

Kailash Bagla says he is originally from Hathras, and pauses to see if I will make the connection.

Well, *desis*, particularly those from Delhi and thereabouts, have all heard of **Kaka Hathrasi**, that master of rhyme.

Pleased with my GK, he proceeds with the story of his life.

The 56-year-old who came to Canada in 1970 is a chef specializing in catering for wedding and large parties.

"I am perhaps the only chef in North America specializing in North Indian, Punjabi and Jaipuri cuisine, and I am known for my *kachoris*," he says.

He guarantees that no one makes *kachoris* like him and that people pick up large orders (75 cents each for a minimum order of 50) which they freeze and use over a few months.

Weddings of rich Marwari families in the US typically run to six-seven days, during which they want a wide variety of dishes to offer their guests. That's when Bagla's *dal baati*, *sookhi alu sabji*, *chutneys* and *choorma laddoos* are specially in demand.

Bagla and his team of helpers usually set up their kitchen in the garage of the host family.

"This is more common during summer but we have done so in winter, too!" he says. "This way they can see they are getting fresh food cooked on the spot."

It all began when...

Bagla began cooking for himself when he first arrived in Canada.

"I was alone here and didn't know anyone but *mujhe khane-peene ka aur usse zyada kibilane ka shauk hai* (I have always loved eating, but more than that, feeding others)."

He had to abandon a Fine Arts course at the Ontario College of Arts after three years when he ran out of funds. After completing part-time courses in Electronics, he worked at various jobs for nearly 10 years, and was a plant manager at a medical equipment firm for four years. He then started a printing business and ran that for 11



NARI MAHALWALA/DESI NEWS

• Kailash Bagla working on one of his leaf paintings: "It's a unique medium"

years. But all along, his passion for good food was driving him in another direction.

Bagla opened his own restaurant, *Halwai*, mainly for sweets, take-out and catering, sold the business six years ago and now concentrates on his catering business.

It is interesting to note that he learned on the job.

"I love cooking, I love experi-

menting. Courses such as those at George Brown are very valuable to someone wanting to get into this business, but I believe that learning with a cook is far more beneficial."

A few years ago, Bagla decided to learn from chefs at a five-star restaurant while on a holiday in India.

"I thought I'd work with

them in their kitchen for a week but within a day I knew there was nothing new they could teach me."

At home, dinner is made by...

Bagla!

His wife **Saroj** says when her husband is a chef, there should really be no need for her to cook. So whenever he has the time, he cooks. And is more efficient, he says.

"She does cook, but I do it more

often. And what she does in one hour, I can finish in 15 minutes."

He says his family loves his cooking and is proud of him. However, his wife and children are not involved in his catering business. He has always encouraged them to develop their own talents.

The earning potential...

Says Bagla, varies as much from field to field as from person to person.

He is dismissive of those who rise from being dishwashers to chefs over a three-to-four year pe-

minute job! I take 30 to 40 hours to complete a painting and sometimes abandon a painting halfway. Mood *ki bat hai!*"

He was inspired to paint on *peepul* leaves when he learned that a favourite art teacher at his high school in India specialized in that art form.

"One day, I asked him to do a portrait for me and he completed one in half an hour. I looked at it and said to him, 'Guruji, you call this a portrait? Tomorrow I will show you a true portrait!'"

When he is in the mood to paint, he can go for up to 18 hours without stopping.

One night, he dreamt that he was being asked to paint Lord Shiva and says the one he has done of Shankar-Parvati is his best work, yet."

Bagla chooses to paint on *peepul* leaves he brings from India.

Turn a new leaf

riod by watching a chef at work.

"They make six dishes, and all six taste the same. These people are making a living, they do not have a passion for food.

"True professionals are few. There has to be drive within. If you have that, the sky is the limit for a talented chef."

If he gives someone an estimate for \$16 per person for 50 people, and someone says they can get it done for less elsewhere, Bagla says he requests them to go elsewhere, in that case.

At the same time, if he knows someone who really wants him to cater for an event can genuinely not afford his price, he will try and make adjustments.

The best part of being a chef

"*Paisa tob milta hi hai, khushi aur dil ki shanti bhi milti hai* (I make money, no doubt, but I find a deep happiness and inner peace in cooking)."

Cutting onions...

Doesn't make his eyes water.

"I love cooking. Period. All of it. Though I have helpers to cut and chop and clean, I can do any or all of it if the need arises."

Other talents

Bagla is also an artist.

And not just any artist, mind you, but "the only one doing this kind of work in this medium," as he says.

He paints on *peepul* leaves.

When I tell him that's not all that rare, that I distinctly recall greeting cards with paintings of various deities on leaves, he sniffs in disdain.

"That's not painting, that's a 10-

The young Bagla skipped dinner that night and worked straight through until dawn. The next day, when his teacher saw the painting, he said, "I have never seen anything like this," recalls Bagla.

This interest in painting stayed with Bagla through his youth. *Time* magazine did a cover story on **Pierre Trudeau** when he got married and Bagla copied that on a *peepul* leaf.

His college registrar encouraged him to go to Ottawa to present it to Trudeau.

