

Q+A

THE MASTER AS CHEF

Nobel Laureate **ABHIJIT BANERJEE** takes his cooking as seriously as he does economics. *Cooking to Save Your Life*, his new book of recipes, reads like a long list of awards anyone can win if they put food first

Q. You say you want to liberate our “inner gourmet cooks” with this book. What made you want to take on this project?

I love cooking. I think it is incredibly therapeutic. It is a domain where, unlike most forms of creativity, you get results fast. That helps because I'm impatient. Also, it's the only art which is unavoidable for us. We all do it, so we might as well enjoy it.

Q. You give us recipes for dishes like South Indian-style stir-fried brussels sprouts. Are these mostly culinary experiments or are you also commenting on how we live today?

No, I wasn't theorising about globalisation. I just really like ingredients and I am very mindful of them. With brussels sprouts, for instance, there are often only two ways to handle them—you either roast them or eat them raw. But I found you can also boil them and make a sambhar. That turned out nicely.

Q. What did you cook to celebrate winning the Nobel? Do achievements affect the way you cook?

I don't remember what I cooked that night, but since we don't go out to eat, I'm sure I must have cooked something fresh. I like cooking and doing other non-work things, such as playing tennis and ping-pong, in a very systematic way. But, yes, work can complement cooking. If you're in a good mood after work, you'll be a bit more ambitious in the kitchen. If you're tired mentally, your cooking suffers.

Q. The Global Hunger Index suggests not enough Indians are getting food. How do we start tackling this problem?

We haven't solved the problem of malnutrition, but in the past 15 years, we have improved in some ways. Income is a factor; more money has reached rural India; schemes like NREGA have helped. But our welfare system, I feel, may be too weighted toward food. The urban poor have no access to anything except food support. Some social welfare programmes for them would be great. But that said, if the economy revives, I think hunger will go down.

—with Shreevatsa Nevatia



Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH