India was not my natural place. I am not a backpacker. I never entertained fantasies of traveling in the East. I did not practice yoga. I was not looking for a guru. I simply wished to spend some time with myself, and India seemed right. I set out for one month, but India, as India is wont, had a different plan. I arrived in the small city of Tiruvanamalai which sits at the foot of a holy mountain, and there I met a very, very English man who dreamed of opening a restaurant. I fell in love with this man and with his dream, with the place and with its people, and I began to cook.

My kitchen migrates between the Middle East and India, particularly Tamil Nadu, where I have lived since 2000. For me food is, first and foremost a connection - something we share, we speak of, we tell stories about. Cooking is an adventure, a journey in new areas of taste, and a longing for something that we cannot always explain. Sometimes food allows us to express on a plate what we cannot put into words.

Efrat lives in Auroville, Tamil Nadu and is the mother of Leela, age 14. She cooks, draws, writes, and gives culinary consultants for restaurants.
The holy mountain

Hundreds of temples are scattered here, there, everywhere. A breathing alive and kicking ritual is taking place at every moment, under every tree, beside each wayside stone, near each anthill. On nights of the full moon hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children walk, or more accurately glide as if on water, circling the mountain. Feet shuffle softly in the crowd for a few hours at a quick pace. One human movement flowing like a river. Yearnings of the heart electrify and punctuate the air like a great field of crickets chirping in the night. That, together with bells, prayers, cows, and a fire blazing in every corner, is the holy mountain.

Things we saw along the way:
* street stalls heaped with colorful powders that cure bad luck
* a green parrot reading cards and squawking the future
* a polka-dotted swami somersaulting along in the lotus position
* flimsy houses made of cardboard
* a golden temple with a narrow opening through which we crawled and were reborn
* a painted-faced elephant holding children aloft with his trunk to bless them
* an ancient woman, face wrinkled like a prehistoric lizard
* men in white robes sweeping bugs from the path so as not to harm a living creature
Once a month on the full moon the town fills with multitudes of people coming to worship the holy mountain. They circle barefoot, singing prayers and wishes. We, like everyone else, flow like water. Fires glow everywhere, people awash in its flames, touching it, passing through it, blessed by it.

**Fire**

By chance, I found myself in this dusty town in the south. It was my first time in India. I had come for a carefree, month-long trip to breathe some air, try yoga, wake up in a five-star colonial-style hotel, live like a queen, and be with myself.

The train entered the station at 10:00 at night. Groups of people who seemed not of this world gathered outside. Huddled together around flames flickering in halved coconut shells, some were wrapped in orange robes, others held staffs shaped like tridents. Until then, the vision in my mind combining flames, robes, and people with tridents was that of hell. Smells of frying merged with the sweet fragrance of incense and the smell of burnt coconut oil, making me dizzy. I did not yet understand anything about sadhus; I did not know that they have withdrawn from the life of this world (material things, women, family) to pursue prayer and the wanderings of the soul. Some set out when they retire, others after personal crisis. Some are devout people connected to a particular religious order who were granted a tiny temple to care for—one of the hundreds of shrines found in every corner. Often they carry a personal decorated staff, sometimes shaped like a trident. The staff and its decorations signify their stature and religious order—the trident marks them as Shiva worshippers as it is one of the symbols of Shiva. That night some readied themselves to sleep as if their bedroom was a natural continuation of the train station. In my westernized view they were homeless. Today, I would not call them homeless; a word connoting a lack. The sadhus do not experience lack—quite the opposite—in the Indian view it is possible to say that the lack of a home puts them in possession of other things more stable than any house. Indeed, the world is their home.
After I found a room for the night in the city near the big temple—chaotic and noisy as if it were midday—I sank down on the squeaky bed, everything spinning through my head. The wealth of scenes, sounds, and smells penetrated through the walls of my room without warning, as if there were no barriers; pervading my skin as if I was made up of air. I felt myself curled up inside a washing machine, the drum spinning at an incredible rate.

“In the morning,” I said to myself, “Everything must change. Otherwise I cannot go on.”

And, yes, the next day I encountered two new elements that would forever change my life. In a local café the man who would become my partner for the following years sat drinking his morning chai. He read the newspaper and peeked at me above his reading glasses. During a short and fateful conversation he told me he planned to open a restaurant, “Here. At the foot of the mountain.” The second element was the story that accompanies the mountain for thousands of years that my partner-to-be—himself a sort of a refugee, a remnant of the British Empire—told me. The mountain of fire that stood in its glory before our eyes covered in a soft layer of woolly sheep clouds, he explained, is a holy mountain. And not just holy—the mountain is Shiva himself—not a symbol but a manifestation of the god Shiva, the god whose job is to destroy what is old and make space for the new.

**Spices** an invitation to a journey

The Indian kitchen is first and foremost one of spices, in contrast with the Western kitchen of which it may be said is a kitchen of raw ingredients. There are those who claim that, originally, the raw ingredients in India were of such poor quality that there was a need to enhance the flavors, and in this way the rich culture of spices developed. What began (if it did) as a curse was the origin of a blessing, a richness of colors, tastes, and smells. I understand that there is something about Indian cooking that is hovering and mother-like, the dedication of time and patience. But I believe spices express so many things; they are worth the effort.
The truth is that dealing with spices does not lengthen the cooking process and can even make it more efficient. Yes, we must prepare the spices for the dish ahead of time in a palette much like the palette of colors a painter prepares so as not to search for the color red or blue while working. The spices for the dish need to be handy, as do the ingredients that form the base of the sauce. Next to the spice platter arrange a tray of ingredients for the sauce: onion, garlic, ginger, tomato, hot green chili, chopped cilantro leaves, and for certain dishes grated coconut. With these beside you while cooking it is easy to understand the logic of the process, the speed it allows, and the wide variety of dishes that you can cook for a meal.

