

***Back of House: Kitchen Workers in Central Ohio***  
**Archie Green Fellows Project, 2017**  
**Occupational Folklife Project || American Folklife Center**

**Interviewee: Kamal & Ami Panchal [Banana Leaf Restaurant]**

**Interviewer: Jess Lamar Reece Holler**

**Date of Interview: Tuesday, June 12th, 2018**

**Location: Banana Leaf Restaurant -- Bethel Road, Columbus, Ohio**

**Interview Index**

**00:00:00 -- Introductory Slate // Interview Lede**

**00:01:30 -- Early Lives in Gujarat, India; Coming to Ohio**

- Kamal -- b. 1956 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat; business degree; came to America in 2001; but, before that, worked in family businesses (movie theatres; and engineering businesses) in Ahmedabad, and in construction. Kamal was *not* involved in the restaurant business in India.
- Ami -- born in Ahmedabad; father was a lawyer; completed her schooling at Jay Commerce College and law school; and practiced criminal law with her father and brother. Came to Ohio, along with her husband, in 2001. Did not know how to cook in India; had cooks in the house in her in-laws' house; but the family *loved* eating, so Ami learned how to cook -- she cooked her mother-in-law & mothers' recipes, and started a restaurant in Ohio
- 00:04:00 -- Came to Ohio to follow their only son, and because other family members lived in Columbus; opening/purchasing a restaurant was a clear path to having a legal status in the U.S.; this was a chief motivator for why they established a restaurant in Columbus, even though neither Kamal or Ami had been involved in the restaurant industry; Banana Leaf became the "first all-vegetarian restaurant in Ohio since 1998"
- 00:06:00 -- Growing up vegetarian; discussion of "Hindu vegetarianism" (no eggs; no fish; but dairy is OK); vegetarianism as a part of the culture of Hinduism -- "you have no right to take somebody's life, so you cannot take somebody's life, because life is given by God." Indian cuisine offers complete meals for vegetarian -- "rice, vegetables, lentils, and bread."
- 00:11:00 -- Kamal discusses widespread Indian vegetarian cuisines; but also, regional differences between North/South/West Indian vegetarian cuisines, based on geographical and lifestyle differences
- 00:13:35 -- Common meals growing up in Kamal & Ami's families in Ahmedabad, Gujarat; discussion of prevalence, in Gujarat, of most women only working in the home. Kamal discusses the "complete meal," which used to consist of rice, lentil, vegetable and bread; and light dinners, featuring dishes like kitcheree. "Breakfast like a king, lunch like a lord, and supper like a pauper" in Indian society; practice in Gujarat was to have very light dinners; but practices have changed. Ami reflects on a similar pattern (00:16:30) but also shares about unique foodways in Gujarat, including some "sweet" elements being put into everything, including vegetable dishes, using jaggery.

**00:17:40 -- Starting Out in Ohio: Purchasing Annapurna (2001) ; Opening Banana Leaf/ Moving to Bethel Road (2006); Learning to Build Out a Menu**

- Starting a restaurant without much experience, but building the menu from parents' experiences, even when household cooks had traditionally done most of the work.
- Kamal -- prime purpose of having a restaurant *used* to be so that they could stay in the U.S. and be with their son; but also believed deeply in "doing things the right way": took all the proper managerial courses, got licenses, etc.; from 2001-2006, worked with Ami's brother and mother-in-law to learn many dishes
- Ami reflects on differences between her family's and Kamal's families foodways; her mother would never eat any food from outside the house or in restaurants
- Kamal reflects on growing up eating a wide variety of cuisines in his house, including Italian cuisine -- this is something he carries on, from his mom, in Banana Leaf's catering business; some of his mom's recipes (including "desi pizza," with wheat crust, home-made pizza sauce, and Indian cheese) are on the Banana Leaf menu
- 00:23:00 -- Kamal discusses some of the ways Banana Leaf's restaurant and catering company are unique; for example, offering "Village-style" Indian food and "very traditional" home cuisine; and discusses the "chaat buffet" that Banana Leaf is known for -- putting *lots* of varieties of foods together!
- 00:25:19 -- Developing the Banana Leaf menu, since 2001; early history of Banana Leaf as Annapurna Restaurant, started by a fellow Gujarati emigrée, started in 1998 in Columbus Square. Ami and Kamal bought Annapurna in 2001, and inherited their vegetarian Indian menu; and then added a few more dishes. In 2006, Banana Leaf moved to Bethel Road, and acquired its new name, to better communicate its South Indian menu.

