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SUBHEADLINE: She is the queen of cookery class, a successful restaurateur and the newly elected president of the International Women's Club _ but the woman affectionately known as Mrs Balbir has overcome great misfortune along the way, making her story truly food for thought

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If each endured wound was a weapon, Vinder Balbir, better known as Mrs Balbir, would be an army on her own. From physical injury to heart-wrenching sorrow and unbearable suffering, Vinder has experienced it all.

Very rarely does a life with such a dramatic beginning later blossom into a remarkable success story.

This is the paradox from which Mrs Balbir, celebrity chef, cooking teacher and TV host, set herself up as great winner, she who is now known from Seoul to Singapore as ``Mrs B'', ``Ma Spice'', ``the ideal cooking teacher'', ``a Bangkok Institution'', and more. Recently elected president of Thailand's International Women's Club, her appearance on the television talk show Joh Jai in 1999 had the highest ratings that year.

``God has given me this gift for cooking, and I turned it into a profession. Cooking is a way to touch my inner self, to take my stress away," explains Vinder, in the cosy yet bubbling atmosphere of her apartment on a back soi of Sukhumvit 15.

Perhaps it is not without good reason that God indeed endowed her with this stress-reducing passion for flattering her palate and her stomach (and by extension her lucky guests), because life for Vinder has taken many turns, the obscure forces of strain and stress starting in her tender childhood years.

Her magic touch in transforming and making the most of whatever is available _ on the cooking table or within the sphere of her own life _ would prove to be very helpful throughout her life.

Born in Kuala Lumpur to Sikh parents who worked in the real estate business, tragedy struck Vinder at the age of 11, with the speed of an M-16 bullet fired in the midst of Malaysia's worst racial riots on May 13, 1969. On that very day, little Vinder, who as she explains, ``was hanging on to her mother's dress", lost both her father and mother _ shot in front of her as they were trying to help a neighbour during the curfew.

Vinder was shot in the stomach but luckily, a little ``chubby" as she was, the wound was not fatal.

``I don't how I made it but I survived," says Vinder.

Another ordeal followed: the separation from her two brothers who were sent to India where their wealthy landowner grandfather lived, while Vinder and her younger sister were sent off to a convent boarding school in Malacca, run by Italian nuns.

The young Vinder Sachdev came out a few years later, imbibed more by the love for pizzas, pastas, cakes and puddings than by the recitation of sacred hymns.

A new chapter of her life was to open as her four aunts living in Bangkok were busy preparing for the young lady's arranged marriage. After a few refusals, mostly from suitors not interested in a girl without a dowry, Vinder gave her consent to the last number on the list; Balbir Thakral, a tailor and employee of an Indian textile factory owner in Bangkok.

With no money _ ``just a hundred baht in a Bangkok Bank account", no home nor possessions, Balbir still made a sincere proposal to the bride: ``I have nothing to offer you, but I can offer you LOVE!"

Vinder's sore orphaned heart couldn't resist the offer. ``Wow! That's indeed what I need the most: Love. Money can always come later," Vinder remembers herself saying, and bursts in a song:

``I am nobody's child,

Just like the flowers

I am growing wild.

I've got no mummy's kisses,

I've got no, no daddy's smile..."

Money did indeed eventually come. But later, much later, although the newly married woman quickly realised that one couldn't live on love alone as there were many bills to pay. The first years of marriage were spent trying to make ends meet, living in a borrowed apartment on Sukhumvit Soi 22, with Balbir earning 3,000 baht or so a month and Vinder 10 baht a class for teaching Italian cooking and the secrets of blueberry cheese cake and other delicacies to expatriates.

Garam Masalas and vegetarian samosas were still nowhere in sight but as no self-respecting Indian wants to survive in a world without briyani rice or naan bread, Balbir soon initiated his wife to the delights of Indian cooking, Punjabi cuisine to be precise.

After three years of marriage, Vinder gave birth to a baby daughter, who was to grow into a cute little girl until death cut her down at the age of 11, following three months of coma due to kidney failure. This tragedy occurred only one year after the couple had endured their second child's cot-death, a few days after his birth.

The devastation caused by these two consecutive traumas was indescribable. The couple, whose youngest son, Sunny, was only two, plunged into a deep depression.

Mrs Balbir's Pizza House on Sukhumvit 11_ her first endeavour, a modest place near the old Charlie's Bar that could seat only 11 guests_ had to be closed down because of financial difficulties. It had been operating for six years. The huge hospital bills for her daughter's care delivered a hard and final blow to the couple's precariously balanced budget.

“I was completely shattered and had lost all interest in working. I stopped for a while to pull myself together. I could not even afford some sessions of counselling that I needed so badly,” commented Vinder, sipping a cup of black tea.

