

EHK 005 Table Talk: Vasudha Viswanath

[00:00:00]

[00:01:00] Vasudha. Hello. Hi, Anna. How are you? How are you Doing great and thrilled to be here. so let's get into it. A fellow cookbook author. Yes. You're about to launch your book. Mm-hmm. , did you ever think writing a book. With comparatively fewer words than a regular book would be so much work. , , you know, that's a great question and um, Since this was my first time doing it and I had no connections in the industry, I did everything upside down.

Mm-hmm. . And when I finished developing the recipes and doing the photo shoot, I thought 80% of the work was done. [00:02:00] Oh, now I just have to document them, you know? And then I found out that the hardest part of writing the book was writing the book. It took me like three times the amount of time after that and, you know, having all the tested and, and um, and you know, I've stopped looking at my cookbook after I got it because I feel like I'm, I'm just gonna find something I don't like and now it's too late to change it, so.

Right. Um, it's, uh, it's, it's, uh, quite the project. Um, and uh, you know, but it was worth it. Worth every minute. Well, I gotta. You made a beautiful book. Congratulations. Thank you. The vegetarian reset launches on, uh, it's January 17th is when it comes out. January 17th. Here's a picture of it. Oh, it's beautiful.

And you took all the pictures yourself, right? I did not. I had a photographer, a food photographer. Um, you did an amazing job. Yeah, she was amazing.

[00:03:00] And the pictures are beautiful and I really wanted that because I didn't. . I didn't want this to feel like a diet book. I wanted people to look at the picture and go, I wanna eat that.

I don't care if it's healthy or not. And, um, I think she really did a fantastic job and delivered shows. She really did. Truly did. All right. Well, let's back up a little bit because we're gonna get to what's inside the book in a minute, but I wanna hear about you, about your story, how you came to the food.

what brought you to this point of writing your, your, this is your first book, right? It is. It's Congratulations. A couple of years ago, I would have not had a clue that this is where I would end up. Uh, I was working on Wall Street for a

hedge fund and, uh, you know, my career has, has been in finance technology strategy based, uh, for over a decade.

But backing up just a little bit, um, I come from a family of foodies. I grew up in [00:04:00] India, and, um, I think ever since I could cook, I have cooked and, you know, I, I would use part of my allowance to buy ingredients for some new cake that I wanted to bake, or pasta that I wanted to make for my friends.

My parents lived for a few years in California and then moved back to India, so, they brought some western cooking into our home, and both my mom and my dad are great cooks. so I had several influences. from my extended family as well. I cooked a lot growing up and I was a bit of an experimenter in the kitchen.

fast forward a decade, I came to the US for grad school and then moved to New York City. , and, uh, my husband and I are both foodies. We would eat out all the time. Uh, I would be, you know, I would take notes and try to replicate what, what I ate, uh, what I liked when I ate out. We traveled extensively, so, That was the story.

I was, you know, always [00:05:00] obsessed with food, but never really shared it beyond friends and family. I didn't have a blog, always a lurker on social media, you know, so it was just for, for family and friends and, The time came, uh, early last year when I was parting with my company and I said, alright, you know, I have this idea for a book and we can get into how I came to start eating this way.

But, I had this idea, it was, uh, I thought it was a quick three month project, and then I would find a real job and, and move on. of course anybody that's written a cookbook, you've written two on your way to the third. it's not a three month project, it was one year class. Um, along the way I got really, hooked by, uh, the space and it was the first time I'd used my right brain, my left brain, and, and you know, the creativity, uh, doing something I was truly, truly passionate about.

Uh, it really energized me every. and, [00:06:00] I decided to stay in the space full-time. but so that's, that's the story of how I came to write the cookbook. Yeah. So, and then let's talk about, because we're, we're both basically sugar and grain free for the most part. I mean, I always say to people like, you're.

100% of people eat sugar and grain, and I hope you do. I hope everybody enjoys their lives and eats a variety of things, but, um, but for the most part,

that's the focus of your book and that's the focus of my books. The only difference is yours, and I like the way you put it, is, uh, vegetarian Plant Forward, you say Plant Forward, which I really like, and, and for my audience it's, it's mostly meat eaters.

