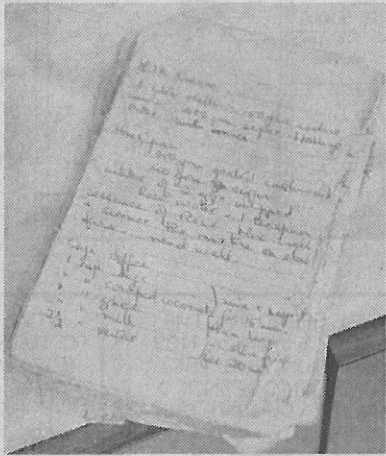






PRESTON GANNAWAY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Above, Mr. Sharma's spice drawer, hinting at the array of flavors in his cooking. Right, his grandmother's tattered notebook of recipes.



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Beautiful Food," just out from Chronicle Books. It's a book in which he toys with flavor combinations, chopping unripe green mangoes and stirring them into mayonnaise to make a verdant tartar sauce, and working an extract of caramelized fig and bourbon into glasses of iced chai.

Over the past few years, Mr. Sharma has amassed a following between his food blog, A Brown Table, and his regular cooking column in The San Francisco Chronicle. As with his column, he took all the book's photographs himself. Their dark, visually quiet backgrounds emphasize the elements of the composition that matter most: his brown hands, and his food.

The light-soaked kitchen at his home here in Oakland, which he shares with his husband, Michael Frazier, their two cats and a dog, is charmingly chaotic. The spice drawer is clogged with dozens of jars: ancho chile, juniper berries, fenugreek powder. A collection of nearly 400 cookbooks spills from his living room into his kitchen. ("It's not a lot," Mr. Sharma said, shrugging.) Pieces of black cast-iron cookware, from teakettles to Dutch ovens, dot every corner of the room.

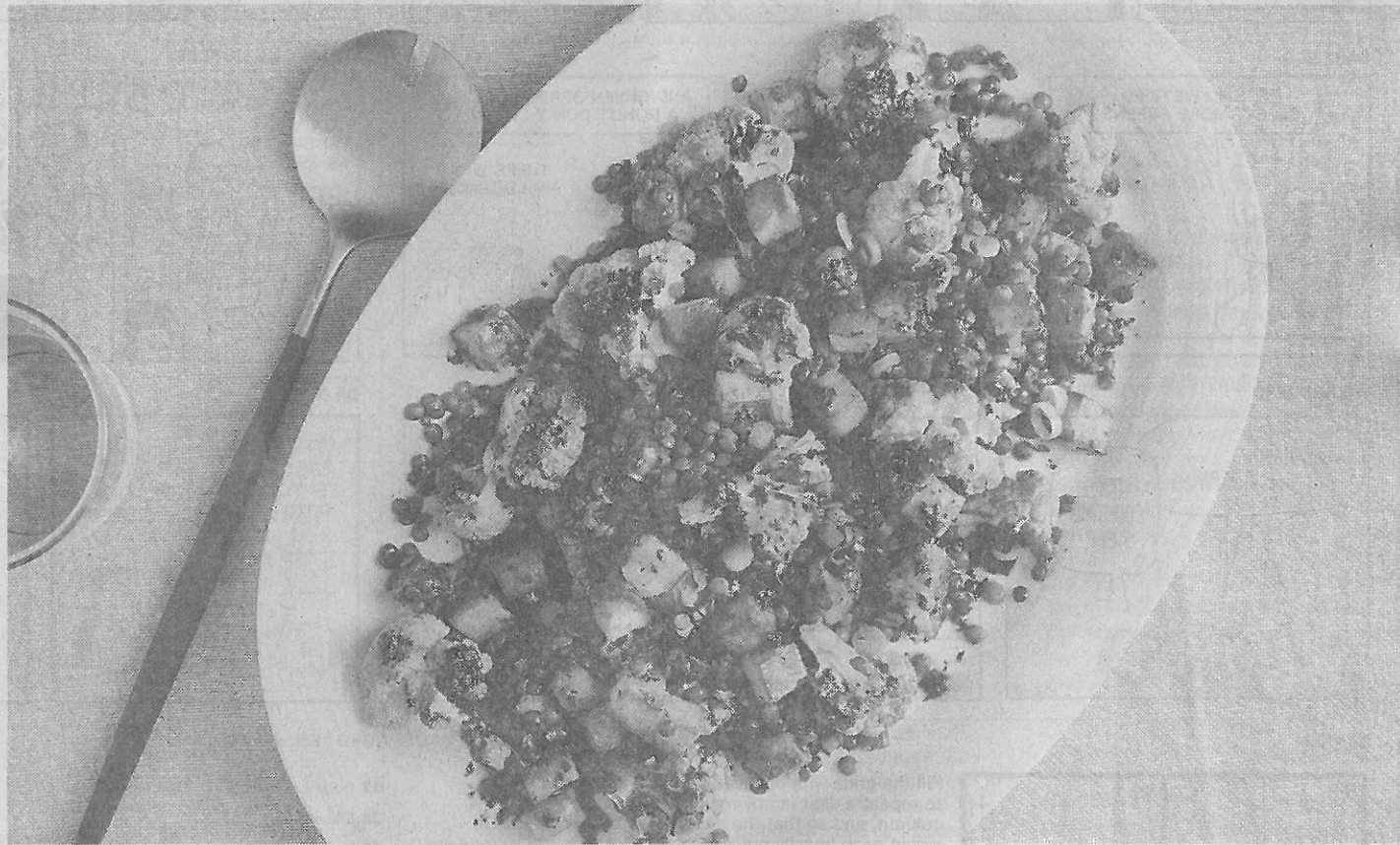
A small wooden box sitting on a high shelf contains talismans from the home he left behind: paperback cookbooks, their pages now yellowed and disintegrating, that he borrowed from his mother, along with his grandmother's recipes scribbled on notepads.

