‘horribly pink’ gums (152), and a ‘squishy’ mouth ‘like . . . baby calf liver under plastic wrap’ (147). When Dimple eventually murders her husband, she turns butcher herself, stabbing him so that the milk in his breakfast bowl becomes ‘a pretty pink’ (213).

In Sameer Parekh’s South Asian American novel *Stealing the Ambassador* (2002), Vasant and Rajiv, a father and son, strenuously brush their teeth in the bathroom of McDonalds to remove all traces of the meat they have eaten before returning home to face Rajiv’s mother. And in Delman’s *Burnt Bread*, she recalls her Indian Jewish grandmother’s deep-rooted disdain for hot dogs as ‘not real food . . . tainted, dirty, unkosher, gristly . . . watered down’ (xviii–xix): a last resort which she consumes only on her deathbed, and then unwittingly. By contrast, in *Namesake*, Lahiri suggests no such censure or need for purgation on Gogol’s part; and his parents simply understand their children’s eating of beef as an unavoidable aspect of a US upbringing. Like differing responses to the new nation itself, the consumption of meat by both immigrants and their children varies in striking ways and, despite the importance of laws forbidding the intake of certain meats in such religions as Judaism and Islam, this situation within South Asian Atlantic writing is viewed largely through the eyes of Hindus, and generally those resident in the United States rather than Britain.

THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTIC INGREDIENTS

If, in general, South Asian American writers respond more dramatically than British Asian authors to the breaking of dietary taboos, the unavailability of authentic ingredients in the adoptive nation, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, links the UK and America here. Thus in Vineeta Vijayaraghavan’s South Asian American novel *Motherland* (2001), Kamala finds it hard to ‘duplicate’ Indian food in the US because the ingredients available are not ‘any substitute’; and in the British context, Kohli recalls that KRK, a particular South Asian supermarket in 1970s Glasgow, was

a lifeline of food and produce . . . the only place you could get spices and lentils, Indian style meat, fish, chicken and mangoes . . . If you couldn’t afford an airfare back to the subcontinent all you needed to do was pop down to KRK on Woodlands Road and buy a couple of mangoes and an eight-kilo bag of rice; it was the next best thing. (*Indian Takeaway*, 80)
In Lahiri’s work, where, as several critics have acknowledged, food plays a major role, the search for Indian ingredients is particularly important. Sometimes this simply takes the form of a casual reference: in the early 1970s, small-town setting of her short story ‘When Mr Pirzada came to dine’ (*Interpreter*), for example, where ‘chili peppers’ can only be ‘purchased on monthly trips to Chinatown’ and ‘mustard oil’ cannot be found at the local supermarket. In ‘Mrs Sen’s’, the search for ingredients becomes more pivotal in narrative terms. Indeed, in the words of Asha Choubey, ‘food acquires a character’ in this story, as Mrs Sen’s need to cook Bengali food, in which fresh, whole fish is a staple element, becomes (as I argued earlier) integral to her emotional and psychological wellbeing. But whereas fresh fish can be bought in Calcutta ‘in any market, at any hour, from dawn until midnight’, it is significantly harder to find in the story’s New England milieu – despite its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean – thus questioning the clichéd notion that life in America is materially more convenient for new immigrants. Mrs Sen’s increasingly desperate bid to buy fish is what forces her to attempt to drive, the disastrous results of which end her supervision of Eliot, the young white American boy in her care.

In *Namesake*, Ashima’s relief about her decision to leave the US for Calcutta is, perhaps significantly, expressed in terms of individual culinary ingredients. The narrator explains that Ashima

will not have to go to the trouble of making yogurt from half-and-half and sandesh from ricotta cheese. She will not have to make her own croquettes. They will be available to her from restaurants, brought up . . . by servants, bearing a taste that after all these years she has still not quite managed, to her entire satisfaction, to replicate. (277)

At the same time, writers also concede that authentic ingredients are now more easily attainable in both Britain and the United States, a sign of the stronger South Asian presence in both countries. Lahiri’s reference to servants, meanwhile – traditionally a part of daily life for the South Asian middle classes – is interesting, because their absence is part of the domestic self-sufficiency that America can teach immigrant characters within these works. Indeed, some characters experience a kind of downward mobility which forces them into new forms of labour, domestic and otherwise. In her novel *An American Brat* (1994), Bapsi Sidhwa describes Manek, a privileged Pakistani studying in Boston, ‘[who] had never prepared even a cup of tea in Lahore, [but] astonished [his niece] Feroza by the culinary prowess necessity had brought forth’. This challenges, furthermore,
Divakaruni’s notion that immigrant men in America depend upon restaurants. That such allusions to domestic staff do not register in the British Asian texts under consideration in this chapter is noteworthy because it suggests the different class dynamics characterising South Asian settlement in Britain: that is, a more working-class pattern of migration, as we saw in the Introduction.

Within South Asian American literature, writers also examine supermarkets, perhaps because they are such an acknowledged bastion of American culture. Prapulla, a new Indian immigrant, in G. S. Sharat Chandra’s short story ‘Sari of the Gods’ (1998) believes US supermarkets are ‘sterilised’ places where

you shopped like a robot with a pushcart . . . products lay waiting like cheese in a trap, rather than beseeching you from the stalls of the vendors and merchants in the bazaars and markets of home. The frozen vegetables, the canned fruits . . . the chicken chopped into shapes that were not its own but of the plastic, all bothered her. Besides, everything had a fixed price tag.63

By contrast to the eerily personified comestibles of this story, the availability of such whitebread food is embraced by Feroza and Manek in Sidhwa’s American Brat. Accustomed to the rarity of tinned food in 1970s Pakistan, they perceive its abundance in the US as part of the luxury and excitement the adoptive nation has to offer since, as Sau-ling Wong has argued, for new immigrants, such food ‘spells stability of supply’.64 The South Asian American writer Indira Ganesan even goes so far as to extol the US supermarket experience as ‘aisles and aisles of choice . . . freedom . . . quantity’ and recalls the joy felt by her Indian immigrant parents at 1960s American convenience food.65

Desai’s Fasting, Feasting offers perhaps the most intense examination of American supermarket culture. As its title implies, the text uses consumption as a leitmotif, defining India and America in parallel and contrast with one other in order to conflate food, home, and parents. In this largely domestic novel of two families, Desai carefully shows that parent–child relationships in both places are distant and dysfunctional, a point expressed through food and particularly through the obsession of the white American matriarch, Mrs Patton, with supermarkets. Her sensation of relaxing ‘when . . . [she] enter[s] the Foodmart . . . it is as if she has come home’ (208) recalls Don DeLillo’s classic treatment of the world of the American supermarket in his novel White Noise (1985).66 It also signals how fundamentally American she is in comparison with an Indian-born figure like Prapulla in ‘Sari of the Gods’. There is something semi-religious for
Mrs Patton in the buying – rather than the actual physical ingestion – of food, since the amount she buys is out of all proportion to what her family can actually eat. She fails, moreover, to achieve a closer relationship with Arun through their visits to the supermarket together.

THE PERCEIVED INFERIORITY OF BRITISH AND AMERICAN FOOD

Beyond the search for ingredients necessary to reproduce different South Asian dishes within the diaspora, writers signal the generally superior quality of subcontinental food in relation to American, and particularly British, fare. In Syal’s *Anita and Me*, Meena dismisses 1960s British cuisine as ‘over-boiled, under-seasoned ... slop’ (26), while the BBC comedy programme *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998; partly written by Syal) mercilessly satirises British food in its well-known ‘Going for an English’ sketch, where diners at an ‘English’ restaurant in India request ‘the blandest thing on the menu’ and then ask the waiter what he has ‘that’s not totally tasteless’.  

In Candappa’s *Picklehead*, the postwar drabness of the Britain his mother, Beulah, ‘found herself in’ (152) is epitomised by the inferiority of British fish: ‘iced carcasses ... displayed on marble-cold mortuary slabs ... all over London ... [with] no distinguishing taste or smell ... robbed of all personality’ (149). Decades on, the situation has not improved, with 1970s British school dinners remembered as uniformly awful: ‘the low-fat spam-fritter-and-chips option’ (3), a dessert course of ‘blancmange ... fluorescent pink ... [which] no one liked’ (147), and, intriguingly, a completely inauthentic stab at curry ... [which] looked like a ladle of over-stewed grey school mince. With raisins in it. If there was one thing I had learned from ... my mother ... it was that curry never had raisins in it. Curry had chicken or beef or lamb or mutton or fish or prawns in it. It was alive with the heat of chillies, or the tang of ginger, or the sweetness of coconut, the bite of mustard seeds or the sourness of tamarind. It could be light ... or fierce ... as you ate it you were surrounded by people ... telling stories and sharing jokes, and feeling ... the hot sun of a distant land warm up even the most sullen of 1970s English days. (2–3)

There can be no question here of the gulf between barely edible British fare and the rich subtlety of Beulah’s (non-vegetarian) home-cooked curries. It is spelled out for political reasons when, during one of many tributes to the bravery and toughness of his parents – and, by implication, of many other immigrants – in making a new life in Britain, he asks the reader to ‘imagine how dull food would be in this country without all the wonderful flavours
that immigrants have brought with them’ (69). According to Candappa, then, it is newcomers, and particularly South Asian ones, who have radically and singlehandedly transformed British food.