And then I have people write me going, Hey, listen, I'm a vegetarian or I'm a vegan. I really wanna do N S N G. No sugars. No grains. How do I do it? And then you and I connected with Substack and I was like, oh, good, you are gonna love Vasudha because she is perfect for, for people who come to me with those questions, cuz I.

Your recipes are [00:07:00] gorgeous. Thank They're likewise. I actually had a reader, uh, tell me that she was, uh, celiac and then I pointed her to your sub. So, um, I think you got something for everyone here, . Absolutely. How did you come to being sugar and grain free and then also vegetarian. All right. And are you a strict vegetarian?

Do you eat meat sometimes or you. Forward. Does that mean always plant-based? I'm just curious Yeah. To know your story. Sure. No judgment either way. So I grew up vegetarian, in India. And, uh, you know, my family has been vegetarian for generations as a lot of indu families in India are. Yes, yes. And it was never really a choice.

You know, I, I, that's how I ate. It was great. I loved my food. Always foodie. so that's how I grew. . so it was cultural, uh, religious upbringing, uh, you can think of it that way. Mm-hmm. . And then through my school and college [00:08:00] years when I realized there were other options. well, we always ate dairy and eggs, so I did always eat some animal products, uh, which is why I say the plant forward.

and I've tried meat occasionally. But I think by the time I tried it, it was too late. Right. I just didn't enjoy the textures and the flavors. Sure. And, uh, I didn't feel the need. I guess if when I came to the US if there was no vegetarian food available, I might have, you know, uh, eaten. Meat, but I didn't have to.

And uh, I never felt the need, and now it just doesn't interest me. Right? So that's, but I have nothing against, animal products. You know, people have been eating meat for millions of years and, think it's a completely, uh, normal choice to make. And, so for me, this whole journey really started. , uh, a very cliched way when, uh, I was trying to lose 25 pounds of [00:09:00] post-pregnancy weight.

Mm, mm-hmm. can relate. Yes. And you know, this time it was harder. I thought I was doing everything right, but I was 35. I thought I was eating healthy home cooked food, but. When, you know, just in hindsight, all of my meals revolve around starch, uh, and refined grains. Sure. Um, so breakfast would be a big bowl of oatmeal.

Lunch would be, you know, a sandwich when I felt guilty. It would be a salad. Uh, dinner would be, pasta, maybe root and, and, and Indian curry, something like that. And this was normal, right? This is how I've always eaten all my life. But the pounds just wouldn't come off. Going back to that, and then I had a physical and it revealed that my, uh, blood sugar was elevated.

Specifically my hemoglobin A1C was, um, in the pre-diabetic range, right at the tip, so, mm-hmm. , not super scary, but enough to wake you up. Yeah, because you know, I always thought of myself as [00:10:00] the fit and healthy and you know, I take spin lessons and how can this happen to me? You have your spinner right behind you.

Exactly. . So, so that was a bit of a wake up call and my doctor said, you know, limit or minimize rises and pasta and bread. and I was like, wait a minute, what do I eat instead? Because this is how I've eaten all my life. Right? And um, so that's when I really started to do my research and. , learn how these high glycemic diets full of starch and sugar.

and you don't have to be eating, you know, the ultra processed diet of, of Poptarts and, and cereal to experience this, even, you know, a home cooked diet that's very high glycemic can affect people and everyone's carbohydrate tolerance is different and, but over a period of. Uh, your body becomes more and more insulin resistant and, and, uh, more than weight.

what shocked me was how it was [00:11:00] connected to so many other chronic diseases, whether it was heart disease, brain disease, cancer. and so that was really my aha moment and, I said, alright, I'm gonna try this low carb thing. And uh, that's when I started to look for recipes for vegetarians and . Good luck, right?