It is necessary to devote time to organizing a spice kit that is varied and handy, with labeled jars that hold a small amount of each spice so they will not get stale and lose their aroma. I prefer to store all of the seeds whole, and if I want powder I grind it myself in a small electric grinder or with a heavy stone or metal mortar and pestle.

Some of the most popular spices in my kitchen are: curry leaves, bay leaves, black mustard seeds, cumin seeds, coriander seeds, turmeric powder, fennel seeds, star anise, cinnamon sticks, cardamom pods, cloves, fenugreek seeds, hot paprika, nutmeg, garam masala, baharat (Middle Eastern spice blend), raw tamarind, and dried red chili.

Study them, smell them. Hidden within them are health and wisdom, and they are beautiful. Seeds, powders, leaves, dried flowers...preparing the spice palette is an act of blessing and gratitude for all the beauty and abundance of the universe. Cooking an Indian meal is entering through a gateway into a rich culture of thousands of years. See it as an invitation to a journey.

**The art of sauce**

A good sauce is a work of layers and tones, light touches, mixing, resting, and another peak, a taste, and another layer, another tone, or perhaps a bit more of something already added. A step forward and a step back. Listening to the
rhythm of the simmering sauce, its consistency, texture, and aroma. When tasting sauce it is possible to divide its different flavors in your mouth—for this we have taste buds.

Sauce loves to cook. It also enjoys being mixed from time to time, slowly and attentively as if to ask how it is feeling, touching it lightly, and to leaving it be. Tasting and altering, mixing, and again tasting, until the sauce is integrated and decisive in its flavor. In making a sauce there is something similar to creating a potion: attentiveness to stirring, the alchemy of ingredients and reducing. There is a kind of magic in knowing exactly when the sauce is ready. Nothing can compete with a sauce made with love and attention. Whoever tastes such a sauce cannot be indifferent when flavory layers play and roll across the tongue.

My first dragon

What’s good about a monsoon is that life goes on. I need to pick up my daughter from school. I try to separate a few shirts stuck together with white strings of mold. Our situation during monsoon is like that of a mushroom—continuously damp with a moldy odor. I have no choice but to set out from the cottage in which the humidity reaches 100%.

For five days now the sky has poured down huge buckets of water and it does not stop for a minute. Lightning, the likes of which up until now, I have only seen in horror movies, shoots across the bedroom of the solidly built forest cottage that until the onset of the monsoon seemed comfortable and enchanted. Now everything is flooded. All the bugs and creepy crawlers, spiders and snakes, field mice and beetles—all of them—are trying to save themselves from the water. Frogs too. Everywhere. Even in the bathroom where they suddenly jump out of the toilet bowl just as you try to sit down. I try to convince myself that the best way to get over a phobia is to live in its presence. I am really afraid but I have a child and self-respect and I try to hold myself together.
We will live here for half a year, the monsoon lasts only two months. It's true that the cottage is isolated and there are no neighbors, but that enhances the pastoral nature of my experience—at least that is what I thought until the waterfalls began pouring down and have not stopped. I make a lot of noise on purpose so that the snakes will hear and slither away as I walk along the path that is essentially a long puddle of mud. I am happy to discover that I have internalized the idea that the family of creepy crawlers and invertebrates are more frightened of me than I am of them, and that they have no interest in meeting me, and of course, not in hurting me, unless they are mistakenly stepped on... I am already on my scooter when I see a huge tail sticking out from behind the wide, wet bush across from me. From the other side of the same bush, a dragon-like head peeks out, looking straight into my wet face, eyes rolling and long tongue darting in and out, in and out...

The rain does not stop pouring down and I am already entirely soaked and dripping under my raincoat. Lucky the clothes were still wet from yesterday! For a moment I think that I am mistaken in estimating the creature’s size due to the rain drops in my eyes. There can not be dragons here. It is not written anywhere. But somebody has already told me, in a half whisper, that she was the only one ever to see a tiger in the forest. “No one wanted to believe me,” she clucked her tongue regretfully.

But this dragon is real, I am convinced, and now he is looking around for a place to shelter from the rain with such yearning that I feel compassion for him. He is, at least, one-and-a-half meters long. I start the scooter that refuses to start because of the damp, and want to scream to someone, anyone, “Dragon! I see a dragon!”, when the prehistoric remnant gives up on his bush and plods sadly towards the trees in the pouring rain. The scooter starts up with jerky movements in the mud puddle. I am silent for a long time, because I have no one to talk to, but also because I am really shook up. Suddenly the pastoral cottage with the hammock swinging lazily between the branches of the mango trees sits in a rainforest inhabited by storybook creatures.

When I reach my daughter and tell her amazedly about the incident, she answers me with an amused but loving smirk that more than hints that, again, I am exaggerating. Really now a dragon?!
After being a walking joke for a few days, it turns out there was a dragon. Okay, not exactly a dragon, but a giant lizard—the water monitor lizard it is called, its scientific name being *Varanus salvator*. It reaches a length of one-and-a-half to two meters and weighs on average 75 to 90 kilos. There are even larger ones. It turns out it is found in wet areas of India and neighboring countries, it knows how to swim, and its favorite foods are frogs, snake, fish, catfish. No wonder it felt at home.