

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

### Behind the Burner: Inside the Kitchen with Poonam Ribadia from “Secret Chef”

Hulu’s “Secret Chef” is a reality cooking competition series created by chef David Chang that premiered in June of 2023. Hosted by a quirky, animated talking hat named Cheffy, contestants from all different backgrounds—including professional chefs, home cooks, and social media chefs—were asked to compete in a series of bizarre challenges and then rate each other’s dishes in blind taste tests. As someone who frequently watches cooking competitions like “Hell’s Kitchen” and “Next Level Chef” in her spare time, I found “Secret Chef” to be incredibly unique and entertaining! Eager to learn more, I sat down with contestant Poonam Ribadia, better known as “Chef Radicchio” on the series, to discuss her experience on the show and her relationship with food as a whole.

**Kristee:** What inspired you to audition for “Secret Chef”?

**Poonam:** It’s funny, I actually had never thought about auditioning to be on a show. Someone from casting reached out to me on Instagram and said, “I think you would be a good person for this! You should consider auditioning!”. I wasn’t really familiar with how casting worked and there were a lot of steps to it, but it was during COVID and I was really bored, so I figured, “I might as well”.

**Kristee:** Had you been building a presence on social media as a chef during that time?

**Poonam:** I was more so just creating content as a fun hobby and creative outlet for myself. I figured if I was making good food, why not post it on my Instagram? During COVID, everyone was posting food porn because they were bored and cooking at home, so I think that’s what inspired me to start sharing more food-related content, too.

**Kristee:** On “Secret Chef” you were known as Chef Radicchio. If you could have picked any other alias on the show, would you have stuck with the name you got? Or would you have picked something else?

**Poonam:** If I could have picked anything, I feel like I would want to be Chef Tomato, because I love tomatoes. But if I had to pick another one of the aliases on the show, I honestly think I would have kept the same one. I actually kind of like Chef Radicchio because it kind of reminds me of my last name.

**Kristee:** What was your favorite and least favorite challenge on “Secret Chef”?

**Poonam:** I think the most famous and infamous challenge on the show was the one with the goddamn clothing steamer. They didn't show this, but I was really jealous of the equipment that all the other chefs got, until I arrived in my kitchen and realized how much I could actually do with it. It really wasn't that difficult preparing the dish that I made—which was a Mediterranean couscous—and the other contestants said it ended up tasting pretty good! Even though I did really well on that challenge, it was a weird one and my least favorite. My favorite challenge was making my signature dish, which was a Manchurian style paneer bao bun with slaw and herby dahi drizzle. Not many people know what Indo-Chinese food is, but this dish is one of my favorite foods and being able to create it for a TV show helps expand that specific cuisine. I also loved reading my reviews and getting so much good feedback on it, especially from guest chef, Millie Peartree.

**Kristee:** What was your favorite part of being on “Secret Chef”?

**Poonam:** I think my favorite thing was David Chang himself. This show was an idea between him and his partner, Chris Ying, that was discussed during one of their podcast episodes and then they actually made it happen! So to be a part of something from inside David Chang's brain and to meet him and eat a dish made by him was kind of the ultimate stan girl moment of my life.

**Kristee:** How important was showcasing your culture within your food cooked on the show?

**Poonam:** It's interesting, I didn't realize what the show was until I arrived on set. They didn't tell me anything during casting and I didn't understand parts of the game until we were actively filming, so everyday was a surprise. While it was very important for me to showcase my culture, I realized the more I did so, the more I was giving away my identity. Instead, what I wanted to demonstrate was a variety of different foods from other cultures. Showcasing Korean food or Nigerian food instead of typical French or American cuisine helped exhibit my skill set and highlighted diversity in my food. Of course, I'd try to represent my culture whenever I could, but the more I did, the more the other contestants would know Chef Radicchio was me.

**Kristee:** What was the most important lesson you took away from your experience on the show?

**Poonam:** Sometimes I forget how open of a person I am, so one thing I realized on the show was how observant and secretive other people can be. I would sometimes let things slip out by being too honest and friendly. I know, it's called “Secret Chef”, but I

didn't realize how closely other chefs were observing me! Taking that into consideration, I guess my important lesson would be that everyone is always watching, whether it's the camera crew or the contestants, and I've started to keep that in mind for life in general. I used to think that I was in my own bubble, when really there are people constantly observing and keeping tabs on me. Also, sometimes less is more—you don't always have to say everything that pops into your head!

**Kristee:** After your success on the show, do you have any plans to pursue cooking as a career and why or why not?

**Poonam:** Interesting timing, because I recently got laid off and am trying to figure out what I want to do. I had a corporate job, but my passion is food, so I see it as a blessing in disguise, because it's really forcing me to think about how I want my future to look like. While I can't imagine myself working in a kitchen at a restaurant, I could see myself doing something adjacent to the food scene, whether it's being a food writer or businesswoman who comes up with a food product. I was actually working in education technology, so I've even considered the possibility of moving into food tech. If I'm going to just sit on a computer working on stuff, it might as well be food related, right? There's a lot of things to consider, but I definitely know that I want whatever I end up doing to be within the food space.

