

profile

The SPICE of LIFE

An Auckland couple are committed to helping Kiwis enjoy great eating with their Spice n Easy range of recipe kits.

Text: Sarah Beresford Photography: Joanna Wickham



Vibha and Sanjay Soni know what it's like to put a bit of spice into people's lives. The couple, who immigrated to New Zealand 10 years ago from Mumbai in India, have made it their mission to share the secrets of great Indian cuisine so that even the most inexperienced cook can enjoy the delights of a great curry.

Both Vibha and Sanjay originally worked in the IT industry but they found it a struggle to find suitable jobs when they settled in Auckland. They noticed that there were no shops selling spices near their new home in Birkenhead and so Sanjay decided to take a punt and open up a shop.

"I didn't know anything about spices," he admits, "but I did know about business, so I thought it was a great opportunity and we should give it a shot. We decided to target the whole community,

so we stocked spices, herbs and cooking products from the Mediterranean, South Africa and Sri Lanka as well as India. We got a very varied clientele coming into the shop and it gave us the perfect platform to find out what people want."

In response to enquiries from customers about how to use some of the spices, Vibha started to hold Indian cooking classes and they were such a hit that she eventually resigned from her full-time job to run the classes three times a week.

"We provide all the ingredients and the classes are very hands-on. They run for eight weeks and at each class we cook a main and a side dish," says Sanjay.

But, more importantly, the classes gave the couple the chance to test drive and refine a selection of recipes and this was instrumental in the success of another venture they had been working on.

"We had the idea of taking all the guesswork out of making great Indian food by providing a foolproof, step-by-step recipe and then packaging all the spices, with a list of the fresh ingredients needed. We asked around all our friends and family for the best-ever recipes for dishes such as Tikka Masala and Butter Chicken and then we cooked them at our classes. It was great to receive lots of feedback and to discover which recipes people liked most. We made the most popular into packs."

And so the range of Spice n Easy recipe kits was born. That makes a long and difficult process sound relatively easy.

As well as the recipe development and trialling process, which took about four years, the couple had to negotiate the minefields of registering the name and patenting the product, formatting and printing the packaging, and getting food safety approval, among other things.

They finally launched the business just as the recession began to bite.

"Sanjay always looks for the positive in things, not the negative," says Vibha. "He sees the silver lining and, although times were tough, he thought the economic climate could provide opportunities with people cutting back on dining out and not getting takeaways as often."

Originally they sold Spice n Easy packs into small speciality stores, then gradually expanded the range so that today,

have 34 different varieties and sell 14 of these in Progressive Enterprises supermarkets. Export to Australia starts in November and they are also following up interest from Canada and the US.

"We were very committed to making Spice n Easy sell," says Vibha. "We went the extra mile to make it work. The dishes you can make taste so good because the recipes are special and the packs have quality spices that are so fresh – they need to be fresh to taste good. We wanted to be confident that what we put into our product is what we would feed our own family. You are what you eat and just because you're busy doesn't mean you have to compromise on quality and flavour. We wanted to give people a really easy option to enjoy great food."

The Spice n Easy range contains no preservatives, is gluten-free and includes vegetarian, meat and seafood recipe kits as well as kits for rice and lentils, snacks and starters, and marinades.

"There are so many products on sale that give no idea what ingredients are used. One thing we love about New Zealand is

the honesty of the people, so we wanted Spice n Easy to be really honest about the ingredients included and to use only the best," says Vibha.

"We've battled financial difficulties and bureaucratic hurdles to get the business up and running, but we've kept going because of the great feedback we receive – we know people want it and that makes it all worthwhile."



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