In Sidhwa’s first novel, *The Crow Eaters* (1978), members of the racially mixed Anglo-Indian community in 1920s India proudly consume ‘English food – Irish stew, roast beef, custard, mint sauce and all that. It’s tasteless but we eat it’; while potatoes are disdained as ‘mealy . . . [like] cockroaches’, and dumplings are dismissed as food that even the servants refuse to eat in colonial Lahore. On the one hand, important regional differences within the British Isles are collapsed here: clearly, ‘Irish stew’ is not ‘English’. On the other hand, the notion that mint sauce or custard, or indeed other traditional British sauces and dishes (especially a host of sweet delicacies), are without doubt stodgy and lacking in either taste or interest is actually a matter of opinion, especially for native-born British Asians. This idea is in fact repeatedly illustrated through Kohli’s fondness for hearty British fare – shepherd’s pie, toad in the hole, fish and chips – in *Indian Takeaway*. But these different perspectives are also perhaps beside the point. British food, admittedly not world renowned, is characterised by the likes of Sidhwa and Syal – as well as Alibhai-Brown – by what it is not in relation to the spicy flavours demanded by a South Asian palate. The summary dismissal of UK food as ‘bland’ and ‘tasteless’ forms a key part of the wider anti-British rhetoric we witnessed in Chapter 1: namely, that the country is perceived to be lacking in important ways, for instance in subcontinental colour or heat. As I argued there – and as Sidhwa demonstrates here – such critiques of the UK, whether focusing on weather, urban landscape, or food, are not, moreover, simply the preserve of South Asian creative artists in Britain but also of writers in the United States.

Yet when it comes to the US, South Asian American writers are also disparaging, noting the homogeneity of a nation obsessed with fast food: for example, through Priya’s references to fried chicken (‘fast food at KFC’) and ‘Starbucks’ coffee in *Mango Season* (126). Sometimes this reliance on convenience food is implicitly attacked. Thus, in ‘Mrs Sen’s’, Lahiri suggests a stark disparity between Eliot’s mother’s daily ordering-in of pizzas and Mrs Sen’s lengthy, traditional Bengali cooking procedures. Just as Lahiri uses food tropes to question American family values – the pizzas Eliot’s mother gives him are clearly a metonym for their perfunctory emotional interaction – so she also uses them to signal that white American children are spoilt, for instance when the young guests at Gogol’s birthday parties ‘claim they are allergic to milk [and] . . . refuse to eat the crusts of their bread’ (*Namesake*, 72). By contrast, when Gogol tries to leave food, his father commands him to ‘finish it . . . At your age I ate tin’ (55).
If South Asian and mainstream American food traditions are depicted as starkly different, it would nevertheless be a mistake to suggest that they are incommensurate here. Indeed, as Lahiri shows through Ashima’s use of ‘Rice Krispies’ and ‘Planters peanuts’ to prepare a favourite Indian snack (*Namesake*, 1), there is a middle path of culinary syncretism.75 Such culinary change and adaptation has, of course, always gone on in a South Asian context, whether at home or in the diaspora, and it calls into question the whole notion of ‘authenticity’, while signalling the power of food as ‘a mark of ethnicity and . . . a means of subverting fixed affiliations’.76 Returning to the United States, Thanksgiving, the quintessential American national festival, provides one of the best demonstrations of this theme within South Asian American writing. Ashima prepares a ‘spiced cranberry chutney’ to accompany the turkey (*Namesake*, 271), while Frances, Nick’s African American mother in *Mango Season*, offers her own version of Indian food, which involves ‘curry powder and turkey’ (66). Although curry powder is, by definition, a foreign interpretation of Indianness77 – and its usage here contrasts with the elaborate, subtly spiced recipes which introduce and punctuate each of the chapters in Malladi’s novel – Frances’s approximation of the real thing is a bid to make Priya, her future daughter-in-law, feel at home in America. Despite its obvious inauthenticity, it thus becomes a kind of ‘third space’78 which frees Priya from rigid definitions of ‘Indian’ and ‘American’.

In the British Asian context – despite broader prejudices against older culinary traditions in the UK, compounded perhaps by the straitened circumstances of some immigrants and their families and by an inter-generational need to protect ancestral cuisine – a similarly syncretic gastronomic process is also at work. This is formalised through a number of specifically hybrid recipes in Bhogal’s book *Cooking like Mummyji*. Initially born of necessity because her immigrant parents were forced ‘to make use of the ingredients readily available at the local supermarket’ (19), adapted dishes from childhood later inspire affection as she offers instructions on how to make such favourites as a Punjabi version of scrambled eggs, ‘eggy bread’ (a version of French toast) with garam masala and chilli, and baked beans with spring onion sabji. She also creates her own ‘fusion’ recipes: pasta with yogurt and chilli drizzle, ‘maharajah’s mash’, Indian hot dogs, and spicy fishcakes and chips. Although such staples as baked beans and fishcakes evidently offer experimental possibilities, Bhogal’s relationship to traditional British food, and by extension mainstream society, remains contradictory. Referring in matter-of-fact fashion to ‘bland [British] food’ (64) – once again, food lacking in Indian spices – she goes on to imply that her ‘non-Asian friends’ know little about cooking: they have only encoun-
tered ‘chick peas . . . in a cold salad . . . or hummus’ (68) and are content
to eat ‘reheated pizza’ (86). Meanwhile, the food served up to non-South
Asian diners at British Indian restaurants would cause ‘uproar’ were it to
be offered in areas of dense South Asian settlement (125). Yet she also men-
tions her immigrant grandfather who ‘loved . . . British food’ (153), and, in
line with her proudly British Asian stance, she has clearly been shaped as a
cook by the experience of adapting and reinterpreting British ingredients
and dishes to satisfy South Asian appetites.

Second-Generation Attitudes to Eating

If non-South Asian food is made to appear vapid, the children of immi-
grants nonetheless often favour it over Indian food, especially in a US
context. In Ameena Meer’s novel Bombay Talkie (1994), Sabah recalls the
pleasure of the mainstream foods served up at a friend’s home: ‘hot dogs
and jello and macaroni and cheese . . . I [was] . . . so envious’. And in
Burnt Bread, Delman reminisces about the joys of family holidays where
she could eat ‘potato chips . . . ice cream . . . Kentucky Fried Chicken . . .
Coca-Cola . . . food [which] was not kosher or spicy’ (66). American food
– in its populist, whitebread form – becomes associated here with freedom
from daily routines and from the responsibilities of family, culture, and
religion. In Namesake, Gogol’s youthful wish to consume popular American
food – illustrated earlier through his desire for beef-based products –
mirrors a more sustained urge to assimilate into the wider culture. This
appetite for conformity leads his parents to take the path of least resistance
by letting him

fill the cart with items that he . . . but not they, consume: individually wrapped
slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hot dogs. For Gogol’s lunches they
stand at the deli to buy cold cuts, and in the mornings Ashima makes sand-
wiches with bologna or roast beef. At his insistence, she . . . makes him an
American dinner once a week as a treat, Shake ’n Bake chicken or Hamburger
Helper prepared with ground lamb. (65)

Aamer Hussein has noted that as an adult, Gogol’s increasing detachment
from the world of his parents is figured in ‘culinary terms’ with the food
he consumes continuing to change as he moves into new social circles.
The elegant, European-style food – ‘polenta . . . risotto . . . bouillabaisse
and osso buco’ (137) – he eats with his white American girlfriend, Maxine
Ratliff, and her parents reveals both his passive absorption of their afflu-
ent New York lifestyle and the underlying differences between Maxine
and Gogol. Lahiri may not favour gastronomically based titles or obvious culinary metaphors, but she uses food in consistently suggestive ways throughout her writing: to reflect, quite matter-of-factly, the biculturalism of second-generation Indian Americans like Gogol and to depict the older generation’s ‘beleaguered, yet determined and inventive, project of keeping Bengali culinary tradition . . . alive in the United States’; to bring the material and sensory elements of a scene to life; to reveal the discomfort and tensions between people who should feel safe with each other; and to illustrate the attempt to express love, often in vain, through cooking. Indeed, she has claimed that ‘food . . . has incredible meaning beyond the obvious nutritional aspects. My parents have given up so many basic things coming here [to the US] from the life they once knew . . . food is the one thing that they’ve really held onto.’

In this affective context, it comes as little surprise, then, that when Maxine finally meets Gogol’s parents, his unease about the occasion is signalled through gastronomic cues, from his embarrassment at their tendency not to close ‘their mouths fully’ when eating to a lunch which is ‘too rich for the weather’ (148). But the reader cringes, too, as Maxine hands the Gangulis a hamper from Dean and Deluca, the celebrated New York delicatessen, containing ‘tinned pâtés . . . jars of cornichons and chutneys that Gogol knows his parents will never open and enjoy’ (146). In other words, Maxine’s love for a New York-based Euro-American cuisine does not necessarily speak to America’s post-1965 immigrants. This episode also illustrates Lahiri’s tendency to indicate place through food, so that the broader cultural cosmopolitanism of New York cuisine is pitted against the narrow Bengaliness of the food served at the Gangulis’ suburban home. In a sense, however, their alimentary refusal to lose their homeland culture is entirely of a piece with the Ratliffs’ behaviour, since both sets of parents impose their values and lifestyle on others through food. This provides perhaps the clearest indication of the lines – drawn equally uncompromisingly – between their separate worlds and foreshadows the eventual breakdown of Gogol’s relationship with Maxine. But in his initially eager embrace of the Ratliffs’ culinary world – a form of ‘successful eating’ which arguably ‘occurs at the expense of spiritual integrity’, to quote Sau-ling Wong, in a slightly different context – Gogol prefers the WASP allure it signifies to what he perceives as the clumsy inability of his parents to assimilate.

