



By Vengrai Parthsarthy

I like food—whether it is sauteed, broiled, boiled, fried or roasted—so long as it is done by someone else. My acquaintance with cooking is sort of primitive and for obvious reasons I would like it to remain that way. I did not know that milk, when heated, boiled over and that water does not. I learnt these preliminaries the hard way—in the school of experience and did not make much progress.

Talking of cooking leads one to the word Cook (capitalized with a purpose). There is something derogatory about it. Perhaps that's why the chief cook in a hotel is called the Chef. I racked my brains for a suitable substitute word. 'Dish Transformer' sounded like a piece of Engineering. 'Kitchen Alchemist' was too pompous and some how leads one to think of gold being converted. Or rather some base metal being converted to gold. I liked 'Menu Maker' but how many are ready for the change. This will call for a regular campaign, a lot of publicity, spade work and, most important, the willing cooperation of the ladies who dominate the kitchen scene by choice or necessity.

I remember the Chief Executive Officer of an Advertising agency give the definition of Creativity thus. "It is what your wife has when she is suddenly required to produce a meal for half a dozen unexpected guests."

Faced with such a prospect what would a man do? Ring up the nearest restaurant and order for a couple of Pizzas and open a few bottles of beer. Of course that is also creativity of sorts, if you ask me. What does a creative woman referred to by the CEO do under similar circumstances—specially if she has a larder bare, except for the inevitable onion, carrots and beet-roots? That's when imagination and innovation take the place of frustration and despair. In half-an-hour you have a dinner of tortillas, beet root sabzi (look-

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rot raita, onion Sambhar, and rice and of course pappads and pickles. As you burp for the third time you can't help feeling that you can't beat that for sheer improvisation. Or, what one would like to call 'measuring up.'

This is one category for cooks—the ones who produce something out of nothing—the Creative ones.

Then there is the second category who require a long list of things (don't forget the asafoetida!) before they would even light up the gas range. You produce what they want and they produce what you want—a reasonable variety of dishes to satisfy the palate. Nothing great, one might say but then... one has to be reasonable, what? Passable is the word that comes to mind.

There is this third category of women (oops, I mean cooks!) who, given every ingredient, still can't produce a meal fit for a tramp. An extra dash of salt here, some uncooked potatoes there (pardon

me, Mr. Dan Quayle) an anemic soup and you know why the place where meals are served is called a Mess. Incurrable is the right word.

When it comes to eating, men are by nature, gourmands, gourmets or gluttons, call them what you will. But when it comes to cooking they are never up to the mark (except some men—show-offs who make much of their culinary capabilities).

Ask the men to cook for a royal banquet and here they come ready with their ladles and all, to answer the hotel's call. But, at home, ask them to cut a few onions, they are clumsy as clumsy could be. This syndrome puzzles me no end but then the reason is not far to seek. I have a secret suspicion that it has something to do with fears of rigorous imprisonment in the kitchen. Better be dubbed as Mr. All-Thumbs and Mr. No-Good than be condemned to a life-long career of getting things to be sauteed, broiled, boiled, fried and roasted. No, thank you.

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