There's only so much eggs and cheese in avocado one can eat. Sure. So, and I just craved spice and flavor. This is how I've always eaten. . And so I said, all right, I'm just gonna create my own recipes. I built a big spreadsheet of, uh, you know, nutrition facts for a bunch of ingredients that I wanted to use, and I bought my first pack of cauliflower rice.

And, uh, there was no looking back. , I, I, I started so long ago that didn't even have cauliflower rice in the stores. You actually had to take the head of cauliflower in a box grater, and it would. Snow everywhere. Just cornflower rice, that food processor's, uh, nightmare. Yeah. Yeah. . And then, uh, my [00:12:00] husband would walk in and go, why does it smell like farts in here?

And I was like, don't worry. By the time I'm done cooking it, you're gonna love it. . Ignore the cruciferous odor. Yeah, I hear you. I hear, um, well that's, that's awesome. And then I'm assuming that your metrics got better. . Yeah. Uh, and it didn't take very long, you know, the, the pounds melted off. but my skin cleared up.

Mm-hmm. , um, I, my periods were lighter. Mm-hmm. , I, um, What else? I think the biggest change that I found was my energy transformation because I would keep having these slumps after my breakfast. I would want a nap after lunch. I would want a nap. it's not that I never nap now, but you know, I don't need it like I used to.

I ne I, I almost never take naps now, and I used to wanna nap all the time. I, I, I wish I had known even in grade school what I knew now, because I couldn't pay attention in school. Like [00:13:00] I don't. You know what I mean? I just, I think that, gosh, I mean, I just feel bad for the kids who have to go to schools where they're feeding them.

Just so, so high carb meals, because these are a whole other story. We should do another session about that. I know, right? But, um, yeah, so that was a big change and I found that more than anything, uh, my relationship with food changed, before I only ate for pleasure. . And now I wanted to eat the foods.

Well, I still wanted food that excited me, but I also wanted it to make me feel my best. And then I would keep gravitating towards that. So now it's not like I never eat a piece of cake or like I do still have creams, you know, like my parents visit and, and they make like some rice station. I eat it. but it's not my 80%, it's my 20%.

And uh, you know, that makes a huge difference. That's what I say. A hundred percent of people eat sugars and [00:14:00] grains. Again, it's just about getting, finding that sweet spot that works for you. Yeah. Yeah. Um, and that's, and by the way, you had a baby, you need to be awake to take care of your baby because , you're already gonna be dragging ass cuz your baby's not sleeping through the night and all that stuff.

So it's, it's, it is. Yeah. And now I've, I've done this long enough too, where I've watched a lot of women maintain the low carb throughout the pregnancy and throughout breastfeeding and. They said people who've done it both ways have said again, like, I wish when I had my baby that I knew about this, because it would've been a game changer.

So that's really great and I love that, uh, you turned it into a thing. You're like, well, I'm gonna make this. Not only am I gonna find recipes at work for a low carb vegetarian, , but I'm gonna turn it into a cookbook so that everybody else can get these recipes because it's, honestly, it's tough to find that and, and I am so glad to know you and be able to refer people to you and hopeful.

Hopefully they'll listen to this interview and everybody go get the book. It's a beautiful book. Even if you are a meat eater, you need ideas for side dishes and yeah. [00:15:00] These gorgeous, gorgeous stuff in here. Obviously there's a, a lot of your culture is influencing a lot of the recipes. Delicious. So good.

Thank you. So let me ask you this, how do you, how do you come up with a recipe? Do you, do you say like, Hey, that would be good. I mean, once you kind of go through what your usual go-tos are. Yeah. And you're, you've already adapted those to be low carb. Yeah. How did you fill out the rest of the pieces of the book?

Like, tell me about that process in your head. That's a great question. I think. , like you said, I start with the go-tos. Like if I made a fried rice with rice, easy enough to turn that into a rice dish. Right. Uh, then I got a little bit more fancy. You know, there are more elaborate dishes in Indian cuisine, for example, that are like the combination of rice and beans and it's hard because.