**00:27:16 -- Kitchen Work Cultures at Banana Leaf**

- 00:27:16 -- Ami: on transitioning from being a lawyer to learning how to run the kitchen, perfect the recipes, and train employees
- 00:29:27 -- Moving to becoming managers and *not* working full-time in the kitchen; and behind-the-scenes catering business; and selecting/training cooking staff who explicitly are *not* trained chefs -- "our restaurant runs only with the Indian housewives" (and other housewives -- Pakistani, Bangladesh, Mexican, American); trained by Ami
- 00:31:30 -- on training non-professional cooks to be Banana Leaf's chefs; how Kamal and Ami select employees, based on Banana Leaf's menu of "homestyle" food -- "all the Indian housewives know about that; all they have to do is incorporate *our* style of recipes; what Ami wants"; discussion of large population of Indian-Americans in Columbus and wide pool of "housewives" seeking work outside the home; hiring out workers from staffing companies for big events (catering for 500 people, etc.)
- 00:33:58 -- Wages and employee payment at Banana Leaf; keep food costs between 15-25%; keeping cost of labor around 25-30% -- "not more than that"; most of Banana Leaf's business is in catering, not in the restaurant, so there's not a lot of overhead except when catering demands are high; main chef paid around \$16/hour; basic wages (about \$9/hour) for everyone else, with some bonuses "depending on what sort of efficiencies they have provided."

- 00:35:30 -- divisions and role distinctions between front-of-house and back-of-house staff; one cross-trained staff member

### **00:36:30 -- Banana Leaf Cooking Classes // Vegan Indian Cooking Education**

- 00:36:50 -- Kamal's connection with the vegan meet-up group in Columbus; and their invitation to Kamal and Ami to start a cooking class
- 00:37:40 -- how Ami trained, via looking at cooking shows, for how to put on a cooking class
- 00:38:30 -- Kamal, on learning how to teach the philosophy of healthy Indian vegetarian cooking; with a theme that a healthy meal can be cooked at home in under 45 minutes; goal was to inspire confidence in the class's students, and to show *simple* ways to prepare Indian vegetarian food -- access is key! "We cook from scratch, in front of you."
- 00:39:54 -- offer of on-call email and on-site support from Ami and Kamal, post-cooking classes
- 00:40:50 -- goal is to teach access to healthy food; most restaurants use frozen/ready-made food, "not good for your health"

### **00:41:00 -- Healthy Food // Sourcing Ingredients for Banana Leaf**

- 00:41:30 -- working with local Indian grocery stores, like India Grocers on Sawmill Road in Columbus; and ordering in special ingredients
- 00:41:50 -- sourcing fresh vegetables and other ingredients in bulk at Restaurant Depot; "one of the most economical"; other ingredients sourced from Sam's Club
- 00:42:31 -- "our inventory is very much analyzed; we just have to push in the requirements, and it is here"
- 00:42:47 -- no walk-in cooler and freezer; so, no space for pre-made dishes made the day before

