

The world of Atul Kochhar, chef

Atul Kochhar, 39, was the joint-first Indian chef (with Vineet Bhatia) to receive a Michelin star, while working at the Tamarind restaurant, London, in 2001. Kochhar now owns three Michelin-starred British-Indian restaurants: Benares in Mayfair, Vatika in Hampshire and Ananda in Dublin. He was born in Jamshedpur in eastern India and lives in west London with his wife Deepti, his daughter Amisha, five, and son Arjun, three. Kochhar is showcasing Benares at the Taste of London festival in Regent's Park, June 18-21 (tastefestivals.com/london).

Wake-up call Arjun wakes me up at 5am. If I could have it my way, I would wake



up at 6am, but my son has a stronger will than I do.

Breakfast In summer it is always juicy melon, a great way to start the day. My daughter loves fruit. We will cut a big watermelon and the two of us will have a competition to see who can eat more.

Morning routine After I drop the kids off at school, I take the Tube to work. Most of my time is spent in my London restaurant, Benares. I get to the restaurant by 10 o'clock and after checking all the ingredients have arrived I get into service mode.

I spend most of my time at the pass, perfecting the plates. But I try to pick up a section during either lunch or dinner, to keep my hand in and let the boys know I'm still there.

Childhood ambition I used to play cops and robbers with

my younger brother, Vikas. I always wanted to be the policeman, he always had to be the bad guy. It was childhood fantasy. But then slowly I grew up and realised that my father's profession – he was a caterer – was a good one.

Precious gift I was given an ornate rattle (pictured) as a newborn baby and I have kept it ever since.

Learning curve My mother had a rule that if you didn't like a particular food, she would cook only that for the next seven days. Once, I refused to eat some squash, so she cooked white pumpkin for the whole week. By day two I was starving and I gave in. There was hardly anything I didn't like as a child, because of Mum's attitude.

Wise words When I was applying for college, my father gave me a very useful piece of advice. He suggested that as I was born in eastern India of a north Indian family and was

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familiar with both cultures, I should train in southern India. I went to Madras for three years and was hooked – I never once went home. My mother got very nervous thinking I would never return and that I would stay to marry a south Indian girl.

Spices There are five key spices I always like to have at hand, and I get really annoyed



if one is missing: cumin seed, turmeric, red chilli powder, coriander powder and garam masala. I think, if I have all that, I can cook a banquet.

Greatest influence When it comes to food it has to be my father. He always believed in helping people locally, so if there was a local farmer he would like to buy straight from him. He said, 'Atul, if we support these people, they support us.' That mantra has stayed with me.

Culinary colours While at catering college I entered a national competition for young chefs held by the Culinary Federation of India. I made a beef terrine, which was unthinkable to do in India at the time as beef was not a very common meat. I got the bronze medal (pictured) and I was absolutely elated.



Bollywood Being born and bred in India, I have a huge love for Bollywood music and film. The films never used to make sense to me as a child; they still don't. Where else would you see people change their clothes a thousand times in one song sequence? But when I'm really tired and stressed out, a Bollywood film puts a smile on my face. As a teenager I considered

Bollywood as a profession, but I wasn't good-looking enough.

Cricket For me it's less a sport, more a religion. If it's a nice day I will take the kids to watch a local game.

Collections Whenever I go on my travels, I like to collect a knife or a book as a memento. I got this Japanese picnic knife (pictured) from a visit to the Napa Valley. It is brilliant, perfect for sashimi.

Evening routine Before we start evening service, the staff are fed at five o'clock. I don't like to eat dinner late anyway, it makes me uncomfortable. We open at 5.30pm and I'm there until 10, home by 11.

I get a cup of warm milk and talk to my wife about our days – she is a good listener.

Interview by Katherine Levy. Photographs by Kate Peters