Normally those are cooked together. They impart kind of that texture and flavor to [00:16:00] one another and their flavored sep. So just figuring out how to do that but cook it differently, um, but maintain that flavor. There is a dish in the book. It's called, uh, . It's in the, what I call the rice section, and that's the South Indian version of rice and beans that I grew up eating and love.

and it's made for the Harvest Festival of South India. And, I think making that, this good in a low carb version was such a triumph because now that's one of the dishes even my parents will eat and they're tough cookies. Yes. Um, . So, so I did that and then, you know, there were some dishes that I didn't need to really adapt.

You know, take a falafel for example, right? Sure. It is by its nature. Well, it's not very low carb, but it's low carb in the sense it's not made of any refined, uh, products. [00:17:00] So, um, There instead of putting it in a pizza, I did a falafel salad. Um, great. And, uh, and then I would just find, you know, I was, I came up with this around the world theme, so then I literally looked at a map and said, you know, what have I missed?

And, uh, I think I was, uh, Missing a French dish, and then my mind immediately went to a French onion soup. Mm-hmm. And, um, and it was helpful that I developed, uh, a bread recipe. So some recipes were so versatile that I was able to use them, uh, throughout the book in other recipes too. So I developed this zucchini bread, which is the first recipe in the book, um, that the, that looks so good.

Thank you so much. Why? Uh, it's one of my favorites and it took me, I think, like 15 tries to, uh, actually get it right. But I use it in I think like six to eight different recipes in the book. I use it, um, you know, just to make a basic [00:18:00] avocado toast or an Florentine, but I also use it to make, uh, an Indian dish called Babaji, which ha, which has, you know, it's like a sloppy Joe, or I use it for the french onion soup that I was talking about.

Mm-hmm. . Mm-hmm. . Um, I use it to make crouton. Uh, breadcrumbs that I used for the anini. Um, so it was a process. Um, I think couple of my favorite sections that originally I didn't expect to be in the book were the savory smoothie section. Mm-hmm. , which, um, I started out with just regular smoothies, and then I just felt like at that time I didn't have anything new to offer the world in terms of a smoothie.

You know, like whatever I did probably had already been done. And, um, and then I think I made one chocolate smoothie that my husband said he didn't like, and then I was like, all right, I need to try something different. So I, I. Started with, with a savory smoothie, and a couple of [00:19:00] them I already knew, uh, their Indian, uh, beverages, uh, that, that we drink with our meals.

And, um, and then that section kind of filled out that way. The, the dessert section was unexpected. There wasn't supposed to be one, but. , when I stalled out on the smoothie side, I said, all right, let me try my hand in desserts. And it's, I wanted them to be sweetened naturally. I didn't wanna use any artificial sweeteners.

And I know you feel strongly about that too. Um, listen, I always tell the people, if you wanna use your artificial sweeteners, you're an adult. You can do

that. , I'm not gonna hand you one of those recipes. You're gonna have to figure out the proportions yourself, , because I just kind of feel like I wanna use, like you say, natural sweeteners and just enough to make the things sweet, not happy, like punching you in the face with sugar, you know?

Yeah, yeah. No, I see You use dates, you use fruit stuff and Yeah. Yeah. So I decided to use whole fruit. Uh, sometimes I use a little bit of maple [00:20:00] syrup, but Right. So it was hard to do. I've never baked, uh, with, with natural sweeteners like that. And it, you know, made it tricky. But, uh, but it, it was fun. And I think that's probably, uh, couple of those recipes are my favorites.

They're, they look so good. The bur looks so good, , and of course the banana soufflé. That sounds wonderful. Um, and I, I love the idea of the savory smoothies, which you. By the way, you things just start to taste better too. When you cut all the processed stuff out, you get more of a, a finesse set of taste buds.

Yes. So a savory smoothie might sound insane if you're new to this. Yeah. But we're like, Hmm, that sounds good, . I like that. That sounds It does. And, and you know, you don't have to have it for breakfast. If, if that doesn't appeal to you, like I am myself, a sweet breakfast person, but I [00:21:00] would have it totally for a lunch.

