

91 ways to eat, meet and unite

TV executive **Kalpna Woolf** believes that food is a language common to us all. She tells *Anna Turns* how her Bristol-based charity is bringing people together around the dining table. *Photos by Jon Craig.*

“Language is a barrier, food is not,” according to Kalpna Woolf, the founder of 91 Ways, a charitable project that runs a pop-up International Peace Café across Bristol. In today’s fast-paced world, these cohesion-building foodie events bring diverse communities together to share meals at long, communal tables, offering a heart-warming antidote to global politics, which can often be so divisive.

“We crave connections and eating together is such a natural thing – just that act of passing a plate starts a conversation,” says Kalpna, who has always believed in the power of food stories. “I just knew in my heart

that this project would work – food is something that is in all of our lives, whatever form it takes, and inviting someone to eat is offering a positive hand of friendship, and it gives an insight into your heritage.”

Kalpna is a TV executive, currently producing TV series with chefs such as the Hairy Bikers and Nigel Slater for Hungry Gap Productions. She previously worked at the BBC for 24 years, working her way up to the top of her profession, and left four years ago: “I was Head of Production, overseeing the whole of network production for BBC Bristol and Features. I loved it but I knew I wanted to do some good and make some impact



Negat Hussein, originally from Eritrea, is one of the Peace Café’s talented cooks



Kalpna Woolf with Shiv Sama, host of 91 Ways’ North Indian Supper



91 Ways has empowered many people, including Viviane

and really make a difference, so I wanted to pursue something different around food in the community.” That’s when she helped set up Bristol’s Food Connections Festival, with a mission to connect the city’s diverse communities through food. “Bristol is such a burgeoning city in terms of food culture and my role was to talk to people about food and bring them closer to other groups and celebrate each other through food.”

And while she was looking at the city’s makeup, she discovered that a total of 91 languages are spoken in Bristol: “That number really surprised me and energised me, so I wanted to use that as a symbol of inclusion,” says Kalpna, who grew up in Southall, a part of London with a strong Indian community. “London can feel overtly cosmopolitan but for many years I worked inside the BBC and just didn’t know about Bristol’s great diversity – people seem to live in their geographical silos.”

Over the past two years, Kalpna’s free peace café has popped up in community centres, community cafés and schools, welcoming Somalis, Iranians, Eritreans, Indians, Mauritian and Burmese families to the table. “We recently took food from a Somali community to a Bristolian community and they’ve shared their Somali spread alongside a roast dinner and wonderful cakes. They’d never have met otherwise, and actually these people discovered they have so much in common,” she explains. “We also worked with Easton Church of England Academy, where pupils speak a total of 51 languages, and ran a celebration day bringing schoolchildren and parents together so they could get to know each other through their inheritance recipes.”





At a recent event held at Bristol's Hindu Temple, everyone from schoolchildren to Muslim refugee women came to share a meal. It was a real turning event for one woman, Viviane, who left Egypt as a refugee with her family when she was just 14 years old, settled in London and then moved to Bristol. She told Kalpna, "I am so glad that I had the courage to come to this event; I took two buses to get here from across the other side of the city and I have made a friend today, Susan from Syria – we both speak Arabic and French and we are meeting next week for coffee. I feel so at home here." Now, Viviane is one of 30 or so people who volunteer for this project on a regular basis and she recently talked about her life at a supper club, finding the experience such an empowering one.

Kalpna's supper clubs are an opportunity for community members to talk about their heritage, values and history through their food, plus funds raised from ticket sales contribute to the small community pop-up events. Of course, relationships don't always develop overnight, so 91 Ways revisits communities throughout the year to reinforce connections.

This project has attracted a lot of women in particular: "I think women value these connections, they are good at building bridges, they want to call this country their home and food is a great way of being part of that," explains Kalpna. "And of course a lot of women cook in their homes or cater in their communities and they feel comfortable. Some of our refugee women wouldn't want to directly talk about difficulties or challenges they have had, but cooking and eating opens up conversations and they feel proud of their food and feel part of something special."

Kalpna's vision is to roll this movement out across the country and she is currently writing a template for other cities. "We're going to pilot it in three places, possibly one in the West Country, Yorkshire, and another city, so we are looking to develop partnerships," she adds. "Ideally we would love to run events nationally and have a 91 Ways festival day once a year, celebrating communities through food." If anyone can make it happen, Kalpna will find a way. **M**

91ways.org



Negat's Eritrean baklava

Negat made this lovely sweet and nutty pastry dessert to serve at the Peace Café; it's simple to make using a few easy-to-find ingredients.

INGREDIENTS

- 100g cashew nuts
- 100g unsalted, shelled pistachio nuts
- 2 tsp ground cinnamon
- 200g butter, melted
- 12 sheets of filo pastry
- 300g caster sugar
- 2 tsp lime juice

METHOD

Preheat the oven to 180°C/gas mark 6.

Place the sugar and lime juice in a medium saucepan with 300ml of water and bring to a gentle simmer. Let it bubble away, stirring occasionally, until the liquid has reduced by a third, then leave to cool. The syrup must be cool when it's poured over the pastry, otherwise the pastry will go soggy.

Mix all the nuts in a food processor until coarse, then tip into a bowl and stir through with cinnamon.

Gently unfold the filo pastry and cover with a damp tea towel to stop it cracking.

Layer one sheet of pastry in an oven dish and brush with melted butter.

Layer another sheet on top of the first, brush with butter and evenly sprinkle some of the nut mixture.

Repeat the layers until the pastry is finished, then generously butter the top.

Cut the pastry into portion-sized squares with a sharp knife, ensuring the blade goes right to the bottom. Bake for 30–35 minutes, or until golden brown and crisp.

Remove the baklava from the oven and pour half of the cooled syrup over the top. Leave to cool for 40–60 minutes. Your baklava can stay fresh for up to two to three weeks.