Beyond Gogol’s need to transform himself culturally, even ontologically, through consumption – that is, the idea, discussed earlier, that eating the foods of a particular cuisine will equal social and national incorporation – is the fact that, for some members of the second generation, main-
stream American or British food is what they know and love. Meena’s affection for fishfingers and chips in *Anita and Me* reflects the importance of this nursery food for British children from all ethnic backgrounds, as does Kohli’s insistence on shepherd’s pie and fish and chips in *Indian Takeaway*. The latter dish – claimed as quintessentially British but, as Panikos Panayi has argued, actually a product of immigrant entrepreneurship in the UK – also surfaces in Farrukh Dhondy’s short story ‘East End at your feet’ (1976). Kash, a British Indian teenager forced to move to Bombay following his father’s death (as considered in Chapter 2), feels a desperate homesickness for London. This is figured in food-related terms and specifically through the image of fish and chips:

> I get the stink of the drying Bombay Duck and with it I imagine the smell of cod in batter at the local chippy ... What I wouldn’t give for a real fry-up from down Kingsland Road. It’s vegetarian food in my grandad’s house. All daal and rice and bhendu and enough yogurt to drown an elephant in.

Writers also suggest that forms of gastronomic anxiety haunt the compulsion of many second-generation teenagers to belong to the cultural mainstream. For Rumi, the troubled protagonist of Nikita Lalwani’s British Asian novel *Gifted* (2007), the appetite-suppressing mastication of cumin seeds, a reduced and contorted re-interpretation of Indian food culture, becomes a masochistic obsession and a symbol of emotional, as well as physical, hunger. More often, however, this anxiety takes an olfactory form: an idea which emerges particularly in recent British Asian literature. Thus the home – often a sort of inner sanctum in which known cultural and familial rules apply – becomes a culinary space whose pungent aromas embarrassed adolescents long to reject. In Abdullah Hussein’s novel *Émigré Journeys* (2000), Parvin, a young British Pakistani girl, perceives her family home as alien to the Britain outside because it smells entirely different. She recalls that, coming home from school:

> I knew that on the other side of my door was a different smell and a separate world ... [the] smell ... from the kitchen ... got into everywhere ... hung there forever, clinging to the walls and furniture and clothes. It was the smell of onion and garlic being fried in ghee and of ... turmeric ... cumin, coriander ... root ginger and the stinging smell of chilli. Of course once I knew that I bore this smell and that it wasn’t the smell of our skin or sweat ... I said to them at school that our food was not like the half-boiled cattlefeed that they ate, colourless, tasteless and odourless like themselves. We cook our food, I said, it’s an art, we put things in it.
Parvin’s position suggests a defensive pride which relies, once again, on the dialectical opposition between South Asian food as subtle, sophisticated, and skilfully produced, and the bald dismissal of British food in now familiar terms as ‘colourless, tasteless . . . odourless’. But she also implies that the smells of South Asian food – and the ambivalent feelings of pride and shame it can stir up – have an inconvenient tendency to linger.91 Suggesting that this, too, is a transatlantic phenomenon, the journalist S. Mitra Kalita writes in *Suburban Sahibs* (2003), her non-fictional study of South Asian Americans, about ‘“IFS” . . . Indian Food Smell . . . [which I] knew existed because my classmates told me so’ and she admits to using an air freshener in a bid to expunge the smell before such classmates visited the family home.92 In Nadeem Aslam’s novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), the Pakistani matriarch, Kaukab, believes that the smell of fenugreek ‘refuses to shift’ because, unlike Pakistani houses, British dwellings consist of rooms which are ‘small and closed up’.93 She nevertheless takes protective action, keeping her family’s coats at a distance from the kitchen so that their clothes will not be considered ‘smelly’ by white British people (105).

Srivastava’s *Looking for Maya* initially resembles these other texts when its British Indian protagonist, Mira, recalls how, in her adolescence, the

smell of turmeric . . . chillis and garlic . . . clung to my coat and my hair. I used to come home from school and race upstairs to put my coat in the bedroom so it wouldn’t reek. When I had made no friends . . . I would silently accuse that smell of garlic, hold it . . . and both my parents responsible by association. (105–6)

But Mira’s attitude towards ‘IFS’ later takes a positive turn when, as an adult, she finds herself ‘looking forward to that smell . . . of home. I would cook dahl and lace it with a sizzling tarka, a concoction of seared garlic and chillies, and breathe in the aroma’ (106). Significantly, it is only in adulthood – once the horrors of peer pressure have safely passed and indeed, after her parents have gone back to India – that Mira can find this spicy smell reassuring.94

*The Rise of the Food Memoir*

In keeping, perhaps, with a wider transatlantic surge of interest in food since the 1990s – ingredients and their provenance, culinary methods, restaurant culture, cookery programmes, and celebrity chefs95 – South Asian Atlantic writers have increasingly produced food memoirs. On one level, this can be traced to the wider growth of this subgenre in
Britain and the US, as we see with the success enjoyed by such works as Anthony Bourdain’s *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* (2000) and Nigel Slater’s *Toast: The Story of a Boy’s Hunger* (2003). But it also relates to the pre-eminence of food in the South Asian diaspora as a rich, complex means of cultural expression and economic survival. With ‘Indian’ restaurants (more likely to be Bangladeshi) such a selling point for diasporic communities, particularly in Britain, writers such as Narayan, Candappa, Kohli, and Alibhai-Brown take their commercial, as much as their literary, cue from a largely captive, non-South Asian audience in love with ‘ethnic’ food and particularly ‘Indian’ cuisine. Despite the sense of a publishing bandwagon, critics have claimed the uniqueness of, for instance, Candappa’s *Picklehead* and Alibhai-Brown’s *Settler’s Cookbook*. *Picklehead* is marketed as ‘unique’ and ‘a book like no other’ while reviews of *Settler’s Cookbook* hail it as ‘path-breaking’, ‘a story seldom told’, and ‘a rare contribution’. There is, however, some truth in these assertions. The South Asian diasporic food memoir may not be new, a point perhaps lost on mainstream reviewers, but the distinctive blend of ethnic and historical specificity to be found in individual examples is original. In any case, these South Asian Atlantic texts, which also include Narayan’s *Monsoon Diary* and Kohli’s *Indian Takeaway*, show a heartfelt, unwavering respect for cooking and eating traditions. This attitude renders them quite separate from the gastronomic superficiality of works which are merely food-titled.

In this section, I will ask what purpose is served by such food memoirs, while charting their transatlantic convergences and differences.

*Monsoon Diary* is a coming-of-age narrative, which – as its title promises – charts in sometimes photographic detail Narayan’s childhood and adolescence in Madras, her university years in New England and Tennessee, and her life as a newlywed just outside New York City. Each chapter is framed by one or more recipes, which serve a dual focus: to celebrate the rich history and flavours of Tamil Hindu cooking; and to add an extra layer of knowledge and authenticity to Narayan’s linear narrative. Like the other memoirs considered here – *Picklehead* as Indian–Sri Lankan Catholic, *Indian Takeaway* as Punjabi Sikh, and *Settler’s Cookbook* as East African Indian Muslim (and, more specifically, Khoja Ismaili) – the particular ethno-religious nature of the author’s community, as reflected through food, defines *Monsoon Diary*. For Padma Lakshmi, this regional emphasis is precisely what makes the text a welcome departure from other works on Indian food, since it amounts to ‘a loving portrait of a cuisine and culture yet to be celebrated properly’. This sense that South Indian cooking is neglected reflects both India’s internal North–South divide and, beyond the subcontinent, the over-representation of certain regional
cuisines – particularly, Mughlai dishes – in Indian restaurants. Although
the situation is changing, South Indian cooking is still less well-known
abroad than a more generalised Northern Indian cuisine. Narayan may
even have written *Monsoon Diary* because she sensed this gap, particularly
within the food memoir subgenre.99

Narayan’s text is anecdotal and ethnographic, but not didactic. Indeed,
she applies an impressively light touch to her cultural explanations, which
are obviously intended for a mainstream American audience. But she can
appear defensive, too, recalling, for instance, that

> as I got older, I began to appreciate eating with my hands, which allowed me
to savour the warm food through pliant fingers rather than a cold, hard fork or
spoon. In fact, Indians believe that hands add flavour to food. When an Indian
wants to compliment a person’s culinary skills, he doesn’t simply say ‘She is a
good cook’. He says that ‘she has good scent in her hands’. (34–5)

This signals, once again, the importance of gender roles in the prepara-
tion of South Asian food, since Indian men remark upon Indian women’s
cooking abilities here. Although Narayan offers no comment at this point
on such gender dynamics, they crucially underpin *Monsoon Diary*. As a
young tomboy, she is unimpressed by her mother’s insistence that a ‘new
bride’ must be adept in the kitchen (72), although she later conforms to
these values when she is allowed to study in America only if she can suc-
cessfully cook a traditional vegetarian feast. What lies behind this fairy-
tale-like test is the old-fashioned idea that cooking is proof of feminine
worth, which is tightly bound up with moral and cultural purity. In other
words, only when Narayan rises to this culinary challenge, having imbibed
her mother’s cultural teachings after all, can she earn the right to leave
India.

