



Photo by Mike Mastromatteo

Siva's food revolution

Diabetes diagnosis plays a positive role in Indian-born chef's advocacy of healthy living

By Mike Mastromatteo

It's rare that someone could turn a health setback into an opportunity for personal growth, career fulfillment and community advocacy, but in Siva Swaminathan's case, it's very much a done deal.

Swaminathan is founder and owner of the Chez Siva cooking school in Toronto, where for the last dozen years, she has

dispensed cooking and healthy recipe advice to would-be chefs. A native of Nagapattinam in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, Swaminathan's first taste of cooking occurred in her grandmother's kitchen back home before immigrating to Canada with her family in the early 1970s. While she initially struck out on a traditional career path in information tech-

nology, she never quite got over her love of cooking. So she traded in her keyboard for a spatula in 1998 to become a chef.

As it turned out, her career change would soon become much more than just a job or even a passion for Swaminathan; it would become a cause. In 2005, she was diagnosed with Type I diabetes, and she began exploring and sharing ways of cooking healthy to help manage the disease.

"It was a bit of a shock when the diagnosis was confirmed," says the vibrant and outgoing woman. Type I is sometimes referred to as juvenile diabetes, in which the patient's pancreas does not pro-

duce sufficient insulin. Although the condition is manageable with daily insulin injections, Type I diabetes patients are advised to follow special diets, remain physically active and carefully monitor blood glucose levels.

Swaminathan was atypical of most Type I diabetes patients in that the symptoms appeared later in life. In fact, it took doctors five full months to fully diagnose her condition from the onset of the first symptoms. But, once the diagnosis was certain, Swaminathan didn't let it bring her down; instead she focused on the positive and became an advocate for diabetes awareness.

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In addition to running Chez Siva, she is also chair of the South Asian chapter of the Canadian Diabetes Association (CDA). Given her Indian heritage, diabetes diagnosis and passion for cooking, Swaminathan is certainly in a unique position to serve as a role model for diabetes awareness, smarter eating and an active lifestyle for new Canadians.

She promotes a three-pronged message for diabetics: "Understand your medication, watch what you eat and don't forget to stay active," she says. It's basic information, but it's surprising how easily it can be overlooked, especially for immigrants hoping to blend in with a North American environment replete with convenience and highly processed food choices. South Asian immigrants, in particular, face increasing rates of the Type 2 variation of the disease. Other high-risk groups include immigrants of Hispanic, Asian and African ancestry.

A study published last April in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* also found that the diabetes rates seem related to the amount of time ethnic newcomers have been in Canada.

Study authors don't have hard conclusions, but they do point to immigrants' exposure to the high-sugar, high-carbohydrate and overly processed "Western" diet as a factor. As well, ethnic immigrants are often less likely to avail themselves to information and support services.

To Swaminathan, the study is a stark reminder of the need for ongoing diabetes awareness and advocacy.

"City life can mean a tremendous change for a lot of new Canadians," she says. "For many South Asians, the move to Canada often means a lot more indoor living. And with that comes the temptation to become less physically active and to fall into eating habits that are less than ideal."

Swaminathan also cautions new Canadians to be mindful of the role stress can play in the ris-

ing incidence of diabetes. Many new immigrants, she says, are so focused on adjusting to the new culture and environment in Canada that they fail to take the time needed for their own personal wellbeing.

"For many new Canadians, survival and providing opportunities for their families are the top priorities," she says. "Things like healthy eating or an active lifestyle aren't seen as important, or they are regarded as something too expensive to follow through on."

Swaminathan believes healthy eating must become a priority, but admits it would resonate with more people by putting some fun, creativity and enthusiasm into meal planning and food preparation. "It's all about ingredients," the master chef says. She also speaks of "kitchen discipline" as a prerequisite for the preparation of better balanced meals, and unashamedly refers to her own Chez Siva kitchen as a culinary laboratory.

At Chez Siva, she offers small, recipe-based, hands-on courses on everything from how to make stocks and sauces, to kids' cooking classes. For the absolute cooking novice, Swaminathan offers the wryly titled "How to Boil Water" course.

Despite her Indian heritage, Swaminathan does not limit her recipes to those of her country of origin. She incorporates what might be considered a traditional European élan to her cuisine. In fact, she worked with master chefs in Ontario and Europe after graduating from the George Brown College culinary arts program in Toronto. She then apprenticed for two years in Germany in the area known as Lady of Constance.

With all these influences combined, today she brings a diversity of recipes and cooking styles together, including northern Italian, Spanish and South Asian. Her website (chezsiva.com) features sample recipes ranging from south Indian raitha to Greek souvlaki, all prepared with healthful ingredients and cooking techniques suited

to the optimal diabetic diet.

"I break my classes down by season and run them for two months each, so in total we're in operation about eight months of the year," she says. "I would say anywhere between 60 and 100 students come through Chez Siva every four months."

To bring her ideas to a wider

audience, Swaminathan is now working on two new healthy eating cookbooks, one based on South Asian recipes and the second one more mainstream.

"Adapt a healthy eating lifestyle with activities for your whole family," Swaminathan says. "Everyone can live a long and healthy life and education is key." 🍌

Tips from Siva's kitchen



With healthier ingredients in our recipes, we can all achieve better overall health and live a long life, says Indian-born chef Siva Swaminathan. Here are a few of her menu ideas for breakfast through dinner.

Breakfast ideas

- steel cut oats or barley with green apple, dried fruits, almonds and low-fat milk or soya
- low-fat yogurt parfait, with fruits, ground flax, granola
- scrambled tofu/egg whites, with veggies, herbs and spice
- whole wheat toast, almond butter or apple butter
- pancakes made with rolled oats instead of white flour, and fruit concentrate instead of syrup

Lunch ideas

- leftover chicken in a pita with low-fat cheese or green salad
- instead of mayo, plain yogurt with herbs and spice and grated carrots
- washed canned legumes (e.g., chick peas) on salad for more fibre
- healthier soups with homemade stocks with no salt
- veggies with humus or bean dip
- low-fat salad dressing with lemon or herbs

Dinner ideas

- brown or parboiled rice with turmeric, cumin seeds and herbs
- flat bread, with hard flour, bran, cumin seeds, pepper, herbs and cooking spray
- marinated tofu/soya in herbs and spices, with a dash of hot sauce
- steamed fish with herbs, lemon, green onions, capers and olives
- slow-cooked lean meat with root veggies, herbs and spices and low-fat stock
- roast vegetables

SEE CANADIANIMMIGRANT.CA FOR MORE OF SIVA SWAMINATHAN'S TIPS ON HEALTHY EATING WHEN DINING OUT.

