

**F**or most of us, the dishes of childhood have a powerful nostalgic appeal. But for sisters Priya, Alexa and Sereena Kaul, these flavours and tastes are all the more important, given how traumatic their upbringing turned out to be.

One faced adoption because, as a girl in male-dominated 1960s Kashmir, she was considered a worthless burden. All three coped with long separation from their parents. Most recently, they have lived through the murder of a beloved son and nephew. But throughout, they have clung – and cooked – together. Now, they've written a recipe book based on their consoling cuisine, in the hope of persuading the rest of us to follow their example.

Were it not for the obvious bond between them, you'd never guess they were related. Softly spoken Priya, 51, arrives wearing a purple beaded blouse, made in her husband's factory in Delhi. Alexa, 50, is every inch the mum-of-three in her stylish trousers and Smedley cardigan, while feisty Sereena, 49, is pencil-slim in a tight designer dress, her highlighted hair pulled back off her face.

They even live on different continents – Priya in Delhi, Alexa in Surrey and Sereena in Florida. Despite the differences and distances between them, they still love to cook together. 'Often, I'll ring Alexa while I'm cooking and ask her what spices I should put in,' says Sereena.

Their culinary skills derive from their mother, Krishna, who married Omkar, an engineering graduate, when they were in their teens. They were so poor they had to travel around India, living with whichever relation would put them up. In 1960, when Krishna was pregnant with Sereena, Omkar followed his brother to the UK to take a postgraduate degree at Leeds University, in the hope of improving his prospects. With only enough money for a single ticket, he left his wife and daughters with his mother in Srinagar, in the north of India. There was much disappointment when another girl was born and Krishna was pressured by her in-laws to give Sereena up for adoption to a wealthy, childless couple. Though only 21 she found the courage to refuse.

Money was extremely tight. Omkar, while studying full-time, had a succession of menial jobs and sent all he could back to his family. Nevertheless, the sisters remember their early childhood as happy. After four years, their father had scraped together enough money to buy his wife a single boat ticket to join him.

Sereena, just three at the time, recalls hanging over the balcony with Alexa, arms outstretched to their mother, calling her to come back. 'I don't think Mum turned round – she was too heartbroken,' says Alexa sadly. 'I look at my own children now and don't think I could ever leave them. But if it was the only way I could get them a better life, who knows?'

Sereena stayed with her grandmother, while the eldest two were sent to stay with their great-uncle. The regime was harsh. The girls were



From top: sisters Alexa, Priya and Sereena Kaul

she says. 'They always looked after me.'

The sisters have always cooked together. From when Sereena was seven, she, Alexa and Priya were expected to prepare dinner every day before their parents came home from work. 'There was never any arguing about who did what,' recalls Alexa. 'Sereena laid the table, while Priya and I diced the onions, washed spinach and cooked the rice, for our mother to fry it all up when she got in and we'd have our family meal.'

After leaving school, before the elder two went off to university, they all moved in together and carried on their collaborative cookery. 'There was never any discussion of who was cooking – we did it as a group,' says Sereena, who admits she was 'very, very upset' when she got a telegram from Priya announcing she was getting married. 'I wasn't prepared for my sister to leave me. I felt abandoned.'

Priya, the eldest and most conventional of the sisters, accepted an arranged marriage and was introduced to Raj Kachroo, a civil engineer who runs a factory with his sister. 'They were friends of the family so my parents knew everything about him.' When I ask how many children they have, Priya looks down and replies, 'I had two, but my son died last year.'

The sisters' eyes fill up with tears, and Priya is too upset to elaborate. Later, the others explain that Aman died after being assaulted by fellow students at medical school in India in an initiation rite that went horribly wrong. He was 19. A murder trial is under way against his assailants. Poignantly, the sisters have dedicated their book to Aman, 'who truly believed in us'. You get the strong impression that this project has been part of the sisters' healing process.

Alexa has three daughters from her marriage to an Englishman, Jamie Goodwin, whom she met when they were buyers at London fashion store, Browns. Sereena, the most rebellious of the three, refused to contemplate university and went straight into marketing on a national newspaper. Much to her parents' chagrin, she fell in love with her boss, Norman Walker, a divorcee with children a decade younger than she was.

The sisters' cookery book is a celebration of the importance of eating together, which has helped them during the tough times. Sereena says, 'We cooked for friends all the time, and they'd ask us for the recipe and spices to go with it, which is how we came up with the idea for the spice box,' a stainless steel container with all the spices needed to create their dishes, which you buy separately. As a project to bring their family together, it could hardly have been better. Now the sisters hope their delicious, homely recipes will work the same magic for the rest of us. ■

Lydia Slater

*The Three Sisters Indian Cookbook* by Sereena, Alexa and Priya Kaul, £16.99, Simon & Schuster. To buy the spice box, visit [www.flavoursandspices.co.uk](http://www.flavoursandspices.co.uk)

# Curry healed our heartache

*Separation, abuse and even murder have blighted the lives of these Indian sisters. But a passion for cooking has been their salvation*

sometimes beaten. 'When your parents aren't there, there's no one to speak up for you,' says Sereena. But after two years, the money was raised to bring the eldest girls, by then aged seven and six, over to Sheffield.

Alexa says, 'I remember this man walking towards us at Heathrow Airport, and Priya saying, "That's our Dad!" I said, "No, I've never seen him before."' Now an office worker, their mother had swapped her sari for a skirt and

high heels. Alexa recognised her only by a mole at the corner of her eye.

Despite speaking only Kashmiri, both girls settled quickly and happily into their new school. However, when Sereena was finally brought over to join them the following year, aged six, it took her longer to adjust. She couldn't remember her mother and had never met her father. 'I was sure of my sisters, though, and in a way Priya has been a mummy to me,'