**Kristee:** When did you first discover your love for cooking and what or who has inspired your culinary journey the most?

**Poonam:** I love cooking. When I was younger, I'm not sure if I loved cooking more or just being in the kitchen with my family all the time. I come from a large family and we frequently had multiple generations of relatives staying with us, so I spent a lot of time in the kitchen with my grandma, mom, dad, and whoever else. Meal prep was always a big part of the day, so I'd always help with that in the kitchen and ended up realizing how much I enjoyed it. My parents are the ones who inspired me the most—they are both from two different cities in India and have different cooking styles with unique techniques and flavor profiles. So I learned from both of them and merged the styles into my own. I also gather inspiration from other people whose media I consume like home cooks, social media chefs, or chefs in general, but my parents are my main inspiration.

**Kristee:** Do you have any professional culinary training or are you completely self-taught?

**Poonam:** Unless you count Food Network as professional training, then I'm completely self-taught.

**Kristee:** And how long would you say you've been cooking for?

**Poonam:** I'm not sure if I remember the exact age I started cooking, but I've been cooking independently without any help since I was about 10-years-old. I would make after school snacks for myself and when my parents would work, I'd frequently make meals for me and my siblings.

**Kristee:** How would you personally describe your cooking style and what other chefs or culinary experiences have influenced it the most?

**Poonam:** It really depends when, who, and what I'm cooking for. My typical day-to-day cooking style is kind of rustic and generally involves throwing something together based on the ingredients I have available. So maybe creative and adaptable? As for influence, I think I've learned a lot from professional chefs and people I've seen on cooking shows and social media. There's one specific woman, Joanne Lee Molinaro (@thekoreanvegan), who does storytelling and food content on Instagram and I love the way she ties the food she cooks to the stories of her life, family, and relationships. I think food is often emotional or nostalgic for people. So while it's not necessarily a style, I feel like her way of thinking and talking about food has influenced the way I view it and discuss it.

**Kristee:** What is your favorite dish to prepare when you're not under the spotlight?

**Poonam:** Tomato toast is my obsession, but I feel like that's not even a dish, more like an "assemble". You're just putting things together. I think my favorite foods to make would be anything involving your hands. I love making a big batch of dumplings or making pasta from scratch because it's therapeutic and repetitive. It's also very labor intensive, so the reward at the end feels much better. I also feel like, mentally, they taste better because I spent all the time and energy making them.

**Kristee:** What is the most important cooking tip that you could pass along to any other aspiring chefs?

**Poonam:** Season and taste as you go. A lot of times people, including myself, will forget to season the food and taste it at each step in the process. If I'm in a rush, sometimes I'll think, "Oh, I've made this a million times, I don't need to taste it," but then I'll finally take a bite at the end and ask, "Why did I do that?". You don't want to spend

time and energy working on a dish and at the end, realize you messed up along the way!

**Kristee:** What recommendations would you have for any students who have accepted an internship in New York City?

**Poonam:** Oh wow, I feel like I have a list of things people should think about. If it's your first time coming to New York or you're going to be living here, just be aware it's a huge adjustment if you're not coming from a big city. Even if you *are* coming from a big city, New York is just its own beast. Another thing is to always be prepared for the unexpected. You'll rarely get anywhere on time, you're either going to be super early or super late. Another suggestion is to create a budget for shoes. I run through pairs of shoes a lot more quickly than an average person. Normal people don't need a new pair of sneakers or heels as frequently because most people drive, but in New York, your shoes will get ruined way quicker because you do so much walking. Finally, just go with the flow and push yourself. While it can be easy to just settle into your routine, there's so much to do and explore. Instead of taking your usual route, take a right turn instead of a left turn to get a different perspective on the city. As Drake once said, "YOLO". You're in New York, just do it. Even if you're like, "Okay, this is my last ten dollars," you'll regret not doing the thing in the moment. Just live your life and worry about problem solving after.

**Kristee:** What advice would you give to young women who are about to graduate college and enter the real world?

**Poonam:** Be unapologetically yourself, take up space, and use your voice to advocate for yourself. If you're graduating college and entering the real world, I assume you're probably applying and interviewing for jobs. Data says that women won't typically negotiate or they won't apply for jobs if they don't match all the criteria on the listing. Lean into it, push yourself, and be your own advocate. A lot of us will have a voice in our head saying, "Oh no, you're not fit for it. Don't do it.". It's a bit of a mental adjustment, kind of like a "fake it 'til you make it" sort of thing, but just push yourself. Also, follow all of the self-help and motivational Instagram accounts and TED Talks, because those will help you, too. You really need a lot of positivity, because there will be a lot of hiccups along the way. It sounds corny, but you just have to believe in yourself, because at the end of the day, all you have is yourself.