

PASTORAL POTBOILERS

CHANNEL SURF 'N' TURFING THROUGH RURAL INDIA **BY SONAL SHAH**



YouTube star Masthanamma has garnered fans worldwide on a channel started by her grandson and his friend (bottom). Her favourite 106th birthday gift was from Pakistan.

The sight of early watermelons, piled up like cannonballs along the roads, had worked its way into my brain, and I found myself searching for recipes that incorporated the ingredient. One thing led to another, and there I was in Gudivada, Andhra Pradesh, watching 106-year-old granny Masthanamma cooking chicken in a hollowed out watermelon over an open flame.

YouTube took me there, of course, via a channel called **Country Foods**, which has since gone predictably viral, with over 3,00,000 subscribers and 54 million views. However, Country Foods—launched by Srinath Reddy and Laxman K. last August, and featuring Laxman's rheumy-eyed, sharp-tongued great-grandmother—is only one of over a dozen rural recipe channels from India, most from coastal states, particularly Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

"Watermelon!" exclaims Ravi V.,

founder of **My Money My Food**, down the phone from Chennai. "Everyone is doing watermelon chicken, watermelon juice, this, that." A transcriptionist on weekdays, Ravi travels to nearby villages to cook on weekends. After having kids, he wanted them to experience the flavour of his own rural childhood and started uploading videos of these outings in October 2015.

"I'm a vegetarian," Ravi tells me. "Six days a week." The remaining days, he could be cooking or watching friends, relatives, and others, who've heard of his project, prepare anything from field rats to stingrays, against a bucolic backdrop of paddy and thatch. "I wasn't sure about the shark," Ravi says, referring to the video "Cooking a

40 Pound Shark in My Village". "But then, it was just in the market one day. It's dead, it's for sale. I'm not going with the fishing net to the ocean to get it."

What his channel shares with the others is a sense of lush abundance, filtered through the philosophy that in the village, ingredients are less a matter of choice than of availability. Almost anything can be devoured, from sea snails (**My Village Food Recipes**) to unlaidd chicken eggs (**Food Money Food**), and every part of the animal is used, from brain to balls.

A hobbyist, Ravi doesn't mind the blossoming competition: "It is nice, people going back to their villages, caring about grandmother and granddaddy," he says.

One of the first, and most popular



PHOTO COURTESY: SRINATH REDDY AND LAXMAN, K., COUNTRY FOODS.

YouTube channels, **Village Food Factory**, was founded in May 2015 on this very premise of supporting family. Gopinath A., a young director in the Tamil indie film industry, felt bad that his father Arugam didn't command as much respect in his home village of Nochipalayam, near Tiruppur, as his uncles. "His brothers are rich, but he is in a poor condition," explains Gopinath's cousin, who speaks a bit more English than him. But viral videos (the channel has over 81 million views) of Arugam meticulously preparing "2500 EGGS and 10 KG Chicken cooking in single pot!!!!!" and so on, have garnered the family a tidy side-income as well as world-wide fame.

Srinath, a video editor, and Laxman, a graphic designer, have both quit their jobs at the media company where

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they met to work on Masthanamma's recipes full-time. Like Gopinath, their videos are strengthened by a central character focus, as well as by their technical backgrounds. "We're from Guntur district", Srinath points out, alluding to the area's famous spices, "our parents taught us to cook, so we also know this subject." The two sometimes suggest ideas to "Granny" as well. The moment when she saucily waggles two cans of Coca-Cola at the camera, before decanting them over a whole chicken in a *kadhai* for one of their recipes, can only be described as, well, canny. Her "VFC"—Village Fried Chicken—one-ups the KFC versions featured in such channels as **Healthy Village Food**, **Desi Kitchen**, and **Food Rangers India**.

This irreverent mix of tradition, ambition (army-sustaining portion sizes), and inventiveness, are common markers of rural cooking channels. So too are the use of blunt, basic utensils and simple tacky graphics; al fresco kitchens and cheesy scores; banana leaf plates and long relaxing takes, with perhaps a slow, tactful pan to the



Arugam (top), the star of Village Food Factory, loves cooking huge quantities of food and distributing them; It was to explore outdoor cooking that Ravi V., founder of My Money My Food, began taking weekend trips to the villages around Chennai (bottom).

underbrush while an animal is being slaughtered. Some focus more on capture and cleaning (**Fishing Hunting Fishing, Village Food Village**), and probably all of them could at this point benefit from updating their SEO-friendly, copycat names to ones that refer specifically to a distinguishable person or place. Though it's kind of fun being oblivious at first, I wonder which side of the India-Pakistan border is represented by **Punjabi Village Food Factory** and **Village Food Secrets** or whether **Food Village** is shot in Bengal or Bangladesh.

These channels also echo similar ones from Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries—a buffet of countryside food habits from places otherwise unremarkable, or so off the beaten track that I'll probably never visit them. Ravi tells me that before he was married, "when dish TV came, my hobby was watching these food and travel channels. I thought, I'm not going to the U.S. or Europe, so let me watch these." For urban Indians, channels like his are the next best thing to savouring the village hearth, whether with nostalgia or a sense of fresh discovery. ✂