In celebrating the artistry and inventiveness of South Indian cuisine,
presented as a kind of *ne plus ultra* of vegetarian cooking – a form which, by
contrast, has remained unsophisticated in Britain and America until only
relatively recently100 – *Monsoon Diary* reveals the ingenuity and practical
thinking behind the creation of different dishes as well as their internal
balance of flavours and health benefits. The sheer skill required to produce
her ancestral cuisine may also account for Narayan’s claim that her grand-
mother’s servant, Maari, made ‘rice . . . [with] a grainy yet soft texture that
I haven’t been able to duplicate with any of the modern gadgets that litter
my kitchen these days’ (46). Although ‘only’ talking about cooking rice
– on the face of it, a simple enough task – she repeats a common refrain
in ‘ethnic’ food writing here: namely, as we saw earlier, the difficulty in
reproducing the apparent perfection of childhood foods. For Narayan, such perfection becomes closely connected to place when she notes that

I have never eaten a good idli in America, although countless Indian restaurants offer them. American idlis are hard and lack a tangy sourdough taste. For good idlis, you have to go to my hometown. (72–3)

But it is precisely in living outside India that Narayan develops the need to cook traditional food and actually learns how to do so. Paradoxically, cooking only becomes a voyage of personal discovery, and ancestral culture a source of homage, after emigration.101

Maari’s ability to produce fluffier rice than can Narayan marks an important tension between authenticity and inauthenticity: that is, who can and cannot prepare traditional South Indian food. On the one hand, Narayan invites the reader (presumed to be an American-based ethnic outsider) to make these complex regional recipes in what is as much ‘how-to’ guide, invitation to join in, and democratisation of a particular tradition of home cooking as personal memoir; and she herself feels free to cook Italian, Greek, Turkish, and Mexican recipes. On the other, Narayan betrays prejudices about white people audacious enough to believe they can make South Indian food. Thus, she recalls an encounter in London with a man who prepares and sells traditional South Indian snacks:

I am wandering around a weekend open-air market . . . a tiny stall [is] selling – can it be? – pav-bhaji. I find myself wandering over, drawn by the smell of cumin, cloves, and cardamom. Behind the counter is a blue-eyed, blond Caucasian. I frown in confusion. A Caucasian making pav-bhaji? My chin rises challengingly. His name is Mike Guest, and he hands me a steaming plate. The pav is crisp on the outside and buttery soft inside. The bhaji vegetables are just right . . . Mike Guest watches with a satisfied smile as I quickly polish off the entire plate. ‘I’ve eaten better,’ I say airily to the reincarnated Indian as I pay. ‘Can I have another plate to go? For my friend, not for me.’ (93)

His ‘Caucasian’ appearance repeated for rhetorical emphasis, Mike is aptly named because he is indeed a ‘guest’: a pretender and an impersonator. As a British man, he also belongs outside Narayan’s intended US target audience and is thus a safer target for critique. Although she views her own prejudices with honesty and humour, Narayan gestures towards the crucial status of food as a marker of cultural belonging and authenticity and, in the process, reveals the flawed logic of her own apparently inclusive project. The paradoxes of this project – questioned in any case by her
Brahminic privilege in India – may also relate to her simultaneous need, like other ‘ethnic’ food writers, to guard ‘the borders of the . . . community’ and challenge ‘white assumptions . . . while creating allegiances with . . . American readers’.102 Eating in the US signals independent choice and, for Narayan, the process of learning to think for herself. But this sits alongside the enduring status of traditional food as a symbol of ‘my lineage . . . identity, and . . . place in the world’ (122), simplified even further to ‘idlis and coffee’ (74). Indeed, the preparation and consumption of ‘“pure” South Indian coffee’ (73) remains key. Thus, in a return-of-the-native moment, recalling the discussion in Chapter 2, Narayan’s prospective husband, Ram, is commended by her family for ‘accepting [traditional] coffee . . . Not like these America-returned types who won’t touch food or drink in the subcontinent. As if the food here is tainted’ (232). The appropriateness of Ram’s behaviour duly established, the marriage goes ahead and it becomes a widely test for Narayan to produce the best traditional food possible as she comes full circle in her perpetuation of familial culture and its gendered values.103

Candappa adopts a more humorous approach to the relationship between food and cultural heritage in *Picklehead*: a portmanteau family memoir and, in the sense that it commemorates a vanishing past, a mnemonic site in the style of *Settler’s Cookbook* and Delman’s *Burnt Bread*.104 As a title, ‘Picklehead’ is livelier than the staid-sounding, even cliché-ridden *Indian Takeaway* or *Monsoon Diary*, while some of the memoir’s chapter names – ‘A pinch of salt’, a series of sections offering a ‘brief history of curry in Britain’, which use the conceit of a ‘half’ (chapter ‘8½’, ‘9½’ and so on) – add to its sense of exuberance. Without taking himself too seriously either, Candappa remains explicitly ambivalent about both his British status and his category-defying ethnic identity as a ‘South London born and bred’, ‘Ceylonese-Burmese-Portuguese-Roman Catholic’, who exists well beyond the parameters of ‘the mythical “Asian community”’ (201, 2, 305).105 Correct, of course, to note the fictional nature of a monolithic ‘Asian community’, Candappa nonetheless recognises that, in a 1970s context,

I should have been Hindu, or Sikh, or Muslim. Roman Catholic didn’t really fit in with the preconceived ideas of the time . . . I was encountering . . . a dislocation between who I was expected to be and who I actually was. (216–17)

Neither humour nor a life-enhancing pride in his family’s culinary history can fully mask the poignant existentialism of his enduring sense that ‘whatever I do, wherever I go, a part of me always feels out in the snow with my face pressed up against a window’ (71). Even so, Candappa betrays a
quintessential Englishness through his popular cultural references, while the complexities of his multiply hyphenated identity galvanise him into celebrating his family’s sheer global reach: a cosmopolitan past expressed through a plethora of delicious, sometimes complicated recipes, faithfully reproduced in the memoir.

This celebration relies, however, on a process of excavation. Candappa may recognise the universal importance of food and the ways in which it shores up cultural authenticity and belonging, yet *Picklehead* begins by confessing how far he has moved away from the culture of his early life. That admission of loss is made somewhat guiltily and although he claims to be unsure ‘what exactly it was that I had lost’ (10), he makes clear that it is food-related. Indeed, his moment of realisation comes when, relying on recipe books to cook ‘a proper chicken curry’ for his children, he ends up in the ‘intangibly unsettling’ situation of buying a jar of supermarket ‘korma sauce’ (8, 10). More problematising than Narayan’s work of remembrance in *Monsoon Diary*, *Picklehead* represents a course of deceptively serious sleuthing, as Candappa searches, through food, for information about his ‘family history and history in a far wider sense’ (10). This leads him to question how

over the same period of time that I had drifted away from my culinary heritage, curry had gone from being ‘smelly and foreign’ to being, according to the late Robin Cook, ‘the most popular dish in Britain’ . . . And what, if any, was the link between what I had lost and what the country had gained? (11)

This broadening-out of his research lends greater relevance to a specific ancestral history, while his meticulous recording of family recipes suggests that he is educating himself as much as the reader.

Similarly, in Alibhai-Brown’s *Settler’s Cookbook* – a title which suggests active overtones of reverse colonisation (‘settler’, as opposed to ‘immigrant’ or ‘exile’) and the practicality required to survive (‘cookbook’ implying a manual) – recipes are both a formula for living and a testimonial, oral way to make sense of, and memorialise, the past. Again, this is not simply about recording personal history. Rather, it is about exploring, in a revisionist sense, the hidden history of a whole community. Thus *Settler’s Cookbook* is part of the author’s wider political mission to examine South Asian history in East Africa and, to a lesser extent in multicultural Britain, according it its due importance in both places. Alibhai-Brown seeks to do so in a positive, yet objective manner, giving space both to British brutality towards Indian indentured labourers in colonial East Africa and to Ugandan Asians’ own persistent anti-black racism. She claims that:
like many other East African Asians whose forebears left India in the nineteenth century, I search endlessly for the remains of those days. Few maps mark routes of journeys undertaken by these migrants; hardly any books capture their spirit or tell the story. (1)

Although her contention that ‘there are no films about our old lives’ is not actually true – one thinks, in particular, of Nair’s Mississippi Masala – her emphasis on the general neglect of this history, though didactic at times, is difficult to dispute.

Deploying food as her leitmotif – since it is the best way, in her words, to ‘warm up the past and make it stir again’ – Alibhai-Brown therefore uses her memoir to reclaim an epic but vanished and, in her view, deliberately erased past. She describes East African Asians as ‘a people who leave no trace’ (67); this, then, is her explicit, angry, elegiac attempt to ‘leave [a] . . . trace’ by remembering her dead parents, lost home(s), and, once again, the soon-to-be-forgotten culinary skills of an earlier generation. It is a response to her British-born children’s ambivalence and lack of interest in their ancestry: a bid through food to inculcate this family history into them. And since this is her comprehensive, in many ways definitive, attempt to capture in panoramic terms a whole lost world, Alibhai-Brown’s wealth of detail about food extends to her broader community portrait, as she pays homage to a whole cast of characters from her early life.

