

# CRAFT AND POPPING MUSTARD SEEDS

*Interview with Jayashree Iyengar*

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## **MAKER IN RESIDENCE INTERVIEW SERIES #1**

In support of CRAFT's mission to foster a more robust regional food system, the center launched the Maker in Residence program a year ago to support local food entrepreneurs as they work on rolling out new business ideas and regional products. While in residence, local makers have the opportunity to work on their own product and business development, as well as host a variety of workshops for the Chatham and larger community in Pittsburgh and Gibsonia. This fall, we are working with two amazing makers who we would like to introduce you to. First up is Jayashree Iyengar, founder and owner of Popping Mustard Seeds. Chatham University and Food Studies alum, this former mechanical engineer is eagerly engaging in personal and thoughtful cooking classes focused on Indian cuisine. Please see our interview below to learn more about Jay!

*(Note: Interview transcription was edited for clarity and brevity)*

**Q: For those who may not know you, can tell us a little about you as a person and then a little about Popping Mustard Seeds?**

*Jay:* OK so as a person who am I? That's a tough question to answer because what I think of myself may not be what others think of me, but this is how I want to answer the question: I am very thankful to my family for who I am today, starting from my mother, my uncle who helped raise me, and my brothers. Then after I got married, my husband, my mother-in-law, and my children. I learned from so many people, and I'm constantly learning. I think, they have helped me become a curious, friendly, and courageous person, and most of all, someone who is able to share. Sharing I find gives me a lot of joy. So that's what I think of me as a person and, of course, it's for other people to say, right? (laughs).

And as the founder of Popping Mustard Seeds- I really enjoy teaching and sharing my cooking knowledge with others. I want to be able to teach people with all different levels of cooking experience from novice to experienced chefs or cooks. On a selfish note, I find teaching is a great way to learn and get better at my own cooking skills. I come from South India— from a state called Tamil Nadu on the eastern part of South India, and I am very familiar with the kind of cooking that I grew up with in my region. Especially my family cooking, more than anything else. Indian cuisine varies from state to state in India and is not the same [everywhere]. Trying to teach others has given me the opportunity to learn, practice, and get better at cooking foods from different regions and communities in India, which I'm still learning by the way.

Personally, I like to try recipes from various cuisines and not just Indian cuisine. I am a vegetarian, so I like to try various vegetarian dishes from different parts of the world. I really enjoy diverse foods, and I love for others to do the same thing— diversify their pantry, their cooking skills. So that's my goal: to share my knowledge with them.

**Q: When was the moment you knew you wanted to start Popping Mustard Seeds?**

*Jay:* So, the moment I knew I wanted to start...well, there's not one moment when I knew that I wanted to teach people how to cook. I think it began with cooking for our friends. I've been in Pittsburgh for the last 39, nearly 40 years. I came as a grad student, and I didn't know much about cooking when I came here, because I didn't really cook at home. My mom or grandmother did all the cooking. So, it was kind of taken for granted. But when I came here...I realized, "oh my God. How do I learn how to make those dishes?" Not just for one's survival, but I was missing those flavors that I was so used to at home. So, I learned a lot of my cooking here from other Indian friends and then later from my mother and my mother-in-law.

When I cooked for our friends, mostly non-Indian friends, they really enjoyed it and were very curious to learn how to make some of those dishes. So, I decided at some point I will just do informal cooking lessons. Then I got the idea: maybe I can teach people this if there's an interest. When I looked in Pittsburgh there weren't many Indian cooking classes available, so I thought "Oh, let me try some trial classes on some friends." That's when I took it seriously, and that's when I realized it could be something I could do.

*CRAFT: I love that parallel process; you started exactly where your students are starting, and you understand what the process looks like. You have also seen, at the end, what it looks like, and how it can feel to be accomplished in something and have opened your mind to so many different things regarding food and cooking.*

*Jay: I'm hoping someday to teach other Indian students who come here like me— [who are] far away from home, and [I can] help them too. I haven't gotten to that point in my business— to advertise to more students, but I'm hoping to get there.*

**Q: So, can I ask why popping mustard seeds? Is there a story behind the name?**

*Jay: Good question. So, when I was thinking of what name I should choose...this name has been in my head for many years. Ever since I thought I should teach cooking and start a business. The reason I chose Popping Mustard Seeds is because [of] what I find myself doing as a south Indian and home cook. We use mustard seeds to garnish or temper food, and it has this unique smell. My mother would do it at the end of her dish for many dishes, even when we made salads and raita, a yogurt salad. To top it with this popped mustard seed as it is hitting other spices is the first thing that comes to me when I think of home cooking. After consulting with my husband and our two sons and discussing other possible names like "Jay's Cooking Class," I went back to what I liked most (laughs). I don't know why, but the name just stands out for me.*

*CRAFT: Because it has a personal connection, and you're trying to inspire your students to have a personal connection with your food, so it has to start there with the name.*

*Jay: Yeah, in fact, it's funny, because it's more personal in another way too. When I first got married, I was just learning to cook, and I wanted to cook for my husband all these Indian foods, because he is also Indian, but grew up here. One of the funny things about popping mustard seeds is it just sputters and pops all over the place and messes up the area near the stove. So, we bought this Indian spoon which is typically used for tempering and found a lid from another small saucepan to help with the mess! So, it's funny, when I teach cooking, that's one of the things I teach— when you heat mustard seeds, make sure you have a lid handy, because it's going to pop everywhere!*

It has so many meanings to me— popping mustard seeds.

