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## There's no taste like home

Shivani Dhamija's Taste Like Home teaches Haligonians that Indian cuisine is "more than butter chicken and naan."

By Nick Laugher



Shivani Dhamija is "always ready to share the secrets of garam masala with you."  
MEGHAN TANSEY WHITTON

For those who worship at the altar of a curiously delicious curry, finding authentic Indian food in Halifax can be pretty tough. However, thanks to a creative entrepreneur, finding the perfect palak paneer may soon be a naan-issue.

Growing up in West Bengal, India, Shivani Dhamija moved to Halifax a little over three years ago. She now runs a home-based business, Taste Like Home, that's begun to teach people the secrets and spices of authentic Indian cuisine. She was inspired to start the business after her first experience with Indian food in Halifax, shortly after she moved here.

"I'll be very honest," she says. "It was my second day in Halifax, and I wanted to try some Indian food. The place where my husband took me, I was like, 'I should have tried McDonald's instead of coming over here.' I won't say the name



The business first started as a small home-delivery operation, Homemade Tiffin Service, where people could order delicious, authentic Indian food, meticulously prepared by Dhamija. "Indian cuisine is more than butter chicken and naan. If you want to know about authentic Indian cuisine, try: chapatis, aloo ka paratha"—stuffed potato bread—"and, most importantly, our street food," she says.

"After five months of that service, people started asking me to teach them the how to make Indian food, and that's what I do now," she says, explaining her transition from small-time, at-home cook to sagely teacher. "I always tell people, 'I am not a big chef, I am a young mother who makes Indian food and I am always ready to share the secrets of garam masala with you.'"

Though she's now renowned for her brilliant biryani and delicious curries, Dhamija didn't really take to cooking while growing up. Inspiration and skill were born out of necessity when she left home at 17.

"My necessity to learn cooking came when I stepped outside my house for the first time," she says. "I could not eat out every day—it's expensive, plus not good for your health. I still remember it took me six months to learn the exact dough to make chapatis, my neighbour taught me. I started learning from neighbours and then my landlady. I used to call my mom long-distance, to understand each and every step of making the simple things. Now my mom is surprised that I know even more dishes than she does!"

So now at 29, with 12 years of experience under her belt, she's putting those hard-earned skills to use, enlightening others about the secrets of spices and samosas. She holds classes every Saturday at 3pm, demonstrating how to prepare a different delicious and fully authentic Indian dish each week—always with a vegetarian option.

There's "a little Bollywood music at the background, and easy recipes in front of you—you see it, and if you want to try it by yourself, right there, you are more than welcome. You take notes, and then at the end we taste what we made," she says. "The best part is you'll take the recipes with you when you are going home."

For those not skilled in the ways of a skillet, have no fear, Dhamija teaches everyone from hardcore food lovers to beginners. She says that, above all, it's about daring to try something different, wanting explore something new. "I can make two different dishes every day for three weeks without repeating myself," she says. "So there is a great variety in Indian food, all you need to do is collect some courage and try something different!"

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**To book a class with Shivani Dhamija or order homemade tiffin get in touch via**

*tastelikehome.com or  
902-482-7714*

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