To a greater extent than Settler’s Cookbook, Picklehead is predicated on the conviction that the cultures of the ‘East’ – defined here as Burma, Singapore, India, and ‘Ceylon’ – are superior to those of the ‘West’ (Britain). Thus Asia’s traditions of cooking, eating, hospitality, and general conviviality are apparently finer, its weather hotter and more inviting, and its societies characterised by a higher degree of ‘elegance and dignity’ (296). The memoir is also shot through with nostalgia for the putatively safer, more innocent world of Candappa’s 1970s London childhood, best illustrated by memories of the feasts laid on at ‘glorious’, culturally hybrid, family Christmases, which combined those

my mother had grown up with in Burma and India, and the full-on British-style approach . . . a big part of who I am . . . who I aspire to be, can be found round the overladen Christmas tables of my childhood. (66–8)

Behind both beliefs is Candappa’s profound respect for his parents, which becomes hard to disentangle from the memoir’s emphasis on food. In a series of attitudes which anticipate Kohli’s Indian Takeaway (beyond the shared memory of tinned fish curry discussed above), Candappa lov-
ingly recalls his parents’ achievements, relating a story which, unlike his own, has already unfolded; and which he clearly perceives to be more exciting. As Kohli later does, he also addresses the reader directly, thus drawing him or her into the narrative and suggesting the collective, hospitable, traditional ‘Eastern’ society he so admires. But much as we saw with Kohli’s travelogue in Chapter 2, Candappa appears most comfortable in a filial role, saying remarkably little about his wife and children, who simply appear, albeit comically, as ‘Small Child A’ and ‘Small Child B’ (9). Candappa’s understated, but loving and sensitive, tribute to his deceased father is particularly moving and it reveals a striking alternative to his light-hearted tone elsewhere in the text. The filial loyalty of both Candappa and Kohli can, however, compromise their objectivity about their parents and, by extension, the problematic aspects of parental culture. *Settler’s Cookbook*, as well as such recent family memoirs as Manzoor’s *Greetings from Bury Park* and Sanghera’s *Boy with the Topknot*, are, by contrast, more critical of parents and communities, even as they venerate the older generation.

In *Indian Takeaway*, Kohli is less interested than Candappa in the historical origins of Indian dishes, but just as concerned with comedy, the particular conditions of a 1970s British childhood, and the need to bear witness to the experiences of one’s parents. Food is deployed to commemorate the distinct, yet paradoxically ordinary, twentieth-century history of British Asians, as – rather unusually for these works – Kohli moves beyond the ethno-religious specificities of his own family to reflect a broader spirit of community and solidarity within the diaspora. This is illustrated through the childhood memory of watching Bollywood films at a Glasgow cinema every Sunday in the 1970s and 1980s:

> For six days of the week, cinemas were bastions of British and American film, but on Sunday . . . Bollywood took over. And it felt like every brown person in Glasgow was there . . . There was also food involved. Hot mince and pea samosas were handed round . . . pakoras would be illicitly eaten with spicy chutney. There would be the inevitable spillage and some fruity Punjabi cursing, involving an adult blaming the nearest innocent kid for their own inability to pour cardamom tea from a thermos whilst balancing an onion bhaji on their knee. (8–9)

Through the sensory detail of ‘mince and pea samosas’, ‘pakoras’, ‘spicy chutney’, ‘cardamom tea’, and the precarious consumption of ‘an onion bhaji’, Kohli brings this now distant memory to life, while engaging his audience in imaginative terms through what Mannur has termed
‘hyperreal eating . . . the practice of simulating eating without physically ingesting food’\(^{107}\) and playing on a national familiarity with – and enthusiasm for – the Indian snacks which colourfully punctuate this episode.

It is this familiarity, and the idea that ‘as a child, the only aspect of being Indian which wider society seemed to celebrate was our food’ (44), which drives Kohli’s mission to ‘return to India what India has so successfully given Britain: food . . . I resolved to take British food to India’ (17). The self-indulgent, even doomed nature of this venture – in view of the unpromising reputation enjoyed by British food in India – is not lost on Kohli, however, since he draws attention to its limitations even before he sets off.\(^{108}\) Yet he does it anyway, preparing everything from toad in the hole in Bangalore to pork belly, mashed potato, and apple sauce in Goa to shepherd’s pie in Delhi to a version of fish and chips in Kashmir. Making repeated concessions to the Indian palate, fruitlessly searching for ingredients (its own reversal of immigrants’ earlier difficulties in securing authentic produce in Britain and America), and producing, by necessity, a series of distinctly non-British dishes, too, Kohli perseveres with his quest. Perhaps this is because its gimmicky nature provides invaluable textual material and thus the promise of successful book sales. Its comical absurdity elicits the reader’s sympathy and interest, moreover, since each cooking episode is so risky and unpredictable. And Kohli’s chutzpah is undercut by moments of self-awareness and self-deprecation, and by failures which are as revealing as his successes. After receiving a damning response from an old friend, Bharat Shetty, to his Bangalore toad in the hole, he believes he has learnt nothing about himself. Yet he has discovered the gulf between India and its diaspora when his fusion food (the ‘toad’ has to be prepared with strips of mutton and the wrong type of fat) makes no impact whatsoever on Bharat.

Cooking provides an organising principle and overarching philosophy but, much like *Monsoon Diary*, Kohli’s road and rail trip across India works as a straight paean to the glorious variety of Indian food: idlis, curries, deep-fried plantain, pakoras, sambas, bhajis, dosas, aloo boondi, rajmah chawal, chutneys. It is also a very individual journey in which food becomes the perfect vehicle for an examination of personal and cultural identity and the very question of human existence. Asked by a Goan acquaintance to justify why he is using cooking to ‘find’ himself in India, Kohli answers that it is ‘because I believe in food . . . [it] is the way to people’s hearts and souls. Understand someone’s food and you understand them’ (174). More tellingly, perhaps, he concedes at the end of the travelogue that ‘my attempt to bring with me the food of the land of my birth soon became secondary to the search for who I am and how I feel about
myself’ (284). This recalls the denouement of Picklehead, where Candappa asks whether the second generation belongs to the world your parents came from . . . Or are you really a product of the world you . . . grew up in? . . . If it is both, then what is the balance between the two worlds? I’m not sure that I’ve ended up with a definitive answer to any of these questions. But . . . I’m not sure that definitive answers actually exist. (311)

In other words, for both Candappa and Kohli – and, one might add, Alibhai-Brown – it is the exploration through food of such ontological and existential questions, and the energy and tenacity required to do it, which lie at the heart of each memoir.

Uniting these otherwise disparate food memoirs is their emphasis on specific foods and dishes, introduced by their original names, which are then glossed for a presumed non-South Asian readership. Beyond the discussions of tinned fish curry in Picklehead, Indian Takeaway, and Settler’s Cookbook, Narayan celebrates prasadam in Monsoon Diary (21), showing that it spans India’s different religious traditions, while Kohli similarly praises prasad in hyperbolic terms in the Sikh context. Both Narayan and Candappa write about rasam and compare it to ‘chicken soup’ (Monsoon Diary, 36; Picklehead, 96). Candappa claims it as ‘an age-old Ceylonese recipe’ (96), however, and their versions of the dish are distinctly different. Thus the ‘toovar dal . . . tomatoes . . . asafetida . . . rasam powder . . . ghee’ called for in Narayan’s recipe (Monsoon Diary, 37) do not appear in Candappa’s, which instead includes ‘garlic . . . peppercorns . . . onions . . . red chillies . . . [and] curry leaves’ (Picklehead, 97). The sense of drawing on a particular repertoire of dishes nevertheless brings together these South Asian Atlantic texts across religious lines (Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Muslim); ethno-linguistic differences (Tamil, Punjabi, Sinhalese, Gujarati); and very different histories of migration (to the United States from India and to Britain via northern India, Burma, Sri Lanka, and East Africa). In other words, food provides a unifying language which suggests – despite my arguments to the contrary in Chapter 2 – that a common South Asian identity, and particularly a recognisable Indianness, might exist after all, although this idea is not explored at any great length by writers themselves.

Although I am extrapolating from a small sample of a burgeoning subgenre, it is possible to note distinct transatlantic differences between these food memoirs. Thus Narayan draws on a quintessentially American literary form: namely, the serious, linear immigrant autobiography. In
this sense, despite its veneration for ancestral tradition, *Monsoon Diary* recalls such classic coming-to-America works as Jacob Riis’s *The Making of an American* (1901) or Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912). By contrast, Candappa and Kohli write from a second-generation, British-born subject position. They deploy humour, especially of a self-deprecating variety, to a far greater extent than Narayan, perhaps because – as I noted in Chapter 2 – the US self-image as a ‘nation of immigrants’ produces a more solemn response to ethnicity.

Narayan’s text is also more ethnographic than *Picklehead, Indian Takeaway, or Settler’s Cookbook*. This may be because she is working within the context of a less recognised tradition for Indian food in the United States than that of her British counterparts. Indeed, Candappa claims, in a moment of anti-American polemic, that ‘like so many of the finer cultural things in life, the Americans just didn’t get curry’ (245), while Indira Ganesan has suggested that, as opposed to the US, ‘in England, they might ask for “a curry”, at least allowing that there’s more than one kind’. The colonial dynamics of Britain’s relationship with India have certainly led to a different relationship with South Asian food, albeit in a radically re-imagined, inauthentic form. But the result of such historical differences is that although Kohli, Candappa, and Alibhai-Brown seek to open the reader’s eyes to the realities and complexities of South Asian gastronomy, Narayan’s tone remains more educative since it relies on less shared knowledge.