Mr. Sharma's food is quietly expressive, nodding to the flavors he grew up eating in Mumbai without chaining it-

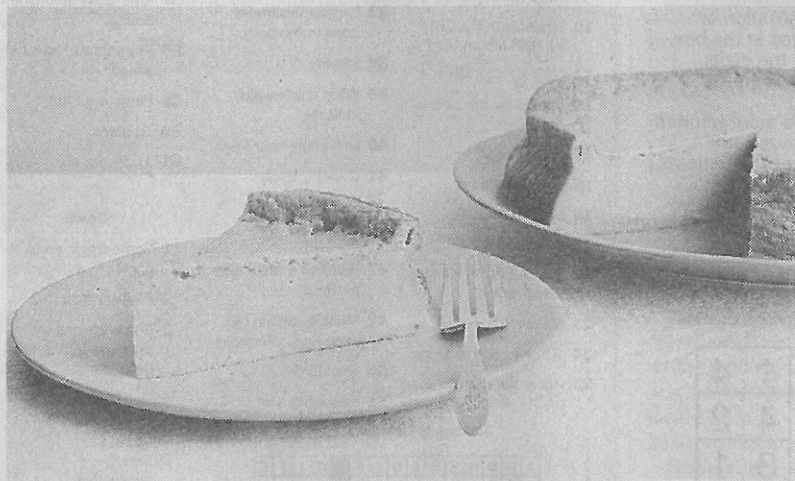


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Left, Nik Sharma at home in Oakland, Calif. Below, his roasted cauliflower, paneer and lentil salad with cilantro-lime dressing. Bottom, his version of his grandmother's sweet potato bebinca.



LINDA XIAO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; FOOD STYLIST: MONICA PIERINI



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**"My food has always been about wanting people to accept me."**

scrubbing against your tongue.

"It is wrapped up in so much tradition, but it can be fluid and move across boundaries," Mr. Sharma said of paneer. "I always believe that tradition is great, but it can bind you."

Mr. Sharma knows this bind well. Throughout his life, he has experienced a tension between sticking to tradition and freeing himself from it, between convention and originality.

It's no coincidence that this conflict plays out in his recipes, which are very personal — even autobiographical. They often rely on ingredients found in the Indian dishes of his youth, like that paneer. But Mr. Sharma breaks away from familiarity, putting those ingredients in conversation with the food he has encountered in America.

The results defy easy categorization, like Mr. Sharma himself. "Mine is the story of a gay immigrant, told through food," he writes in his cookbook's introduction, which details his journey from childhood in India to his current life in California as he sought out his place in the world. His cooking helped carry him, providing both direction and comfort along the way.

self to tradition. Take paneer, an ingredient Mr. Sharma feels has untapped potential. He finds it often gets relegated to gloppy bowls of mattar paneer, where it floats next to peas. But it possesses versatility: It's a pretty stubborn cheese, able to withstand heat without collapsing into goo.

In "Season," he places charred cubes

of roasted paneer in a bed of cauliflower, scallions and lentils. He breaks it up with his hands and folds it into a warm potato salad with cilantro, chives and a cured spicy sausage native to the Indian state of Goa; the paneer eases the jolt of the sausage. He bakes it into a frittata with garam masala, where the paneer retains its rubbery feel, the crumbles

"My food has always been about wanting people to accept me," he said. "But I'm also looking for acceptance from myself."

Mr. Sharma spent the first 22 years of his life in the closet. He grew up in Mumbai, born to a Hindu father from the state of Uttar Pradesh and a Roman Catholic mother from Goa. He wasn't like his schoolmates, whose families had more money than his. He also realized early on that he was gay, though he didn't tell a soul. Still, he found himself a frequent target of schoolyard bullies.

Through it all, he cooked. Once he mastered rice, he moved on to a binder of recipes his mother had cobbled together from Indian lifestyle glossies and newspapers. These recipes weren't exclusively Indian: He baked a Neapolitan cake using maraschino cherries for the red layer.

"I know people will hate me for that," he said, laughing. "But that's all they had in India, so that's what we used."

He always longed to escape to America, enticed by images of it he'd seen in MTV music videos and television shows like "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

His moment came in 2002. A student of biochemistry at what was then called the University of Bombay, he landed a scholarship to the University of Cincinnati. He stuffed his life into two suitcases, pressure cooker in tow.

Those years in Cincinnati were freer. Mr. Sharma eventually came out to his parents via email; they accepted the news. He cooked often in those days, forging a sensibility that existed somewhere between his upbringing in India and his new life in America. Soon enough, he found himself seasoning his marinara sauce with nigella seeds and braiding bow-tie pasta with kheema for weeknight dinners.

He was living in Washington, D.C., pursuing a master's degree in public policy and working as a medical researcher when he started A Brown Table in 2011; he craved a creative outlet to soften the dual stresses of work and school. Inspired by food bloggers like David Lebovitz and Deb Perelman of Smitten Kitchen, Mr. Sharma balanced a point-and-shoot camera on wooden boards that wobbled atop trash cans.

He never imagined that the decision to feature his hands in photographs would be an issue. Within months, anonymous comments began to appear. They were pointed and viciously personal in nature, attacking an aspect of himself he could not suppress: his race. Discouraged, Mr. Sharma temporarily stopped

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