**Q: You've mentioned your mom a few times, and I even read it in your bio on your website about how even though your mom didn't teach you how to cook, she was still a teacher to you. How did she influence or impact your perceptions on food and wanting to be a teacher to other people?**

*Jay: Right. My mom, without directly teaching me, she taught me. When we were growing up— I'm sure it's true with everybody, you are used to certain flavors in the house, and you can smell and taste it. At least for me, I never forget that smell and the taste together. Even though she didn't teach me initially when I came here [to the United States], because she wasn't here to teach me, when she came back to stay with us, she would cook, and I would watch her and*

learn from her. Sometimes I would ask her to write down recipes, so I could replicate it later. So, in some ways, she taught me later in life. And my mother-in-law was another source. I learned a lot from her, because her cooking was different. They were both big influences for me, plus many cookbooks and cooking shows. But I think with my mother, going back to your question, it's mainly the flavors that remind me of her. I always remember my mother saying what's important for taste is the amount of heat, meaning chili, the amount of salt, and the sourness. I think if she knew the word "umami" she would've used it, because, to me, it just fits into what she was trying to say.

**Q: What else are people really missing out about South Indian food? Like spices are important, but what else are we missing out on understanding your type of cooking?**

*Jay:* So, I have to go back to curry. When I ask my students, "What do you first think of about Indian food?" Many of them say, "curry." Initially it was hard for me to understand why they would go to curry. Then I read enough to know that the British coined the term and invented it for the Western world, but it's not something we use the same way as people think. Different parts of India use the word curry in different ways, and I want people to realize that. I think I kind of answered this question earlier— that in India there are many regions, and what you get in restaurants is not typical home-cooked food. The food you find in restaurants here has the Mughal influence, which we call North Indian food. If you go to South Indian restaurants, you get the flavors of what they call dosas and idlis. Even within South India amongst the four states, every region has similar dishes, but each taste very different. In just the way they make it, and in the blend of spices— how the spices blend together is very important in Indian cooking.

Curry powder is a blend of different spices, mostly spices used in North Indian cooking. I should say each community, each region, each family has their own blend of spices. And nowadays, you can see so much on YouTube and Food Network, but I don't want people to get overwhelmed when it comes to Indian cooking. I think it's more than spices. However, it can be kind of compartmentalized, and then you can learn from simple to more complicated. What I mean is: start with minimum spices and slowly add more and more spices to get the taste where you want it.

**Q: What brought you to CRAFT and wanting to be one of the resident makers?**

*Jay:* Oh that's easy! When I started teaching cooking classes, I just thought, "Oh, I'll go teach cooking classes." There was not a big plan there, but what I started realizing as I was teaching is I knew very little about the subject. People would ask me questions in class like, "What's the difference between North Indian and South Indian cuisine?" or "Are the spices, which make the difference?" They would have so many questions! And I didn't know the right answers. I could've given answers that I thought were right, but then I started to ask myself the same questions: Why is India popular in spices? While I was trying to find ways of learning, I learned of the Chatham Food Studies [program]. I was fascinated by the program, because it wasn't just about cooking; it was about food as a bigger subject. I got very curious and wanted to learn more, because I thought this will help improve my teaching skills. Not just how to cook, but

everything about it— history and culture of food, and this may be the opportunity for me to do that. So, that's what brought me to Food Studies.

I graduated from Chatham last fall, and that naturally lead to CRAFT. Cassandra (CRAFT program manager) and I were talking after she took one of my cooking classes, and I was telling her about what I want to do with my business. She suggested I apply for the Maker in Residence program. I didn't know much about it then but thought that it's a great opportunity for me. So that's how I came to CRAFT .

**Q: Can you give a sneak peek of what your workshops for CRAFT are going to look like?**

*Jay:* Yes. My first workshop is called [Chai and Chat with Jay](#). I'm really excited about it, because I have made chai a lot. Chai masala can be made in so many different ways. I came up with a chai chart made up of different spices you can use to make it. One of my friends, when she saw it, called it the “chai pyramid.” I think it's a perfect name for it. Masala just means mixture of spices, by the way. A masala chai is spiced tea made with a mixture of spices; that's all it means. You can make it with cardamom, cardamom and ginger, or continue adding more spices to them. I'm also excited, because if people wanted to, there is an opportunity for them to ask me questions either ahead of time or during the class. I'm happy to have that conversation with people about Indian food, and my biggest goal with my cooking classes is for people to relax and enjoy cooking, not to be overwhelmed by it.

The other class I'm going to teach is [Indian One-Pot Cooking](#), which I've done before, and it's a popular class. We'll cook rice, lentils, vegetables all in one pot with Indian spices, and then we'll make a raita to go with it. The third class is a new class, and we'll make [Khaman Dhokla](#), which is a dish made of chickpea flour that comes from the state of Gujarat in the western part of India.

**Q: For our last question, can you tell me about a lesson that food has taught you?**

*Jay:* What food has taught me, is to be flexible. I'm a vegetarian. I'm not flexible enough to go and eat meat, but I'm flexible enough to try different vegetarian foods in different cuisines. By teaching, I've learned it's fun to learn other cuisines and enjoy the different flavors.

*CRAFT:* I want to thank you for your time and sitting down to do this interview. Thank you so much!

*Jay:* You're welcome! I enjoyed our conversation very much.

***If you would like to support Jay, or learn more about her classes and offerings, please visit her website at [www.poppingmustardseeds.com](http://www.poppingmustardseeds.com), or follow her on Instagram at [@poppingmustardseeds](#). Also, be sure to sign up for one of the [virtual workshops](#) she's hosting with CRAFT this fall!***