**Recent British Asian Cookbooks**

Just as these recent memoirs blur the line between the genres of recipe book and life-writing, so critics have long read cookbooks as a form of autobiography; and in a chapter devoted to South Asian diasporic food, one cannot ignore the importance of actual cookery manuals. But rather than revisit the already well-documented impact of earlier South Asian Atlantic food writers, particularly Madhur Jaffrey, I will now analyse two more recent recipe books-cum-memoirs: Bhogal’s *Cooking like Mummyji* and, more briefly, Simon Daley’s *Cooking with My Indian Mother-in-Law: Mastering the Art of Authentic Home Cooking* (2008).

Produced by different publishers and appearing five years apart, both books are nonetheless remarkably similar in a physical and aesthetic sense: that is, in their size, colour (both have dark pink covers), and length. And in each case, the author situates recipes in personal terms, maintains an anecdotal conversation with the reader, and stakes a claim to authenticity. That this claim is crucial is made evident by the fact that it appears, in
both cases, in the book’s subtitle: ‘real British Asian cooking’, in Bhogal’s case; and the strapline ‘mastering the art of authentic home cooking’ for Daley. Bhogal may emphasise ‘real’-ness – further established through a series of family photographs and reportage-style shots of British Sikh culture – because she has interpreted her mother’s traditional cooking from a second-generation vantage point. This suggests a tension between the book’s explicit pride in British Asian cuisine, rather than food in India, and a certain discomfort that such culinary knowledge has had to be deliberately and self-consciously acquired. Yet this point of comparison with Narayan, Candappa, and Alibhai-Brown – namely, the learning of traditional recipes only as an adult – may also account for the zeal and determination underpinning the text’s culinary purpose. For Daley, authentication is necessary because of his questionable status as an authority: like Mike Guest in *Monsoon Diary*, he is, after all, a white interloper. His uncertain position is, however, rescued and shored up by the presence of Roshan (or Rose) Hirani, his eponymous mother-in-law, as key contributor, and by an enthusiastic endorsement from a top British-based Indian chef, Vivek Singh, who hails the book as ‘a faithful record of the instinctive cooking that goes on in a typical Indian household’ (front cover, book dustjacket; emphasis added). Bhogal and Daley also stress authenticity in order to mark out their recipes from the hybridised, inauthentic, watered-down ‘Indian’ food traditionally on offer in British restaurants.

As regards *Mummyji*, this is perhaps ironic given Bhogal’s emphasis on culinary syncretism (as discussed above), but the separation between home and restaurant food is one of the book’s defining premises:

> our home food is much simpler than the food you find in Indian restaurants. We use very few spices . . . The main element missing from restaurant food is the female energy. The kitchen is . . . the best place to be in an Indian or British-Asian household. Full of women joking . . . gossiping, confiding . . . The wisdom, love and culture of these women rubs off from their hands into the food to give a special taste. (n.p.)

These ideas correspond to the notion of a woman’s hands imparting extra flavour, mentioned in *Monsoon Diary*, and above all to the earlier celebration of mothers-as-cooks in the intimate sphere of one’s childhood home rather than the public space of the male-dominated restaurant. This external culinary setting is less authentic, both because it caters mainly for non-South Asians and, implicitly, because men rather than women are doing the cooking.
In Bhogal’s explicit homage to matrilineage, then, her otherwise unnamed ‘Mummyji’ joins the roll call of South Asian mothers who cook superbly, thanks to years of practice – and little choice in the matter. But this paean contains its own irony, similar to that of Monsoon Diary and later Daley’s cookbook: if it has taken Indian women years to become expert cooks, why should it prove such a simple task to cook their legendary dishes? This also resembles the puzzle of Picklehead and Settler’s Cookbook, as well as Monsoon Diary: namely, at what point recipes are actually supposed to be made and at what point they serve a more commemorative function. It is also worth noting that in every work which lauds a mother’s cooking, her own voice is absent, mediated instead by children with the time, confidence, literary training, and desire to record her achievements; and this may result from their sense of feeling sufficiently settled in a multicultural society – Britain or the US – to explore issues of cultural history and ethnic pride.

Claiming Mummyji as a new type of cookbook, neither written by ‘non-Asians’ nor containing ‘complicated . . . dishes from restaurant kitchens in India’ (17), Bhogal argues that it ‘is not just a book for other British Asians’ (16), although they are clearly a key target audience. Rather it is an attempt to show ‘the Western world . . . the secret of real Indian home-cooking’: posited as easy to make (despite some recipes which suggest otherwise), offering a ‘perfectly balanced meal’ which can be cooked ‘fresh from scratch without any artificial ingredients . . . healthy . . . [with] much less oil . . . than restaurant food and . . . quite mild’ (16). Mummyji is, moreover, written with love, verve, and excitement. Thorough and compendious, it is also the product of a writer who is clearly an excellent cook herself. But in several important ways, it is problematic, too. Bhogal’s desire to address both British Asians and a ‘non-Asian’ audience results in an ‘autoethnographic cookbook’: that is, ‘a form which seeks both to represent the group within its own sense of its history and culture and to contradict dominant representations’. But this leads to an awkward mixture of second-person narrative familiarity for potential second-generation women reading the book and moments of ethnographic explanation – for instance, a defence of arranged marriage – as though Bhogal is simply trying to do too much in her first book. Her need to explain Sikh religious ritual also speaks to the difficulty of making her Punjabi heritage synonymous with a broader British constituency of Indian descent, even though – recalling the recurrence of such dishes as prasad and rasam across the memoirs discussed above – she does note an interethnic, interreligious relevance to many of her dishes.

Her effusive celebration of British Punjabi family life, exemplified by
her own close bond to her parents and siblings, also means that – as with Candappa and Kohli – a more measured assessment of diasporic culture is missing. Thus, unlike Sanghera’s loving, but clear-eyed, critique of British Sikhs in *Boy with the Topknot*, Bhogal records an array of customs in an unquestioning manner: corporal punishment of children; a reliance on superstition; the arduousness of agrarian life in the Punjab; arranged marriages (but without any attention to their potential difficulties); and the limitations of traditional gender dynamics. Perhaps Sanghera’s charged and haunting narrative, which also chronicles the prevalence of Punjabi domestic violence, goes too far in the other direction in ways that would sit very uncomfortably with the ethno-religious pride of British Punjabis like Bhogal, whose love of traditional culture and food, family and British society are, moreover, life-affirming. Neither do I wish to make the crude suggestion that Sanghera’s version is ‘right’ while Bhogal’s is ‘wrong’. But in comparison with *Boy with the Topknot* – and even *Indian Takeaway*, which chronicles the white racism Kohli so often faced as a boy – *Mummyji* can feel like a relentlessly positive, public relations exercise, even a hagiography of British Sikhs.

In *Cooking with my Indian Mother-in-Law*, Daley gets around Bhogal’s dismissal of Indian cookbooks written by ‘non-Asians’ by celebrating exactly the same matrilineal tradition of home cooking. In his Introduction, Daley fondly recalls his first experience of his mother-in-law’s delicious cooking, which marked a kind of parental blessing of his interracial relationship with Rose’s daughter, Salima. The book is yet another mnemonic site, containing plenty of visual evidence of Rose at work. Indeed, as did *Mummyji* and Patel’s *A Love Supreme*, Salima has photographed her mother’s hands making Indian dishes. Vivek Singh’s endorsement, quoted above, also attests to the text’s memorialising function. Much as Sandhu noted in relation to *A Love Supreme*, he sees the book as a tribute to the ‘unsung skills of the home cook’ – that is, the culinary work performed by Indian women – and, perhaps even more importantly, as a record of such knowledge now that recipes no longer ‘pass orally from one generation to the next’ (book dustjacket). That Daley has written his text – more biography and straightforward manual than *Mummyji* – in a less intimate and more objective way can be traced precisely to his status as outsider.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown the extent to which South Asian Atlantic writers rely on foodways to explore questions of identity in national and cultural
terms. Once again, some major transatlantic similarities can be discerned through the thematic emphasis by writers on gender roles, specifically the unpaid culinary labour performed by so many immigrant mothers, which is arduous, yet identity-forming and a source of artistic expression;¹¹⁶ the superiority of Indian cuisine versus ‘mainstream’ foods in both Britain and America; shopping, the search for ingredients, and the processes of adaptation which inevitably follow; and the navigation of gastronomic taboos, particularly articulated through attitudes to meat-eating.

Fiction and life-writing alike also point to an educative project, which takes several forms. It concerns the need to inform non-South Asians about the ethno-regional and historical differences embodied in subcontinental foodways, and about the important distinction between ‘authentic’ home cooking and ‘inauthentic’ restaurant food. It is also an ‘autoethnographic’ process and, for the second generation especially, an autodidactic one, too. This process arguably achieves a successful negotiation of ‘the burden of . . . ethnic food . . . [by] get[ting] over the romanticism to say something more interesting than mere affirmation’.¹¹⁷ It does so through painstaking research and a deep-seated respect for culinary expertise; through a recognition of family and gender dynamics; and among younger British Asians and South Asian Americans, through an acknowledgement of cultural ignorance about traditional food. This coming-to-terms with one’s culinary heritage also follows a particular pattern. Following a period of both conscious and unintentional detachment from the pleasures and limits of parental cooking – in a love-hate relationship which can lead to ethnic shame and a furious desire to assimilate by eating ‘mainstream’ food – a number of British Asians and South Asian Americans feel a duty to record, and learn to make, the dishes they ate in childhood. This is not confined to women, as Candappa, Kohli, Manzoor, Sanghera, and Patel demonstrate. Indeed, men may feel less ambivalence about food preparation, since sons generally experience less pressure to preserve culinary methods. Nor is the need to engage with such tradition limited to Britain or the US, as demonstrated by Lahiri’s second-generation characters and Narayan in Monsoon Diary. For the latter, however – and for Alibhai-Brown – that need emerges only after emigrating.