Bagla went, but returned a day later because Trudeau was out of town.

He then sent the painting to Trudeau by registered mail and received a thank you note in reply.

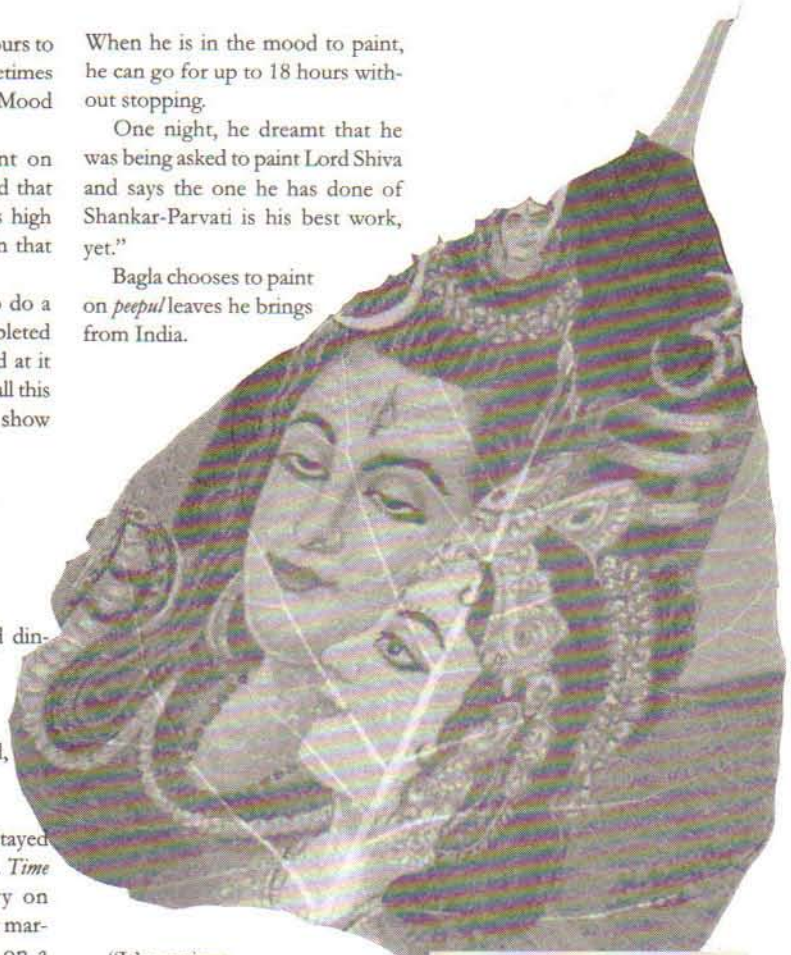
"It was a very nice letter. He really liked the painting. I still have that letter somewhere..."

But painting was a hobby and life got in the way. Bagla got married, had kids, got involved in different things.

Then, three years ago, his youngest son, **Manish**, encouraged him to take up painting again. Picking up a paint brush after a gap of 27 years, Bagla painted Santa Claus on a *peepul* leaf.

"If you see it, you will say this is not *baath ka kaam* (not done by hand). It looks like a photograph. My kids said, 'Daddy tum buddhe ho gaye, baath ki kaarigari nabin gayi (you are old but you haven't lost your talent).' I said I'm not a *buddha!*'

He has done more since, of the Pope and Princess Diana, etc.



"It's a unique medium," he says, simply.

"One that people who understand true art will appreciate."

Cooking vs painting

"Cooking is an art that feeds me," says Bagla. "One of these days, I will sell my paintings. I don't know how much I can ask for them – what's the value of a leaf? My paintings could go for anything from \$3,000 to \$50,000. There's no way to say. What's the value of true art?"

When pressed for a figure, he says he was offered \$1,200 for his Shankar-Parvati painting. He turned it down.

He will not accept anything less than \$4,000 for it.

Bagla says he is available to do portraits.

The cost would depend on the work involved, but expect to pay at least \$2,000.

"These are one-of-a-kind portraits of lasting value. The colours in the ones I have done of my wife Saroj 30 years ago are still jewel bright."

— SHAGORIKA EASWAR

Bagla's Dal Baati

1 cup each of cornflour and besan

1/4 cup maida

A pinch of baking soda

1 tbsp oil

Salt to taste

Sieve together the cornflour, besan and maida with baking soda. Mix in the oil and make a dough as for *chappatis* with a little water. Divide dough into equal parts and make into what Bagla describes as "*balushahi* shapes" or balls with a depression in the middle – the *baati* (cup) of the *dal baati*. In India, these are baked in the ashes of coals, but here he either bakes them in an oven or fries them in oil. Once done, soak *baatis* in pure *ghee*. Serve with *urad/ chana dal* and *chutney*.

Bagla shares this recipe with the caveat that all quantities are approximate. "Whether I cook for 50 or for 500, I do it by *andaaz* (approximation). As a rule, all chefs taste, but most often I don't. Still, everything tastes perfect!"

• Kailash Bagla can be reached at 905-303-4850 and 416-606-8129.