But with the help of her husband, Vinder managed to fight her way back again. After having run a tailor shop for a few years, Balbir gathered sufficient money to buy a new restaurant and the one that still stands, Mrs Balbir's, on Soi 11/1.

“He gave me the keys on my birthday and said, ‘Mrs Balbir must come to life again!’” remembers Vinder with a smile.

God knows which heavenly material these little keys were made of. Apart from unlocking the restaurant's now famous dark glass door, they opened up a new world for the family, with much fulfilment and happiness in store.

Switching to Indian food – so customers could better relate her Asian looks with the food she served – Mrs Balbir's restaurant was one of only a few Indian restaurants in Bangkok 20 years ago, such as Cafe India on Surawong Road and Royal India in Phahurat.

“Actually I shocked many people, especially my relatives, as a girl from a respected Indian family was not supposed to get involved in such a business,” recalls Vinder. Whatever the orthodox views on the matter, Vinder discovered her true self in the trade, building on her personality little by little, discovering the world through the lorgnette her customers held up for her.

“I saw the world through my customers. Whatever I am today, is because of all those who one day walked in my restaurant and shared their story with me. They opened my mind, they changed me. I believe each person always had a specific message for me, which took me one step further,” Vinder noted, swearing more by the personal touch than by the food to explain the success of her business.

But to start with, the attentiveness of Vinder to meet customers' every need was animated more by a mother's concern to raise money for her family than by some kind of unquenchable thirst for knowledge. “As a simple person, I only wanted to sell my food and make ends meet. That was my first motive really.”

Whatever the delicious or heart-warming alchemy behind it, Mrs Balbir's was an instant hit with Indian cuisine aficionados flocking to indulge in delightfully moist tandoori chicken, superb curries, creamy kulfi ice cream, crispy vegetarian or paneer-stuffed samosas, and many more.

“It became something different, with a woman's touch, not just a place to eat but to communicate and chat, as if customers were coming to eat in my house but sorry, you have to pay!” explained Vinder, teeming with stories of people's lives told in her eatery.

“My restaurant became a drama house; some people coming in a happy mood, some sad, some in love, some fighting and throwing food at each other, staining the walls, some agreeing on big business deals, some asking for baby nappies or camera batteries,” Vinder laughed, and she ended up putting up a list of services available at her restaurant.

Meanwhile, Vinder never stopped teaching, adding Thai food to her repertoire, herself learning from friends and street stall cooks.

“Ideas started pouring out ... I started teaching at people's homes as entertainment. Television came into my life with Channel 36's UBC Series Hot Spots, then Destination Thailand, plus from time to time, Travel Asia on Star TV,” explained Vinder, who soon was the inviting figure behind numerous food festivals and culinary events.

The restaurateur aura expanded tremendously to become one of Thailand's most popular culinary icons, furthering the Indian cuisine renaissance.

``Thai people tend to be very adventurous as far as Italian or French cooking is concerned but when it came to Indian food, there was a jam somewhere, maybe because of a false idea that Indian cuisine smells! It got much better though."

Nowadays, Vinder is juggling with her many hats, dividing her time between handling the restaurant _ where her husband works _ giving cooking classes, running after newsworthy stories to feature in her ``Bangkok Spice with Mrs Balbir programme on UBC Series, cooking and hosting cultural discussions on the Magic Eyes barge on a regular basis, selling saris, doing catering, etc.

If all that is not enough, Vinder, who is also rustling up an Asian cookbook and possibly a book about her life, has recently been elected president of Thailand's venerable, charity-oriented International Women's Club for the year 2001, overseeing a membership of 600 women from 65 countries.

Vinder has been a member of IWC for the past 20 years.

``My goal as president is to be able to gather enough funds in order to set up a club house for the IWC," Vinder reveals, complimenting IWC's great committee and wide range of activities.

Vinder's innumerable resources and many facets have made a few teeth grind, her few detractors a bit irritated by her apparent ubiquity gift, labelling her as ``superb self-publicist" or even ``shameless self-promoter".

To which Vinder retorts without frowning: ``Everything I do is a challenge to myself. At times, it caused me a lot of suffering, sometimes it is very rewarding. But behind all that, I look for experience basically, more than business opportunities. All these experiences _ that no amount of money could buy_ help me grow from inside. I try not to stop but if I happen to take the wrong direction, I'll turn the steering wheel," she concluded.

As a ship is made to sail through the worst storms before being certified seaworthy, it might be that Vinder's craft is now well-equipped, able to confront all the hazards of life and come alongside any shore it heads for, carrying along in its wake her shy and dedicated husband and handsome son.