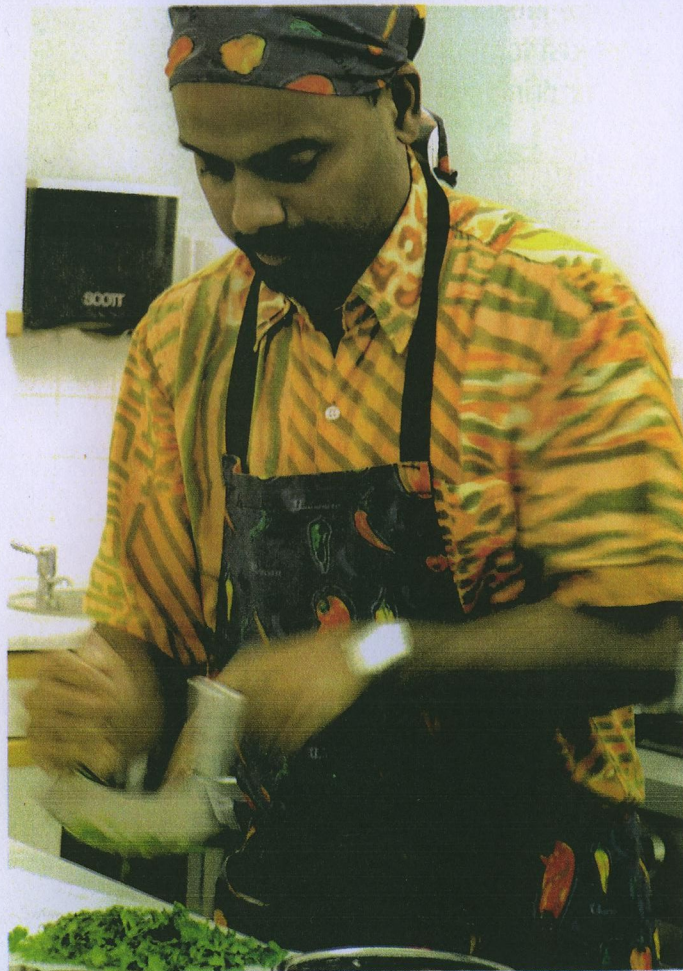


THE SPICE OF LIFE

Meet Bosco Santimano, the Peebles-based Goan chef who cooks up a feast of Indian flavours in his customers' homes. **Nichola Hunter** samples his enthusiasm ... and his food



Bosco Santimano says all he needs in a client's kitchen is a hob, a small working area and running water

For a small country with a gruff exterior, Scotland doesn't do too badly on the multi-cultural stakes. I'm aware of our large Italian and Chinese communities, but Goan cuisine in Peebles? That was a new one on me.

My introduction to this new dining experience was a lunchtime visit to the home of Bosco Santimano, owner and founder of AromatiCuisine.

Bosco hails from Goa in India and found his way to Scotland via a cruise ship ... and love. He was working as a steward on a cruise ship in 1997 when he met and fell in love with Hanisa, an Italian. When they decided to marry, Hanisa didn't want to return to Europe so they opted for India.

"The culture drove Hanisa mad," says Bosco. So they returned to Italy while they figured out what to do next, and decided to see if the UK would suit them better.

Their first stop was London, but as Bosco recalls: "It wasn't a very good experience – too chaotic, aggressive and expensive. We had jobs but the money came in and went straight out again. We didn't have a life.

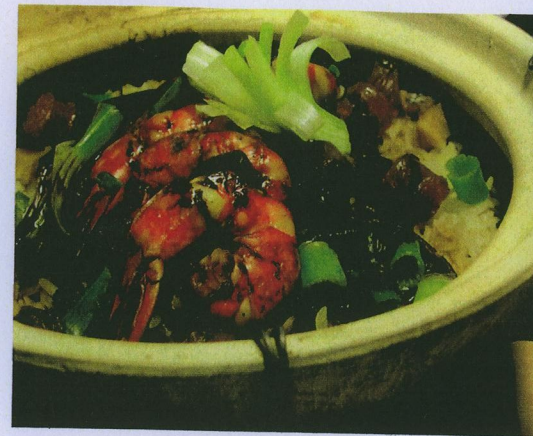
"However, as Hanisa had done lots of travelling before we met, she had a friend in Scotland who suggested we come up here. She told us it was a completely different place to London but I admit that we didn't really believe her until we arrived.

"She was right. From the moment we arrived in Glasgow on the overnight bus, everyone said 'Good morning' and 'Hello'. It was so different from London in an instant."

The Santimanos found work in Pitlochry for the summer season then moved to Edinburgh so that Hanisa could do a shiatsu course. Bosco worked in the catering industry and for the NHS. After stints in the civil service and then in the voluntary sector, he was made redundant.

