

LIFE & TIMES **FAMILY**



Food for thought

Award-winning food writer Mohana Gill tells **Aneeta Sundararaj** about her disciplined childhood which instilled in her an early passion for cooking

THE photographer is already packing his equipment but award-winning writer Mohana Gill makes a request: "Please take a photo of me and my cat," says the 78-year-old, before adding: "Poor thing. He met with an accident a few weeks ago. Now Mochi is incontinent and has to use diapers."

On cue, little Mochi meows his discomfort. Photos taken, the cat saunters away to be pitied upon, played with and looked after by Mohana's other pets — two dogs, three cats and two puppies.

"It's like a zoo here," she says, before settling down on her sofa and handing me a copy of her latest book that has won an award — a book on Myanmar's cuisine.

Why would a Malaysian Indian choose to write about the food of the country? When Mohana tells her story, it becomes clear that she has come full circle.

HARD TIMES

"I was born in Myanmar. In Patheingyi (Bassein), to be precise.

I speak, read and write Burmese fluently, and have friends and former students who are still living there," says the mother of three grown children.

"My grandfather was in the First World War. He came from Rajputana to Burma (as it then was) with the British Army. When the war ended, he married my grandmother — we don't know who she really was because she died when my mother was very young. We suspect that she must have been Burmese because we look like we have some Burmese blood. Anyway, during the Second World War, my father was taken into the detention camp by the Japanese. Every day, my mother went to the camp where the Kempeitai was. She would sit outside and ask to see my father. She gave the guards clean clothes for him and insisted she get his old ones back. That way, she knew he was still alive. I saw how this brave woman was able to convince the stoic Japanese soldiers to do what she wanted."

Mohana's father did leave the camp, malnourished but very glad to be home. When the war ended, he moved his family to Rangoon (Yangon), determined that all his children get an education. Tragedy

struck one day — when he returned home he complained of chest pains. By seven in the evening, he was dead.

"Can you imagine what it was like for my mother?" asks Mohana, a tinge of sadness in her voice at the memory of such difficult times. "Here she was, with five children between the ages of 2 and 14 years. My aunt, my mother's only sister, suggested we move back to Patheingyi with her. My mother refused because she wanted to fulfil my father's wishes and give us all an education.

With steely resolve, Mohana's mother set about bringing up her children and inculcating them with good values.

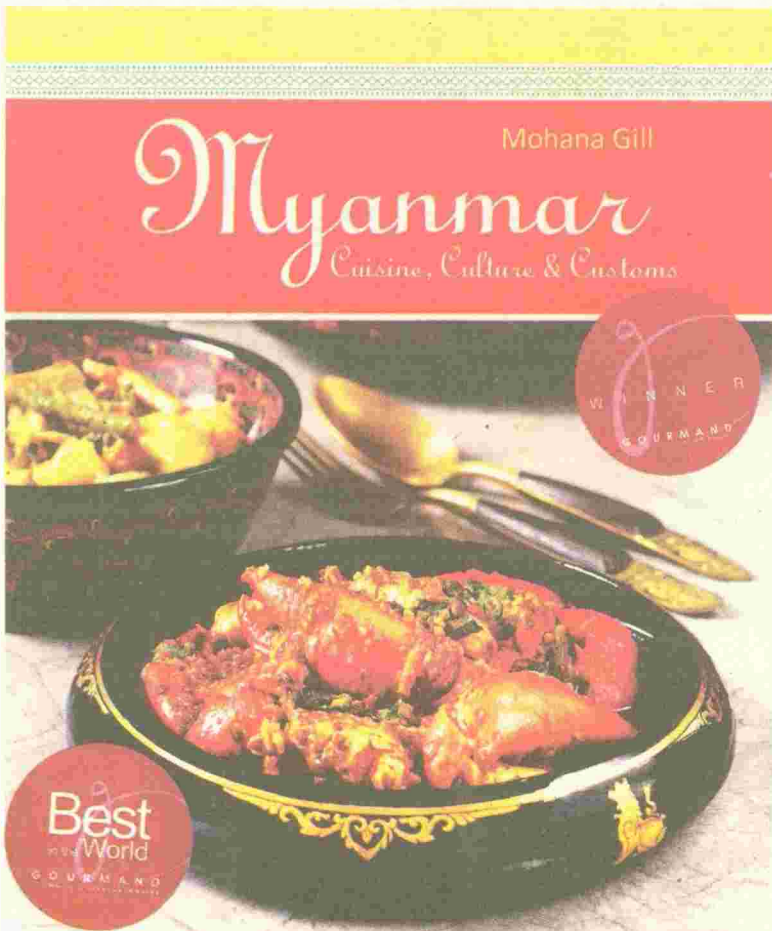
"My mother always insisted on dignity of labour," she explains. "We had to do everything ourselves. All of us had to learn cooking, cleaning, sewing, dancing, singing and so on. My interest, even at that time, was cooking. My sister liked sewing. When it was my turn to do the sewing, I would tell my sister that if she did the sewing, I would do the cooking for her."

In time, Mohana obtained scholarships to study in universities overseas and worked in various countries before moving to the Faculty of Economics and Administration at University Malaya in the 1960s. "In 1967, I met

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my husband and as they say, the rest is history."

One can't miss that air of serenity about Mohana when she says: "I had three sons in four years, and I can tell you, those 12 years when I was a full-time stay-at-home mother were the happiest years of my life. It was a feeling of being wanted and needed."

A quick smile and she adds: "You know, children will eat what they cook. When my sons were young, I made one day a week cooking day. All of us used to be in the kitchen. We would bake a cake, make cookies or do something. The kitchen was always a mess. They would say to my husband when he came home from work, 'Papa, look at what we cooked.' It was not 'Look at what Mummy cooked'. Children must know about food. Ask a child today where you get a pineapple and he'll probably say, 'in the supermarket'. This is very sad."

In 2006, with her children all grown up, Mohana says she needed "to do something for my sanity. Cooking is my passion. But when my friends suggested I publish a cookbook, I thought, 'Another cookbook?' Who wants another one? So, I decided to concentrate on fruits and that's what led to *Fruitastic*."

Citing her husband as her biggest supporter, today she has several award-winning cookbooks. In the process, she also opened a cafe called *Fruitastic Express* located at a private hospital. She says: "It's a comfort zone for patients and visitors. Here, they can get something simple, healthy and delicious."

Reverting to her love of cooking, she adds: "I always think that a recipe is only a guide. Like a painter, the recipe gives you the canvas and the paints you must use. But the

picture you create — like the dish you cook — is yours."

BEST OF THE BEST

The Gourmand World Cookbook Awards were founded in 1995 by Edouard Cointreau. It celebrates global cookbook and wine book publishing and features many world renowned chefs each year. It is sometimes described as the Oscars Of Food Awards. Mohana says, pride in her voice: "This is the most prestigious award-giving authority in the world."

In 2007, her first book, *Fruitastic* was the recipient of The Gourmand Special Jury Award. *Fruitastic* is dedicated to fruits and has information about more than 40 fruits and innovative recipes where fruit is the main ingredient.

This five-time Gourmand World Cookbook Award winner's latest offering is *Myanmar: Cuisine, Culture And Customs*. From the quiet simplicity of Myanmar's rural towns to the bustle of modern day Yangon, it captures the sights, sounds and flavours of a country that has, until recent years, been isolated from the rest of the world.

Mohana says that both books have been given two more awards: "What Gourmand has done is to take all the cookbooks that have won the Best In The World between 1995 and 2015. I am so lucky that they have nominated *Fruitastic* as Best of the Best in the category of Fruit Books. And, they have also nominated *Myanmar: Cuisine, Culture And Customs* as Best of the Best in the category of Asian Cuisine."

Mohana plans to attend the awards ceremony at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2015 when the final recipient of these awards will be announced.

SMART PARENTING

Strength in gentleness



ZAID MOHAMMAD

THERE was a very successful farmer who reared many sheep. One day, the mother sheep was killed by a wolf, leaving a number of little lambs behind. One particular lamb was very stubborn. She missed her mother so much that she wouldn't cooperate when it was time to go back to the cage. The farmer tried every way possible to make her move. He pushed, pulled and even tried to carry the lamb, but to no avail. Instead of moving, she would fight her way out.

So the farmer gave up and sought help. He called one of his stronger workers to come forward and solve the problem. The muscular young man smiled confidently as he stepped forward to take on the challenge. But after a long time spent pushing and shoving the lamb, she still didn't budge and the young man failed.

In the background, the farmer's

grandma was watching the whole episode. She then stepped forward to give it a try. The young man and the other workers laughed at her. In their eyes, she was a "frail old lady" who couldn't even carry the lightest load, let alone make a stubborn lamb move.

But within seconds, the laughter stopped and everyone was watching in awe. She easily led the lamb back into the cage with little drama. How did she do it? Grandma just put her thumb inside the lamb's mouth and let her suck it. It turned out that the lamb was missing her mother and by sucking the thumb, it calmed down.

That was a great story I received on the Internet as it highlighted that sometimes might is not always right. Sometimes, we just have to be gentle to make a big difference. Now, let's try to re-apply the story in the parenting context. How many times have you tried to make something "move" by using might? This can come in the form of yelling, scolding, pushing and shoving. Did you get the desired results? Or did you get more resistance in return?

Sometimes, we may feel that we have to show our power to solve a problem. In doing so, we may even force our way through. But children are very much like the little lamb.

They may resist our force by misbehaving and rebelling even more. By then, we would get frustrated, creating a negative environment along the way.

As grandma proved, a little wisdom and gentleness go a long way towards bringing the family closer. To get our kids and family to respond better, we have to be smart and provide what they need most. In many cases, all they might need is our loving attention.

Can you recall the last time you spoke nicely to your spouse and kids? What were their reactions and response? I'm pretty sure it was a calm and harmonious interaction.

Now, let's harness this power of gentleness to the maximum. More problems can be resolved harmoniously this way. Let's show them that we are stronger despite being gentler. Most importantly, let's ensure that our kids and family will look back at us as one of the gentlest and kindest parents around.

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The story of the little lamb highlighted that sometimes *might is not always right*.