

Romy Gill

Food writer, cookbook author and previously chef-owner of Romy's Kitchen in Gloucestershire

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'I want to be known as a chef first. Then, as a female chef. I want my food to look pretty when it is going out over the pass not because I am a woman, but because you eat with your eyes. I am a feminist,' Romy Gill tells me, with the spirit of a woman who spent almost two years trying to get a bank loan for her restaurant, seven years running it, and has in the meantime written a cookbook and raised two now-teenage daughters. 'I want people to know that. I want my daughters to see.'

As it is, they'd struggle to miss her. Though Gill relinquished Romy's Kitchen in Thornbury, a market town between Bristol and Gloucester, in 2019, her public profile has gone from strength to strength, with an MBE, regular appearances on television, features in newspapers and residencies

across the country. In 2020 it was announced she would be co-hosting BBC One's revival of hit 90s series *Ready Steady Cook*. 'I remember watching it when I moved to this country, thinking how amazing it would be to be Green Pepper or Red Pepper, never dreaming I could actually be on there,' she says wonderingly. It's a far cry from the Bengali steel plant she grew up in with her parents, surrounded by families who had travelled from all over India to work there; but then it's also unlikely she'd be where she is today if it wasn't for that unique childhood.

'If my dad hadn't worked in that steel plant; if he hadn't left North India to go over to West Bengal; then I wouldn't know and understand the flavours and cuisines of people from all over India.





My best friends were from Bengal, Kerala, Kashmir, Nepal, and when people migrate, they take their identity with them, in their language, rituals and food.' Her turning point – the point at which she realised she could make money from her talent for cooking – came when she noticed how different she was from most Indian émigrés. 'Most Indian food writers and chefs in this country will only know the food of the region of India that their family is from; I can talk about the cuisines of many regions.' She is both indebted to her culinary heritage, and free to carve her own path through it.

Yet it is a long road from deciding to be a chef to becoming one; and it's even longer if you're a woman of colour with two children and no formal training. Though Gill had worked solidly for four years running cookery classes, catering for events and selling her sauces, samosas and chutneys at markets, the bank refused to stump up the cash for her to open a restaurant of her own. 'I wanted it to be my restaurant. I didn't want to own it with my husband,' she says – which would have been an easier way of securing a loan payment. One of the reasons the title of 'chef' matters so much to Gill is because she's fought so hard for it: selling her jewellery to raise the money for the restaurant, then, after it opened, working around the clock to build its reputation.

'I didn't see my kids for five years. But I knew that in order to establish my restaurant I needed to do that.' Owning a small restaurant in a small town, there was a limit to how much she could charge, and how many people she could employ. Her strong social media presence – her strong media presence – today belies the fact that for ten years she's been in a tiny kitchen 'actually cooking' for guests who flocked from around the country.

'I managed the reservations, the finances and cooked the food. I am a chef, and I want journalists to understand that.' Much as she respects the influencers of Instagram, 'they couldn't cook in a restaurant. It is a very different thing.'

Whether she will open another restaurant remains to be seen; for now, she is focused on her forthcoming book, *On the Himalayan Trail*, restaurant residencies and her TV slots and newspaper spreads. Having platforms like *Ready Steady Cook* and a regular recipe column in the *Independent* matters because 'women are great chefs. They are in restaurants. But they are not being noticed enough.' The newspaper supplements and prime-time TV series are 'men, men, men' – in part, she continues, 'because of the cliquishness of the industry.'

'Andi Oliver (p.18) is changing that. She's doing brilliant things,' says Gill – while for her own part, she hopes being the first female Indian chef to be awarded an MBE will 'shine a light for other women.' Ideologically, she knows how important it is that women, particularly women of colour, 'can see that I have done it'; yet Gill's reputation for running or collaborating in charity suppers (many of them led by all-female kitchens) shows that she thrives on being of practical use, whether that's for Action Against Hunger, young Indian entrepreneurs or BAME communities affected by Covid-19.

'I remember at the steel plant, women from all over India drying spices and pickling fruits and chopping together. They would help each other and share each other's food. That's how I grew up – so if any woman needs my help, I will help them,' Gill enthuses – 'not to follow in my footsteps, but to stand on their own feet and say, "This is what I do."'