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Chef Damu's RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

He is the first in India to receive PhD in Hotel Management and Catering Technology

Shalini Umachandran | TNN

Chennai: "Name an ingredient and I'll give you a recipe," says K Damodaran, better known as Chef Damu to his legions of fans from Mambalam to Matunga who tune into his television and radio shows. And every ingredient you throw at him is turned into a simple-sounding, three-step dish. "Instant recipes are my speciality, I call them the Damu special," he says with unaffected pride.

The celebrity chef has just got his PhD in Hotel Management and Catering Technology, the first person in the country to do a doctorate on the subject. "It's been my dream to do a PhD in catering management but Madras University kept saying they could not find me a guide," he says. After years of cajoling, the university finally agreed, in October 2004, to let him start his PhD.

"But they could only appoint a guide from the engineering field with knowledge of catering technology. He helped me with the writing," says the chef, who defended his thesis on July 3 before 69 professionals from various fields. He had to contact friends in Germany, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and the US to gather information for his thesis, which was on the rather unusual subject, 'Distance Education for Training in Hotel Management and Catering Technology'.

"Many people working at lower levels in the hospitality industry find it hard to rise through the ranks. If there is a distance education course, it will add to their work experience and qualify them for promotions," he explains. He's hoping that colleges will take inspiration from his thesis, which not only sets out the curriculum but also explains how to structure and run the course. "I have structured it in such a way that even a person who has passed class VIII will be eligible," he says.

Damodaran, who has hosted cooking programmes on Raj TV, Pothigai, Jaya TV and Vijay TV over the last five years and a long-running show on Radio Mirchi, has headed institutions such as Asan Catering College and MGR Institute of Hotel Management and has been with Empee Institute of Hotel Management and Catering Technology since last year. "My experience in academics, along with the years I spent as a chef in various five-star hotels, made me realise that such a course was necessary for people who cannot take time off to study," says Damodaran, who has been cooking since the age of seven.

"The first time I made semiya kichidi, it got

stuck to the pan, but I'm happy to say I've never had another disaster in the kitchen," he says, laughing. The cheery chef is passionate about Tamil Nadu food. "My passion is Chettinad food," he says.

Damodaran grinds his own masalas — and exhorts his fans to do the same. "It's easy to make them in a mixie. Food is first about the smell; the look, which is the way you present it; and only then taste," he says. He travels to the Karaikudi region almost every weekend to collect recipes. "It's one of the few regions in the country that has retained its 2,000-year-old traditions of cooking," he says.

Damodaran has done 17 cookbooks for housewives with 2,700 recipes and four books for catering students, apart from the many recipes he reels off during his TV shows.

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CHEF, AND NOW A DOCTOR: K Damodaran