

# PEOPLE

Who you need to know



## The Facts

**Who**  
Vikram Vij

**Position**  
Celebrity chef,  
restaurateur and  
manufacturer

**What's New?**  
Two soon-to-be-  
announced product  
lines for grocery

## SPICE KING

Vikram Vij is seeking to match his restaurant success at the grocery store

By Raizel Robin

Photography by Adam Blasberg

**VIKRAM VIJ SOUNDS A LITTLE** tired over the phone. It's no wonder: somewhere between running his four restaurants, overseeing a 28,000-sq.-ft. manufacturing facility, launching a new line of frozen meals and releasing an autobiography (*Vij: A Chef's One-way Ticket to Canada with Indian Spices in His Suitcase*), the Vancouver celebrity chef has just returned from a trip to Delhi.

The purpose of the dizzyingly quick trip—he flew there and back in 24 hours—was to taste the new meal he had developed for Air Canada, which is being served on its flights to India. He wanted to eat the food exactly as it was served: at 37,000 feet. “I needed to experience the whole flight,” says Vij. “Was there too much or too little food? How was my stomach feeling when I got to Delhi? What was missing? At altitude, your palate is completely different than when you're on the ground.” He came away enlightened; he has plans to add more olive oil and spices to the meal, and maybe some yogurt as well.

It's that tight quality control and obsessive attention to detail that have helped Vij's food stand out. Starting out in the kitchens of an Austrian ski resort and later at the Banff Springs Hotel, Vij dreamed of opening a restaurant that served the Indian cuisine he grew up on but with an approach that was more fine dining. Presenting Indian food is tough,” he says. “It's brown, browner and brownish. I wanted proper service and stemware.”

By 1994, he opened Vij's, a 16-seat restaurant in Vancouver. Fast forward 10 years, the restaurant, at a roomier location, was beloved for its vibrant take on Indian food. His cooking attracted many visiting celebrities including Pierre Trudeau, Martha Stewart and Tom Cruise. Vij himself, a gregarious host and restaurateur, had also become

famous in the foodie community.

In 2004, when local independent grocer Stong's Market approached him to develop a line of prepared curries, he was ready to take the leap into grocery. Vij opened another restaurant, Rangoli, and used it to test the product line over the next three years.

He broke ground for his manufacturing facility in 2007, a 28,000-sq.-ft. factory in South Surrey, B.C. All the while he continued to build his brand,

publishing two cookbooks, joining CBC's reality show, *Dragons' Den* and making regular media appearances. Soon enough, he had secured orders from 20 more stores.

The biggest challenge of moving into retail was learning how to cook on a large scale. “Cooking in a restaurant is somewhat whimsical,” says Vij. “Being a manufacturer is an exact science.” He went from boiling chickpeas in stockpots to boiling them in 568-litre kettles. And when mistakes happened, they were costly. For six and a half years, the factory suffered losses of up to \$50,000 per month. Even for an entrepreneur whose cooking empire is worth about \$50 million, it was no small drop in the bucket.

Today, the Vij's At Home brand is available in grocery stores across the country. The line of prepared Indian foods includes Coconut Beef Curry, Saag & Paneer, Curried Chickpeas and bagged, frozen Indian meals—more than a dozen SKUs in total, each retailing for less than \$10.

Profitability, says Vij, is “just around the corner.” The facility's revenue has grown a whopping 37% in the past year. Not only that, Vij is set to release two new product lines for grocery in May.

With 17 SKUs plus the foodservice lines, the number of people Vij is feeding has grown exponentially. At his factory, however, everything is still made by hand. His 24 employees chop and cook the tomatoes and onions, and his spices are roasted and ground by hand. “It's like a giant kitchen,” he says.

Vij continues to take great pride in his modern twist on traditional Indian food, and that means his personal touch is never compromised. “When you come to my house,” he says of his cooking style, “I want you to eat Vij's food, not just Indian food.” **CG**

### 30 SECONDS WITH: VIKRAM VIJ

#### ON COOKING FOR MARTHA STEWART

I made a chutney with mint, mango and cilantro. But I wanted to throw her a curveball so I added green mangoes to it. I gave it to her and said, “Tell me what you think it is.” And she said, “What I really taste here is this green mango.” I was floored. I had so much respect for her; she really knows her ingredients.

#### ON COOKING FOR TOM CRUISE

He was on a diet. I cooked him daal, vegetables and naan and he was happy with it. But it was Katie Holmes [Cruise's former wife] who really enjoyed my food.

#### ON HIS FAVOURITE CUISINE, ASIDE FROM INDIAN

We're lucky to live in a country where we have so many cuisines to choose from. Korean, Chinese, Italian—we have a diverse, beautiful country.

#### ON HIS FAVOURITE VEGETABLE TO COOK WITH

Red wine grapes. [Laughs.] I usually have a couple of glasses when I'm cooking. At least, if not a bottle!