This process of commemoration results in a full embrace of gastronomic tradition and the food text as mnemonic site. Despite the popularity of ‘Indian’ food abroad, particularly in the UK, such traditions are perceived as endangered and the determination to perpetuate them thus becomes a passionate one. This recalls Elaine Kim’s contention that within Asian American literature, writers ‘sensitive to the foreboding certainty that the elderly and their life experiences will vanish before they can
be understood and appreciated, portray the old with a sense of urgency’.118 It also suggests that diasporic culture is, in Purnima Mankekar’s words, ‘reified in terms of loss or fears of loss – something that has to be consciously retained, produced, or disavowed’.119 But I have argued that this charged engagement can lead to problematic texts where writers are so invested in celebrating and memorialising family through food that their tone becomes defensive, uncritical, fulsome even, resulting in an absence of objectivity.

If food memoirs contain transatlantic differences – namely, a higher degree of familiarity with South Asian food in the British context and thus a more ethnographic tone in South Asian American works – so, too, do fictional works. Although they agree, almost uniformly, on the excellence of South Asian cuisine – its depth and subtlety of flavour reflecting, perhaps, the complexity of subcontinental culture itself – they suggest a greater degree of antipathy towards standard British, than standard American, food. And this attitude of disdain is shared by both British Asian and South Asian American writers. Despite a shared transatlantic embarrassment towards ‘Indian Food Smell’, then, the young American-born desi generation is shown to consume, with more gusto, such US mainstays as hot dogs, bologna, and tuna sandwiches than the equivalent situation for second-generation British Asians. Such behaviour suggests that the consumption of meat (especially beef) occupies an even more central position in US than in UK culture and that American comestibles simply taste better than British food. But this transatlantic distinction also signals the stronger emphasis, illustrated here through eating habits, on immigrant ‘integration’ in the United States and multicultural ‘separatism’ in the UK, as I argued in the Introduction to this book. When we consider the treatment of food in South Asian Atlantic literature as a whole, however, such differences can of course be interrogated. After all, a writer like Lahiri handles Indian foodways in the US with subtlety and elegance, sidestepping any need for ethnographic explanation, while Bhogal strays into sometimes unnecessary cultural explication in the British Asian setting of Mummyji, and Bhogal, Kohli, and such fictional characters as Kash in ‘East End at your feet’ show affection for classic British dishes, particularly fish and chips.

On a slightly different note, I will now conclude by returning to the earlier claim that food in South Asian diasporic writing has become a cliché and to the question of who perpetuates this idea. Certainly publishers and critics rely on food imagery, in an unthreatening and sometimes reductive way, to package and discuss these works.120 One thinks, for instance, of the reception of Monica Ali’s novel Brick Lane in 2003. Natasha Walter’s
Guardian review is entitled ‘Citrus scent of inexorable desire’, while Suzi Feay’s discussion in the Independent on Sunday bears the headline, ‘Brick Lane by Monica Ali: It’s one raita short of a spicy literary banquet’. Feay concludes with the verdict that the novel is ‘bland . . . anglicised fare, perhaps best suited to the sort of person who still orders the “English dishes” in an Indian restaurant – with a sprinkling of garam masala’,121 Using spice imagery (Feay’s ‘garam masala’ reference) to frame and contain the ‘East’ is, of course, an age-old feature of Orientalist discourse.122 But it is worth noting that South Asian commentators have also drawn on food-related rhetoric to discuss Brick Lane. Illustrating this point, Sukhdev Sandhu’s London Review of Books article is called ‘Come hungry, leave edgy’, and Bobby Ghosh’s review in Time Asia magazine bears the heading, ‘Flavour of the week’. Headlines may be controlled by editors and subeditors, but Sandhu’s essay still discusses the current appetite for Bangladeshi food in Spitalfields and Ghosh writes of Brick Lane that ‘if you’ve grown up on a diet of Bengali and British-Indian literature, Ali’s debut is . . . predictable and lacking in flavour’.123

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the framing of South Asian writing in unnuanced gastronomic terms is common practice. Thus Ursula Le Guin praises the ‘comic sense’ of a fellow writer, Manju Kapur, in her novel The Immigrant (2009), as ‘a kind of gently pervasive and delicious flavour, like that of ginger or coriander used with a light hand’.124 And Graham Huggan notes, for instance, that John Updike’s 1997 review in the New Yorker of two novels – Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things (1997) and Ardashir Vakil’s Beach Boy (1997) –

merely adds to the gastronomic clichés strewn across Western writing about India, thus completely missing the obvious irony that these clichés are reproduced for deflating purposes in several contemporary Indian works, Roy’s and Vakil’s included among them.125

But Huggan also draws attention to the complicity of artists themselves with such supposed clichés. Food-related titles – whether of reviews or of literary works – are part of a marketing machine in which writers play their part. According to Mannur, some South Asian American writers engage in ‘a form of cultural self-commodification through which . . . [they] earn a living by capitalising on the so-called exoticism embedded in . . . [their] foodways’.126 Titles are arguably a shorthand means of achieving such self-Orientalising commodification.

In a Chinese American context, Frank Chin has scathingly dismissed such food-based commodification as
part cookbook, memories of Mother in the kitchen . . . Mumbo jumbo about spices . . . The secret of Chinatown rice. The hands come down towards the food . . . [which] crawls with culture . . . Food pornography. Black magic.127

And the Scottish Pakistani novelist Suhayl Saadi, in an excoriation of the London media and publishing industries, has characterised this commodification as an ongoing and disempowering Orientalism. How many more novels about . . . exotic Indian spice-sellers can we stomach? Like vindaloos, they pour endlessly into our system and out the other end, changing nothing in the process . . . We have become bulimic with TV comedy dramas about Asian restaurants . . . and everywhere . . . the odour of curry . . . writers pander to all this because they know . . . that if they don’t, the likelihood of publication or production is commensurately less. So let’s all jump onto the korma train and dance exotic for the English über-classes!128

Such broadsides signal the very real relationship between food and ethnoracial stereotyping. But to reject the depiction of ‘ethnic’ foodways so categorically as exploitative and self-Orientalising — ‘mumbo jumbo’, ‘food pornography’, and ‘black magic’ for Chin, barely digestible ‘vindaloos’ and the ‘korma train’ for Saadi — is to overlook the genuine importance of this subject and indeed, in Saadi’s case, how key it is to South Asian traditions. It is also to ignore the idea that writers who take creative ownership of their ancestral foodways might ensure that ‘food becomes a symbol [proving] . . . the humanity of . . . [their] characters’.129 The universal centrality of food in any case makes the subject continuingly relevant to any audience.

There is, then, surely a world of difference between a critic or writer who relies on potentially essentialising gastronomic titles and/or material in lazy, commercially motivated fashion and another author’s multi-layered treatment of food culture. Thus Nisha Minhas’s novel Chapatti or Chips? and the film Chicken Tikka Masala (2005) by the British Asian director Harmage Singh Kalirai — both unsubtle and shamelessly commercial works, which fail to discuss food130 — are simply in a different category from many of the texts discussed in this chapter. Or, as Sudheer Apte puts it in a review of Lahiri’s Namesake, this is not ‘another novel employing exotic Indian-American backdrops (breaded chicken cutlets, chickpeas with tamarind sauce) to peddle ordinary storylines’.131 If the use of food in South Asian Atlantic literature runs the risk of stereotype, then — like other stereotypes — this arises from its status as a kind of ‘survival blueprint’, in
Timothy Mo’s phrase.132 After all, food has traditionally denoted cultural, economic, psychological, and physical survival in the new nation for South Asian immigrants. Yet to read food simply in terms of survival strategies is to overlook the complexity of its treatment – and the capacity for personal transformation it connotes – in these works. The sheer abundance of food metaphors within both transatlantic South Asian writing and reviews of that writing has resulted in a complex relationship between originality and cliché. Following such critics as Mannur and Jennifer Ann Ho, I would argue, however, that writers generally tread that line carefully and skilfully. By mapping out the multiple and wide-ranging ways in which writers knowingly deploy culinary and gastronomic tropes, this chapter has sought to show that food belongs to an equally developed thematic tradition on both sides of the South Asian Atlantic. This is because, despite historical differences between Britain and the US, it remains a personal, cultural, and creative resource too deep-rooted for artists to ignore.

NOTES

4. This list includes everything from the BBC sitcom *Tandoori Nights* (1985–7) to South Asian North American films such as Srinivas Krishna’s *Masala* (1992), Nisha Ganatra’s *Chutney Popcorn* (1999), and Anurag Mehta’s *American Chai* (2002); and much South Asian fiction in English: for example, Carl Muller’s *The Jam Fruit Tree* (1993); Kavery Nambisan’s *Mango-Coloured Fish* (1998); Kamila Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron* (2000); and David Davidar’s *The House of Blue Mangoes* (2002).
7. This claim was famously made by the late British politician Robin Cook in a 2001 speech on British national identity; see n.a., ‘Robin Cook’. In line with this idea, the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) now includes curry in its operational ration packs; according to Neil Hind, a spokesperson for Defence Food Services, suppliers to the MoD: ‘in many ways it is about . . . a feeling of familiarity . . . many of the guys – as we [British people] all do on a Friday night – go out and have a curry . . . It’s very important that we feed them the food that they would normally eat at home. Most soldiers
... are curry mad'; quoted in Oliphant and Willox, ‘Ruby Murray’. For academic accounts of Britain’s long-standing relationship with Indian food, see Chaudhuri, ‘Shawls’, pp. 231–2, 238–42; Zlotnick, ‘Domesticating’, pp. 52–3, 58–65; and Panayi, Spicing, pp. 27–8. As Hardeep Singh Kohli has noted, historically, the white British embrace of curry has not necessarily signalled a corresponding mainstream acceptance of South Asian immigrants; see Kohli, Indian Takeaway, p. 44.