Yeah. Um, And, um, people are different. There's a lot of, I, I had a couple of testers who were like, oh my God, this concept of a savory smoothie, this is a game changer. I've never liked a smoothie until now. So I guess, you know, people, uh, different people like it. Um, but you could also just think of it as, um, as an accompaniment to a meal.

It doesn't have to be a meal replacement. Right. Then maybe it become easier. I love it. So for. Folks who are not eating eggs and dairy, who really wanna keep it completely plant-based, the you have enough stuff in there with beans and like, cuz you were talking about beans, lentils, the, the proteins to get the Yes.

To get the things to get the protein. Yes. So, uh, I think. Over 80% of the recipes in the book are, uh, they're either vegan or they're easily vegan, sizeable, you know? [00:22:00] Mm-hmm. oil instead of butter or heat, stuff like that. Um, and I think. if you don't eat any animal products, um, it does, it's not impossible, but you do need to get more intentional about how you get your protein right, because a lot of sources of vegan proteins are also very high in, uh, carbs.

Uh, and calories. So, uh, you know, you're gonna have to eat a lot of food , uh, but you can do it if you are intentional about it. Like incorporate concentrated sources like tofu in there, um, and uh, you know, just be intentional. Mm-hmm. and, um, eat whole foods and, and, and add a lot of olive oil and avocado to your meals cuz you'll be really hungry if you don't do that.

Yes. I have a lot of beans with, uh, yeah. a lot of lentils and drizzle olive oil over it so you get full, because you're right, the vol, the volume of food that you [00:23:00] consume is, is a lot because you, because you're not eating a fatty ribeye steak that would fill you up in seven bites, you know? Right, right.

And does does kind of fill you up more than, right? Yeah. Um, I'm still impressed that your doctor told you to cut out pasta breads, rices. I know. I, because a lot of doctors don't do that. They think it's crazy. A lot of doctors think it's crazy. Yeah. You know, it was just a brief note, uh, in the app, but it, it definitely served as my aha moment and wake up call.

So I, I am grateful for that. Um, . I think we're getting there, but maybe it's not, it's not yet as mainstream as I would like. Just this knowledge of how food impacts your health. Mm-hmm. and, um, institutions are very slow to change, but I feel like there's so many people like us that have personally experienced the [00:24:00] benefits and, um, you know, we're not doctors or nutritionists.

uh, we've found this out , right. And, uh, you know, it's um, I think just the masses that find out how effective it is to eat this way, uh, we'll get there over time. I agree. And I think, well, you and I both have that aspect of that. We want to teach people what's worked for us. And so here we are putting our stuff out there and, and you even mentioned the skin clearing up.

I'm, I'm at least 10 or more years older than you are, and there was a big ad campaign when I was a young teenager. I think it was Clerisy. Mm-hmm. , first of all, they wanted you to use something called benzo peroxide, which is the moment it touched my skin, gave me huge allergies. And second of all, they would say things like, it's not your diet that that causes it's bacteria on your skin.

And that's why you have to put all of our chemicals on your skin to get rid of the zits. Yeah. And I [00:25:00] remember seeing it in like 17 Magazine or whatever, you know, the thing. You would just see this information repeated over and over again. And I always dealt with like cystic acne, especially cyclical, you know, the, the ones I always say, they're below the, the cheek line where you get basically right before your period, you get a really big, the big mother mother's it, you know, that hurts.

Yeah. And um, literally haven't had one of those in 10 years. Like you were saying, that the cycle clears up. The hormones get rebalanced. Yeah. And I know that for men, the equivalent happens for them with good things happen. With your sex hormones, with your digestive hormones, with your endocrine system, and even things like sleep it So, so many good things happen that I'm like, that's crazy that we were sold that false bill of goods.

You know, just, just slap a bunch of chemicals on your skin when it's like, no, no, it's actually what you're eating that's really gonna help you clear your skin up. So I think the knowledge that food is medicine is just [00:26:00] so powerful and, uh, you know, in general, I mean, it's easier said than done. I think we are all, uh, Sort of food is such a big part of our identities, how we handle our emotions sometimes, uh, you know, it's a part of how we grew up and sometimes people just don't have the head space to make changes and it's so much easier to believe that you do something else.