The couple had settled in Peebles by then, but headed for Italy for inspiration for what to do next.

"Throughout this period, friends suggested



AromatiCuisine provides a comprehensive service, from dishes such as Goan King Prawns to the table decor

that I start my own Goan restaurant. They thought it would be a great success since they had tasted my food over the years and there is no Goan cuisine available in Scotland. That was when the idea of AromatiCuisine came up," Bosco says.

The concept of AromatiCuisine was a simple one: clients hire Bosco to come to their home, prepare a Goan meal, talk about the dishes he's cooked, serve it up and leave the kitchen as he found it, all for the reasonable sum of £30 per head (for a minimum of eight people).

The idea is popular in India, Canada, America and London, and while doing his research, it was a conversation with the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce that gave Bosco the encouragement to give it a go in Scotland.

"They planted the real seed as they suggested that by doing it this way, and catering in people's homes, I didn't have to lay out huge sums of money. It was a struggle for the first two years, but in the third year it took off. I'm now in year four and most of my business is from word of mouth and referrals."

The reason for Bosco's success is threefold: his willingness to learn and adapt from the feedback from clients, the support from his family, and his exuberant personality.

When you ask Bosco to cater for a dinner party you get the Bosco ambience as well, as Hanisa describes: "Bosco is never nervous, even on his first job! He's so relaxed about the cooking and the whole process of bringing the meal together. I don't think Bosco is all about the food; it's the atmosphere he brings. He's just himself and clients really like that."

Bosco adds: "I learned a lot over the first few years. I now have a template which I work from and I studied the feedback forms to discover what clients want in Scotland. I'm happy for the host or hostess to be in the kitchen while I'm cooking or for the guests to come in and see what I'm doing.

"Once the food is prepared (all of it is done

on the client's premises, nothing is made in advance), I serve it the traditional Goan way where all the food is laid out on the table and then people can take second and third helpings. There are three dishes plus rice, all in main course sizes so there is plenty for everyone. I then introduce the food and answer any questions."

To complement the dining experience, Bosco supplies a CD of Goan music and the table is dressed with beautiful decorations which Hanisa makes. The clients supply plates, cutlery and glasses.

You don't have to be dripping with dosh to enjoy Bosco's skills but surely you still need a rather posh kitchen to accommodate him? Not so. While I was interviewing Bosco, he was preparing a delicious lunch in his small galley kitchen. He was busy attending to the xacuti (Goan chicken curry with aromatic spices) and the saffron rice on the hob while Hanisa was preparing a home-grown salad picked from their allotment. It was a tight squeeze with three of us in the "boiler room" as Bosco calls the kitchen, but he maintains that all he really needs in a client's kitchen is a hob, a small work area and hot running water.

As a result, more and more people are choosing to enjoy Bosco's skills and he has a varied client list, from renowned author and India aficionado Aline Dobbie (whose books include India: The Peacock's Call, India: The Tiger's Roar and India: The Elephant's Blessing) to young couples looking for an authentic alternative to an Indian takeaway or restaurant, or friends and families simply desiring something different to the traditional dinner party.

"The one thing they all have in common is that they are all people open to a new experience," says Bosco.

Aline says: "Bosco was a total delight to have in my kitchen, produced delicious food and helped to create the ambience by bringing flower petals to strew on the table, flowers, and a disc of Mariachi Goan music to really

put you in the mood. I thoroughly recommend the experience for those who like Indian food."

It's an experience that many choose to repeat and most of Bosco's referrals come from people who have attended a dinner party organised by a friend and then want to try it themselves.

"I took a census after three years to discover which dishes were most popular and these are the mainstay on the menu now. I have many repeat clients but quite often they'll stick with the menu they had previously," says Bosco.

If you feel like getting a bit more hands on in the kitchen, Bosco also offers a Learn & Dine option where he will come to your home and teach you and a minimum of three friends how to create two Goan recipes from scratch. You can then enjoy the fruits of your labours and take away all the information you need to recreate these dishes again at a later date.

Bosco has also recently set up a community interest company, You Can Cook, which works along similar lines to a charitable organisation. The aim of the project is to educate and create awareness within the community regarding the basics of cooking, with a major emphasis on healthy eating. There are specialised classes for people with specific health issues such as diabetes, heart problems, allergies etc.

"AromatiCuisine is aimed at a niche market and my personality is to involve everybody and You Can Cook allows me to do that," Bosco says.

His enthusiasm for his work is infectious and he and Hanisa are a great double act. The lunch they created for me was fabulous. The xacuti, served with a home-grown salad and Hanisa's dressing, was delicious.

INFORMATION

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