

Sister ACT

Priya, Alexa and Sereena, who now live on different continents, tell Catherine Butler how they revisited their childhood to turn their mother's recipes into a cookery book



Eldest sister Priya Kachroo, 51, lives in Delhi with her husband Raj. She has a daughter, Sinead, 22, and a son, Aman, who tragically died last year, at the age of 19, in India after an

attack, which is now subject to a court case.

"Food was always an integral part of our lives. Kashmir in Northern India, where we were born, is a very fertile land – you could just throw a seed and something would grow. As children, we'd gather lotus root for the cooking pot, and go down to the lake and ask the fisherman to catch a fish for our dinner.

We shared our house with our grandparents and cousins, and most of every day was spent buying food and preparing meals for big family lunches and dinners for 11 or 12 people. We'd spend hours watching our mother cook. She

ground all her own spices and had real creative flair. She never measured anything and yet everything always tasted delicious.

When I was three, our lives changed. Our father, a civil engineer, was struggling to provide for his family, so he went to England and got a place at Leeds University to study for better qualifications. About three years later, our mother followed him and found work in the accounts department of an office to save up to bring us all over. I know it was very hard for her to leave us and we were very unhappy too, but we now understand that she did it for us. Sereena stayed with our grandparents in the family house, but Alexa and I went to stay with our great uncle and his family.

"We've all lived such different lives, but our individual skills were essential to create the cookbook"



SEREENA WEARS T-SHIRT, JOLIES, HER OWN, BANGLES AND EARRINGS, VAN PETERSON. PRIYA WEARS DRESS, BY MALIENE BIRGEF, CAROIGAN, VELA, BLU, NECKLACE, BULATTI. ALEXA WEARS DRESS, HOBBS, JEWELLERY AND VEST, HER OWN

After two years, we were reunited with our parents in Derbyshire, where they'd settled, and a year later Sereena joined us and we all went to school together. Mum found various ingenious ways to continue cooking traditional Indian cuisine. In Kashmir, she would make pickle by putting all the ingredients in a container and leaving it out in the sun for a week. Here, she experimented with a jar resting on the pilot light on the gas stove. It exploded once because there was too much heat, but in the end she made it work.

England soon felt like home, so when I was 16 and my father moved us back to India, we felt like such misfits and our studies went downhill. Eventually, my parents stayed in Delhi, but because my father had since been successful and my mother had continued to work, they were able to buy us a house in Sheffield. First, Alexa and I came back over, and then our mother came with Sereena and stayed with us for a year until we were all settled at college.

As one by one we finished our education, we went our separate ways. After university, I did some travelling but wanted to settle down and get married and have a family. My parents said they knew a nice boy in India who they thought I'd get on well with. I travelled over to meet him and liked him immediately, and we got married.

When the idea for the book first came up, the other two were very excited, and although I said I'd help as much as I could, I was busy with work and life. But Sereena can be a bossy boots and persuaded me to give up my teaching job, which was quite a leap of faith. But once I started on this path, it's all I wanted to do. We're all very different – Sereena is a great businesswoman, Alexa is very creative, whereas I am much more literary. I realise now that it needed all three of our skills to bring it to fruition.

Last year, I had a terrible family tragedy when my son was the victim of an attack and died. Being so closely involved with all my family at this time has been a great support. As little girls, we used to play office and pretend to speak on phones – it was strange how we were now practising what we once used to play. Of course, working with family can cause arguments, but ultimately it has brought us even closer together."



Middle sister Alexa Goodwin, 50, lives in Guildford with her husband Jamie and their three daughters.

"Arriving in England for the first time was a huge culture shock. On our first night, Priya and I had a shower and were getting changed into our pyjamas in front of the fire in the living

room when my father turned on the television. A man appeared on the screen and we both screamed – we didn't understand that he couldn't see us.

We settled in to our new life relatively easily though, and soon felt more English than Indian. We each grew up to lead very different lives and were spread across three continents, but our

childhood experiences meant we shared a strong bond. More recently, we've spent months travelling back and forth to India, testing out different dishes with Mum. Our greatest challenge was figuring out the quantities, as we had never measured anything out when cooking before. We often used to chat to each other about what we'd cooked lately, but now the first thing we ask is, 'Have you written it down?'"



Youngest sister Sereena Walker, 49, lives in Florida with her husband Norman.

"We began cooking at about 14 and, after years of watching our mother, it came quite naturally to us. We were quite competitive and there were rows over who made the best Lamb Rogan Josh. One day, Dad came home with three bits of lamb and told us each to cook a Rogan Josh for my parents to judge. It was quite a lesson – mine had too much chilli, Alexa's not enough, while Priya's was too 'wishy washy', so we still had a lot to learn.

Practice makes perfect, though, and, as we grew older, we'd cook for friends who loved what we made, and we often talked about writing down Mum's recipes so that

"Our mother's recipes were never written down and getting the measurements accurate was a challenge"

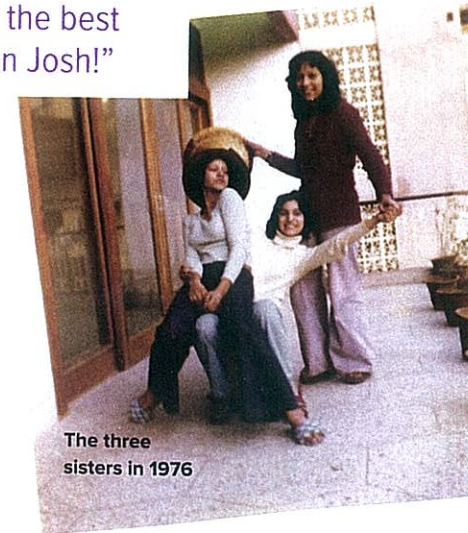
they wouldn't be forgotten. And then one day, I was following an Indian recipe and moaning that I couldn't find all the spices it needed, when I had a fantastic idea. In India, every house had a spice tin, so why not write a book of all our family recipes, and sell it with a canister containing all the spices you will need? I rang up my sisters immediately to see what they thought.

It was a real family effort – Dad was in charge of noting down the quantities and measurements. Mum and Alexa focused on the testing, while I took care of the business side of things and Priya wrote the book – although we all tested the recipes. By the end of 2007, we had finished and self-published *Flavours & Spices Of India*, and were selling them with the spice tins at food fairs and exhibitions. They sold like hot cakes, and it was at a large food show that publishers Simon & Schuster came across us and asked us to write *The Three Sisters Indian Cookbook* with them. That was last year and it was very exciting. We've now decided to launch our own range of chutneys and sauces too.

I love working with my sisters. We have always been close and care deeply about one another, but living so many thousands of miles apart, we needed a focus that could bring us together again. I don't think any of us really thought we'd end up doing something like this, but actually food was all we ever talked about, and just as our mother's cooking bound us together as children, it has kept our lives intertwined as adults too."

The Three Sisters Indian Cookbook (Simon & Schuster, £16.99) is out on 14 October. w&h

"Aged 14, we had a competition to see who could cook the best Rogan Josh!"



The three sisters in 1976