

The Flavor Profile of

A portrait of a man with dark, wavy hair and a beard, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a grey crew-neck sweater. The background is a plain, light blue-grey wall.

Mayukh
Sen

Words by Jeevika Verma
Photos by Amir Hamja

You weren't a customer at her restaurant; you were a guest in her home. This line from writer Mayukh Sen's James Beard-winning profile on soul food icon Princess Pamela is a window not just into the writer's subject but the writer himself. Sen is a thorough conversationalist, eager to share. And with the world of food media as his home, what he shares welcomes you into an intimate space filled with memory and resilience.

There is a reason Sen was drawn to Princess Pamela's story. As a queer, South Asian writer, Sen is used to feeling like an outsider in the media world. Pamela, too, lived on the margins of the food industry for a long time. With little money, she eventually ended up a New York restaurant pioneer. But more than that, it was her fate, and her eventual disappearance, that Sen so beautifully explores in his piece. He doesn't want her to be forgotten.

Notably, Sen wrote his Princess Pamela piece in 2017, around the time of his father's death. He died just before the story was meant to publish.

"To win a James Beard award right after that major trauma in my life just felt like major whiplash," he said. "I have experienced so much loss, especially within this time frame that I've been a professional food writer...loss has reminded me the essence of a person can so easily slip away from you once they're gone."

His need to protect these memories was exactly what drew the New York based writer to food media four years ago. That, and well, he was an ambitious 24 year old freelancer who needed a job. So when *Food52* offered Sen a staff writer position in 2016 he jumped on the opportunity.

"In spite of writing about food professionally, I'm not really a cooking enthusiast," he said. At the time, he said that worked well for *Food52* because they were looking to bring in a fresh perspective. Still, Sen was good at his job.

Sen's book on women who shaped food culture in America, titled *Taste Makers: Seven Immigrant Women Who Revolutionized Food in America*, will be out soon, and it builds on the thread of lost or misremembered characters in the food world. In the book, Sen chose to profile seven women, ranging from a few familiar names like Italian cookbook author Marchella Hazan to more contemporary ones like Julie Sahni, founder of Julie Sahni's Indian Cooking School in New York.

"I see this book as a critique of capitalism and the way in which it forces creatives to stuff themselves into boxes for easy mass consumption," he said. "And a big reason I wanted to write it is because I myself have felt boxed-in and commodified as a queer POC voice in the media."

Sen said people often look at superficial aspects of his identity and expect a certain kind of product from him—the kind that precludes actual engagement with his work. After he won the James Beard Award in 2018, he explained, he started getting a lot of attention from big names in food media. But some of them would attack him on public forums without cause.

In one instance from June 2019, Stacy Adimando, the then editor-in-chief of *Saveur* magazine, belittled Sen on Twitter for posting pictures of Sophia Loren.

"Yeah because what's a skilled female cook without her looks? From the guy who's always ready to point out to every other writer

politically incorrect and biased they are,” she wrote.

Just about two weeks prior, Sen had published a Medium piece on what Loren’s cookbooks revealed about her as a celebrity. He noted, in fact, how Loren’s beauty “could also function as a curse, permission for critics to underestimate or dismiss her.”

So, Adimando’s tweet was more a personal attack rooted in misrepresentation than a critique of Sen’s work, which it is fair to assume she hadn’t close-read. Adimando later deleted her tweet and left *Saveur*, just six months into her tenure as editor-in-chief. But the interaction set off a larger social media discussion around who was allowed to be successful in the food media world.

“I found myself in a position where I was constantly having to prove myself,” Sen said of that period in his life. “I put a lot of pressure on myself to play the whole game.”

The industry started to feel like a popularity contest. Sen was nominated for more awards. He wrote for legacy media. He landed a prestigious job teaching journalism at NYU. Still, he felt his work was not being taken seriously, perhaps due to resentment around his success at the age of 26.

“The whole thing just made me feel like an outsider again,” he said.

Since the award, Sen has pushed himself to realize his work speaks for itself. Trying to be on everyone’s radar is exhausting, so he tries to turn the pressure into creating work he is proud of. Two of his pieces following the Beard award—one about the late Raji Jallepalli, and

the other about the late Ismail Merchant—deal with Indian food. Sen wrote about them wanting to push against the dominant narrative around the cuisine.

“A lot of mainstream representations of Indian food within American food media tend to be lacking in terms of kind of caste awareness or regional diversity,” he told me. “And that’s always been frustrating to me.”

In his piece on Raji, Sen lays out how the Memphis-based chef interlaced Indian cooking with French food, laying out a path for more con-

temporary cooks to do the same today—particularly in the South. He writes: “Raji dealt with a far more inhospitable climate than these chefs do today. One to two generations younger than Raji, the current faction of Indian-born chefs in the South still deals with diners who expect buffets with butter chicken. But unlike [those chefs], who blend elements from Indian and Southern cuisines, Raji’s food was resolutely Fran-

co-Indian.” By delving deep into the nuances of Indian cooking and how it naturally brings in layers of influence from other parts of the world, Sen tells a story not just of a forgotten immigrant cook, but of her ingenuity beyond the American lens.

Similarly, when writing about the late film producer Ismail Merchant, he notes: “Cooking became a form of currency for Merchant, capital he used to ingratiate potential investors who could help finance his career in films. He knew it was odd for a would-be producer to feed investors himself rather than take them out to

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restaurants. But his food was a great equalizer.”

In exploring this intersection of food and film, Sen paints an enchanting picture of the closeted artist and how he used the kitchen as a haven, shielding his public life from the fantasy he left expertly contained to his cookbooks.

It is this ability to present readers with full-

Part of Sen’s exhaustion after he won the Beard award was realizing that he had entered the world from within the margins himself. Not only was he not a food enthusiast, he was a queer person of color in a very white industry.

As a result, this year has pushed Sen to hug his allies and friends tighter than before.

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formed nuanced profiles that Sen sets his work apart from other writers. And when it comes to using food as a storytelling device, he doesn’t shy away from digging deeper into who holds power in the cooking world.

For that, food media has actually been at the forefront of a reckoning in 2020. In just one instance, *Bon Appetit*’s editor-in-chief Adam Rapoport resigned after the publication was revealed to have propelled a number of racial discrepancies, including cooks of color being paid less than their white counterparts, and an Instagram picture resurfaced showing him in brownface. Employees of color spoke about a toxic work environment and some of them—including the well-known Priya Krishna, Rick Martinez, and Sohla El-Waylly—decided to leave its YouTube show in protest.

“It’s been a bit triggering,” Sen told me when I asked about how he felt about the discourse. The *Bon Appetit* controversy was just part of a larger outpour of those in the food world speaking out about racism within the industry.

“Whenever I have voiced my opinions about the lack of diversity within the industry, I’ve gotten quite a lot of backlash from gatekeepers. So in the past year I’ve had to disengage at a certain point to preserve myself,” he said.

“I have found myself gravitating towards people who are in a similar situation to me where they were speaking out about all this kind of mistreatment for a long time before this current moment,” he said.

For some of his exhaustion, the pandemic’s impact on the year has actually helped Sen, who describes himself as a homebody. He’s become more organized during lockdown, allowing him to focus on special projects like his book. And, though virtually, he continues to teach journalism classes and work on freelance assignments.

Above all, like cooking, writing is a way of remembering. To share stories from within the food world is to preserve a unique cultural memory that might otherwise remain a secret for many. And so, when it comes to the relationship between food and writing, Sen has found just the way to keep on learning—and sharing—those secrets with us all. □