10. Stein, ‘Curry at work’, p. 146.
11. Thus Mannur, Culinary Fictions, is the first full-length study of food in this context. While valuable, it focuses for the most part on South Asian America, rather than offering proper transatlantic comparisons, and Mannur mainly focuses on different literary texts from those I consider here. Pre-dating this monograph are Chaudhuri, ‘Shawls’; Zlotnick, ‘Domesticating’; Narayan, Dislocating, pp. 161–88; Kunow, ‘Eating Indian(s)’; Stein, ‘Curry at work’; Roy, ‘Reading communities’; and Panayi, ‘Immigration’, pp. 10, 16–17; as well as articles on individual writers or film-makers, which I have cited here where relevant. On food in East Asian American writing, see Wong, Reading, pp. 18–76; Ho, Consumption; and Xu, Eating Identities.

12. Malladi, Mango Season, p. 47.
14. Some writers suggest, however, that this situation has changed through the enthusiastic adoption of labour-saving devices; see, for instance, Alibhai-Brown, Settler’s Cookbook, pp. 387–8.
15. Bhogal, Cooking like Mummyji, p. 12; and for a South Asian American version of the same idea, see Mankekar, ‘India shopping’, p. 204.
17. Syal, Anita and Me, p. 61.
20. Chan, ‘Curry on the divide’, pp. 13–17; and compare, too, Syal, Anita and Me, pp. 61–2, where, as a young girl, Meena refuses to learn to cook Indian food.
23. Kohli, Indian Takeaway, p. 78.
26. For further erroneous claims of exceptionalism, see Shoba Narayan’s contention that readers ‘wouldn’t find’ the recipes in her memoir Monsoon Diary (discussed below) ‘in other cookbooks’; quoted in Feldman, ‘Indian author’.


31. See also Rayner, ‘Cooking’; and compare Lee, ‘Coming home’, p. 168.


38. Compare Ray, *Migrant’s Table*, p. 73.

39. See Panayi, ‘Immigration’, pp. 10–11, where he notes that in Britain’s ‘Indian restaurants . . . [which] increased from the handful which existed . . . after the . . . Second World War to 8000 by the 1990s . . . the standardisation of the complexity of dishes eaten [in India has resulted in] . . . curries . . . as British as . . . fish and chips’.


47. Markandaya, *Nowhere Man*, pp. 71 and 69 respectively.


50. Roth, *Plot Against America*, pp. 100 and 91 respectively.


54. For some historical context on the rise of ‘Indian grocery stores’ in Britain, see Panayi, *Spicing*, pp. 142–4; and for an anthropological study of ‘India shopping’ in the US, see Mankekar, ‘India shopping’, pp. 197–214.


56. Lahiri, *Interpreter*, pp. 30 and 24 respectively.


58. See Ray, ‘Meals’, pp. 107–8, where he contends that the importance Bengalis attach to fish actually increases when they are in America.


60. Compare Kunow, ‘Eating Indian(s)’, p. 168.


64. Wong, *Reading*, p. 52.


68. See also Panayi, ‘Immigration’, p. 17, where he claims that ‘entrepreneurs from ethnic minority backgrounds established some of the most important symbols of British consumption’.


72. Compare Bess, ‘Lahiri’s *Interpreter*’, p. 126, where she observes that Mrs Sen offers Eliot easily prepared American food – peanut butter and crackers – only in a mood of despair at her American life.

73. Within this gendered culinary arena, Lahiri’s dichotomy between Mrs Sen as warm Indian caregiver and Eliot’s mother as ‘cold . . . self-centred’ representative of “Western” womanhood’ is, for one critic, rather simplistic; see Kunow, ‘Eating Indian(s)’, p. 167.


75. For more on Indian American culinary syncretism, see Ray, ‘Meals’, p. 106; Ray, *Migrant’s Table*, pp. 75–6; and Mannur, *Culinary Fictions*, pp. 196–216.


79. See Ray, *Migrant’s Table*, p. 76.


84. Maxey, ‘Jhumpa Lahiri’.

85. Mudge, ‘Lahiri’.


get goosebumps just thinking about going home – the first thing I am going to do is have fish and chips and a proper English cup of tea.


90. Hussein, Émigré, p. 96.

91. In her short story ‘Hindus’, Bharati Mukherjee critiques Indian ghettoisation in New York through the unappealing image of a party where ‘the smell of stale turmeric hung like yellow fog from the ceiling’; see Mukherjee, Darkness, p. 133; while in ‘Nostalgia’ (also anthologised in Darkness), the need to eat Indian food is made to suggest the destructive emptiness of clinging to an idealised past once in the US.

92. Kalita, Suburban, p. 2; and in the British context, compare Rayner, ‘Cooking’.


94. See also Mankekar, ‘India shopping’, p. 208.


99. Narayan has pointed to the dominance of ‘North Indian restaurants’ in the US; she has also noted that ‘the average [New York magazine] editor . . . is not familiar with the nuances within Indian cooking . . . they do not know about Bengali or Assamese cooking’; quoted in Chhabra, ‘Shoba beats Jhumpa’.


101. Compare Roy, ‘Reading communities’, pp. 481–2; and Mannur, Culinary Fictions, p. 27.

102. Avakian and Haber, ‘Feminist food studies’, p. 20.


104. See also Döring, ‘Subversion’, pp. 260–1.

105. The author’s local origins and use of the phrase ‘born and bred’ recall Karim in Kureishi, Buddha, p. 3, who describes himself as a South London-raised ‘Englishman born and bred, almost’.

106. Alibhai-Brown, ‘Food and memory’.

107. Mannur, Culinary Fictions, p. 82.

108. Kohli is also not the first British Asian to attempt such a mission; see Pandey, ‘“Bland” British food’, which reports on a TV programme, designed to introduce British cuisine to Indians, hosted by Manju Malhi, a British Indian
chef. According to Malhi’s website, the ‘forty part series . . . “Cooking Isn’t Rocket Science” for one of India’s leading broadcasters NDTV . . . led to a demand from publishers to come up with a British cookbook for India . . . [while] Manju has been asked to create the concept of a “British” restaurant in Delhi; see n.a., Manju Malhi.com; and n.a., web link for ‘Cooking isn’t rocket science’.

109. Jacobson, ‘No taste’, p. 155, notes that ‘for Jews, speaking food is as important in reconnecting us to our past as eating it’. Replacing the Yiddish terms – for instance, gefilte fish, kes – cited by Jacobson with prasad or rasam suggests a comparable emphasis on ‘speaking food’ in South Asian Atlantic food writing.


113. For discussions of Jaffrey’s œuvre, see Roy, ‘Reading communities’, pp. 476–96; Colquhoun, Taste, pp. 363–4; and Mannur, Culinary Fictions, pp. 30–5. There is also insufficient space here to cover recent South Asian American cookery writing; for a consideration of this genre, see Mannur, Culinary Fictions, pp. 163–71, 196–207.


115. Some commentators might even question the impulse to address fellow British Asians at all. Thus Sarfraz Manzoor contends, somewhat provocatively, that ‘nobody who’s actually Asian would buy one [an Indian cookbook] unless they are completely estranged from their culture’; quoted in Rayner, ‘Cooking’. Anticipating such forms of criticism, perhaps, Bhogal suggests that young British Asian woman can be perfectly comfortable with their cultural heritage, yet unaware of how to cook traditional dishes.


120. See Mannur, Culinary Fictions, pp. 14, 110, on the paratextual use of food to sell Asian American fiction. A dependence on food metaphors also surfaces in discussions of both multiculturalism and miscegenation; on the former, see Wagner, ‘Boutique multiculturalism’, pp. 32–5; on the latter idea, which I broached in Chapter 3, see the reference to ‘chocolate milk’ in Delman, Burnt Bread, pp. 60–1; Singh, ‘Writing tough’, p. 87, where he draws on the Malay term ‘rojak’ – a mixed sweet-and-sour salad and recognised image in Singapore for those of mixed race – to refer to his own Sikh–white Scottish background; and for British examples, the ‘multiracial lolly’ used to refer to Ben and Priya’s white British–Indian marriage in Vakil, One Day, p. 21; and Hanif Kureishi’s screenplay My Son the Fanatic (1997), where Farid breaks off
his interracial engagement on the grounds that ‘keema’ cannot be ‘put . . . with strawberries’ in Kureishi, *Collected Screenplays*, p. 313.

121. Feay, ‘*Brick Lane*’; and see also Maxey, ‘Representative’.


123. Ghosh, ‘Flavour’.


125. Huggan, *Post-Colonial Exotic*, p. 60; emphasis in original.


130. On Minhas, compare Mannur, *Culinary Fictions*, p. 154. The apparently formulaic title of Kalirai’s film may, however, hint at the cultural syncretism it depicts since chicken tikka masala is a famously British Asian food.

131. Apte, ‘*Namesake*’.