### **00:43:20 -- Audience for Banana Leaf & Changes in Offerings: Catering, Buffet Meals**

- 00:43:30 -- Who is the major audience for Banana Leaf? Many Indian consumers, of course; but lots of vegans and vegetarians, as well -- many of whom are not Indian
- 00:44:12 -- changes in interest in vegetarian/vegan cuisine in Columbus, since 2001
- 00:44:53 -- more details on Banana Leaf's catering company -- not just vegan Indian cuisine; but also Kosher food
- 00:47:12 -- changes in the Banana Leaf buffet; originally, five years ago, changed restaurant hours from 3pm-9pm, since their grandson was born; recently, Banana Leaf opened the kitchen for lunch again, since their prep staff has to be there in the morning -- Kamal decided to offer a "protein power"-themed lunch buffet, to convince skeptical new vegetarians! "There are many people in this world who do not know the consumption of lentils as a part of their diet ... the Hindu vegetarians back in Indian, we get lots of proteins from lentils. And India is the only country which cultivates and grows over 20 kinds of lentils. And, if you put it's form, there are 40-50 different types of forms; so, lentil can be a whole lentil, and a split lentil. In our protein power lunch buffet, we put three lentils, all the time ..."
- 00:49:50 -- Ami, on training cooking staff to cook buffet meals

### **00:50:12 -- Perspective on their 18+ Years, Now, in Columbus' Restaurant Industry**

- 00:50:20 -- More options, such as online delivery service
- 00:50:50 -- Kamal & Ami have become much more social; they are known, and provide catering, all across Ohio; “we are the oldest Indian restaurant in Columbus in business”; Kamal also serves on many non-profit boards and with the local Gujarati community board, and in refugee services non-profit work in Columbus
- 00:52:10 -- Kamal's plan to open a branch of Vegetarian Vision in Columbus, which would deliver information about vegetarian nutrition in Columbus' public school system (ages 8-12): information about vegetarianism, and dietary information regarding healthy options for foods
- 00:53:30 -- changes in reception of Indian food and regional dishes in Columbus; “now, people eat Indian food as a healthy option” (whereas, before, Kamal saw non-Indian Ohioans eating Indian food as a sort of “adventure”)
- 00:54:40 -- on being one of the first restaurants in Columbus to mark up their menu, in the early 2000's, according to what is vegan // what is vegetarian; now, Kamal reflects, you see this everywhere
- 00:55:24 -- Gluten-free options; “most of Indian food, except for bread, is gluten-free by nature”; most Indian food is Kosher, as well; most fried Indian food is coated in *chickpea* flour (besan), not white flour. Kamal and Ami also worked to develop bread recipes out of “naturally gluten-free” flours: chickpeas, buckwheat, etc.
- 00:57:42 -- Balancing “authentic” family recipes and innovations for the menu

### **00:58:16 -- Food Futures: Concern About Healthy Food Access // Community Vegan Kitchens**

- 00:58:30 -- Kamal's concerns about unhealthy eating in our contemporary moment; “you have to follow the vegetarians ... who have been vegetarians, for decades and decades.”
- 00:59:00 -- Kamal shares plan/vision for “healthy food kitchens,” similar to food pantries, to be run by non-profits; but wants to see them serving fresh, healthy, vegetarian food; concerned about food access being *healthy*.
- 01:00:00 -- Futures for Banana Leaf: plans to open new locations; but also working on developing options for franchising, etc., to get themselves *out* of the kitchen and the restaurant; but they want to make clear that they can run everything in the business by themselves, even if the rest of the staff disappeared
- 01:02:37 -- “My main focus is how to eat healthy food; and access to healthy food to the people.” Kamal encourages people to check out his blog via Banana Leaf's Instagram page, for more thoughts on his future non-profit, and working to make healthy food access possible for the majority of people. More reflections on the healthy food kitchen and bulk requirements as critical for the economic success of a restaurant or endeavor; “just for the food, not for the experience” -- larger corporations will help fill in the gaps of the budget, to make the vegan kitchen affordable to community members (much more so than regular for-profit restaurants) -- “less than \$5 for a meal. At today's cost structure, I can do it.”

### **01:07:00 -- Concluding Slate, Thanks & Goodbyes**