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'I want to be true to what I do'

Celebrity Chef Vikas Khanna speaks of what drives him

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There's a lot happening within the bright yellow walls of Vasantha Bhavan in Vadapalani, Chennai. The regulars glance curiously towards a table occupied by a charming man in black and an elegant lady in a blue sari – Chef Vikas Khanna is eating idlis with Indra Nooyi, Chairperson and CEO of PepsiCo.

It's a breakfast meeting with a difference. Vikas has just prepared Nooyi a meal that takes her back to her childhood. There are golden-brown paniyarams, fiery orange bullet idlis, gleaming pesarattu, fluffy pink beetroot appams and finally a creamy paysam – all made with a "healthy" twist. "I've added oats. If I can incorporate calcium and fibre into these dishes, why not?" says Khanna, recently appointed as nutrition ambassador for PepsiCo India.

The pesarattu was the most challenging, according to the chef. But, after nearly a year of experimenting, Vikas has finally got it right. "I put jowar flour, pearl millet, bajra, rice, dal and oats into it, and there is no difference in taste," he says.

As Nooyi leaves, and he sits down for a chat. Like in any Punjabi household, the Amritsar-born celebrity chef, 45, grew up on a staple of parathas. Now, a resident of New York City, his breakfast every day is a bowl of oats with whole milk, plain egg white and a glass of juice, or a fruit.

Vikas has been cooking for 26 years now. He has memor-



BRINGING HOME THE FLAVOURS Vikas Khanna with Indra Nooyi PHOTO: K. PICHUMANI

ies of creating dishes with his grandmother in their family kitchen in Amritsar. "If you ask my mother, she will tell you she has no recollection of my doing anything outside the kitchen," he adds.

After studying hotel management in Manipal, Vikas moved to New York City to study, and he eventually started Junoon in 2009. A Michelin-starred restaurant, diners don't mind the long waiting period even after all

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these years.

He's cooked at the White House, for the Pope, put together a meal at the Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata, authored cook books, launched his documentary at Cannes...what's next? "I want to pay attention to the nutrition of India and work in that direction," he adds.

Apart from that, what's keeping Vikas busy is his Kitchen Art Museum. "It's a four million-dollar project coming up in Manipal. The space will showcase vessels and equipment through the ages. Our grandmothers used to cook in large pots and in large quantities. Over the years, with our generation opting for banquets, such vessels are losing their popularity. I've tried collecting as many of those old utensils as I could," he adds. Be it Dutch, French, Mughal, Arab or tribal – Vi-

kas claims to have sourced utensils representing all of them. It's an attempt to preserve culinary heritage. You can tell about an entire culture by looking at the utensils, he believes. "You should see it – there are 70 types of plates. I have an entire wall covered with just strainers from the North East, West Bengal, Kashmir and other parts of India," he says.

Vikas says that it was on a trip to South India in 1991 that he fell deeply in love with food. "People are ritualistic about cooking. I like how they roast and grind their coffee, make the dosa batter from scratch... they don't resort to shortcuts."

No shortcuts is what keeps him ticking too. "I have sacrificed too much to get here and I want to be true to whatever I do," he signs off.