You know, you don't have to change anything from your regular routine, just add on something else. And, uh, that, that will work. And people. It's just human psychology. You're more willing to pop a pill or put uh, yeah, you know, appointment or chemical, uh, and, and hope that it gets better. But once you realize that it's 90% diet and 10% everything else, right.

Exactly. Um, Uh, that's, that's really powerful. And then you really, really [00:27:00] start to experience the benefits. But it's hard, it's hard to change habits and, um, I think on my part, that's why I try to make it interesting and compelling. Yes. Uh, to, to eat healthy. I try to make it an easy choice. I, you know, I want people to drool at the side of the recipe and say, I want this now.

Uh, because, just because it looks delicious. Oh, they will, they will. The, the book it very delectable looking. Absolutely. Mm-hmm. , you've done a fantastic job. And I, I will say, have you started getting the comments yet from people who are like, doesn't matter about carbs, you should just count calories. Or like, people just come, you're like, okay, yeah, you hear that all the time.

Um, and you know, honestly, I roll my eyes now, but. two years ago, I didn't know any better and I just feel like it's, it's so not mainstream that, um, it's, it's okay. So, [00:28:00] uh, yeah, I find myself constantly having to try to educate without being judgemental. Right. Um, and, um, But, but it's hard now. I'm so deep in the space and I, I think I'm listening to, uh, so many people who, uh, have understood this and, and, uh, you know, talk about the same issues.

So, uh, now it gets harder and harder when, when I meet someone who's, who's still talking about, you know, low fat or. I know. Um, so listen, I have, I have a friend who's still very much like, you will never tell me that butter is healthy. You'll never tell me that. I was like, okay, that is no problem. I don't wanna engage in debates.

Yeah. I want to be here as a light and a beacon for the people who want my information. And if you don't need it, , I don't care. , move on. Yeah, and and the other thing I noticed a lot too is the vegan community and the low-carb community fight a lot. And I'm always like, [00:29:00] no, no, no, no. We're all on the same side.

We all want people to be healthy. That's exactly right. Yeah. And no. and it's really interesting, you know, when I was thinking about this, um, every diet worth that salt that's had some degree of success in the world, whether it's the Ornish, whether it's dash, whether it's low, uh, low carb, whether it's keto, specifically the vegan diet, whatever it is, people have, people experience at least short term success once they're on it, right.

Why this is because of the flight to quality on every diet and Right. You know, they may differ in, in, uh, certain aspects going forward and some things may we're all different. It may work for some people versus not. But just the idea that eating. A diet high in foods that have been stripped of their nutrients, [00:30:00] cannot do anybody any good.

Maybe they won't hurt you if you have a high tolerance or they won't hurt you that easily, but they're certainly not doing you any good. So making your diet, you know, making those the focal point of your diet, that's, it's, it's never gonna lead to a good thing. And, and so I think that's something pretty much every diet agrees on.

I agree. The fine grains flour, um, Well, look at us. We've got a meat eater and a plant-based human together on the same page. You guys, we are proof. We are proof that we can make it happen. Uh, the book is The Vegetarian Reset Vasu Wan. I'm gonna put the link to the book, you guys pre-order it, or if you're listening to this order, this book, I don't care if you are Plant Forward or your Plant backwards order, this book because you're gonna get more ideas of what to cook in your kitchen and you need more ideas.

Um, January 17th, 2023, the book drop. [00:31:00] Get the Kindle, get the hard cover, and I'm also gonna link your subs too. And any other, well, you and I'll talk off the air, but thank you so much for being here. Thank you. Thank you for

having me. Uh, it's great. We finally, you guys don't know this, but we tried. We tried like seven times and then we made it happen.

So thank you for being here. I really appreciate it. Thank you. Thanks so much Hannah. Take care.