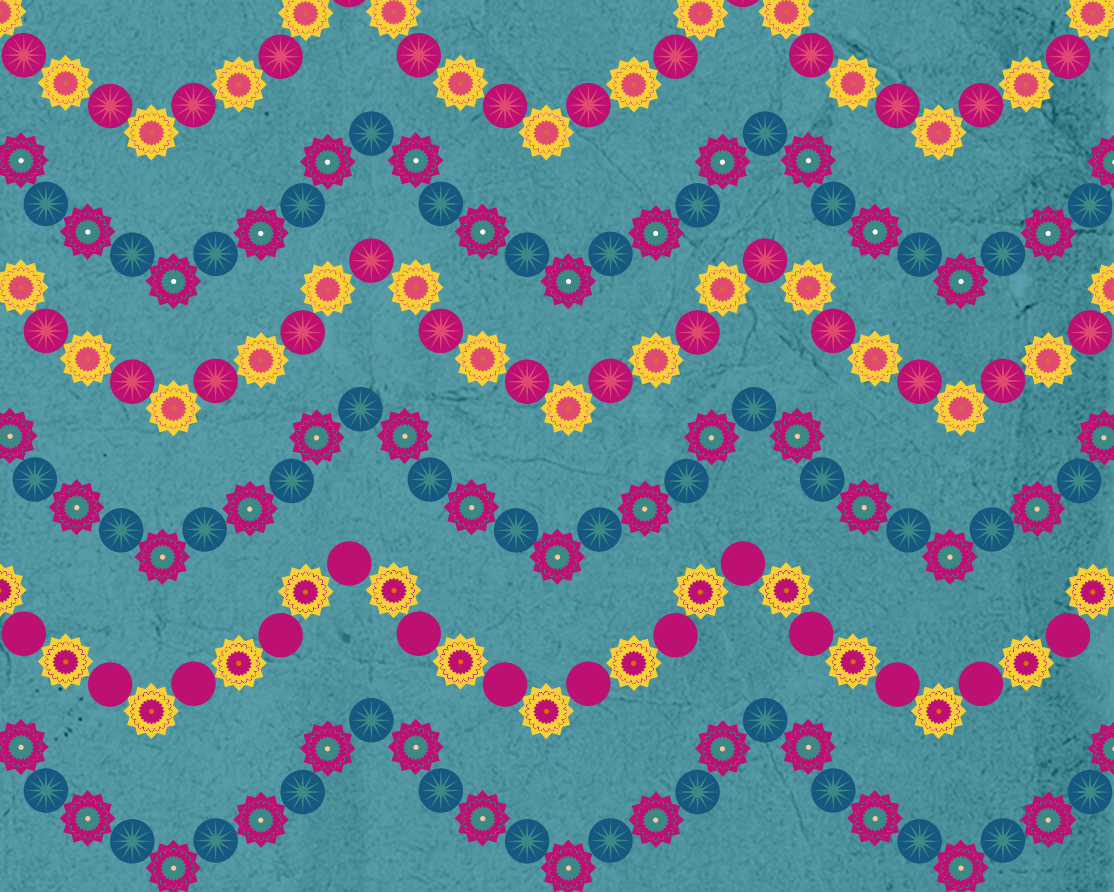




Reenvisioning South Asian Identity

The Sapna Project

Q&A

How are you reenvisioning your South Asian identity as you grow older?

deepening my connection with the multicultural influences in my life

embracing ancestral roots

seeking connection with South Asian individuals and communities

sharing love

starting difficult conversations

critically reflecting

reconnecting with the culture and traditions

putting aside expectations

learning the language

navigating generational differences

being curious

SPOTLIGHT

with Thiru Kumar

Could you speak briefly about your work and any connection to the re-envisionment of South Asian identity. What new initiatives are you most excited for with your organization?

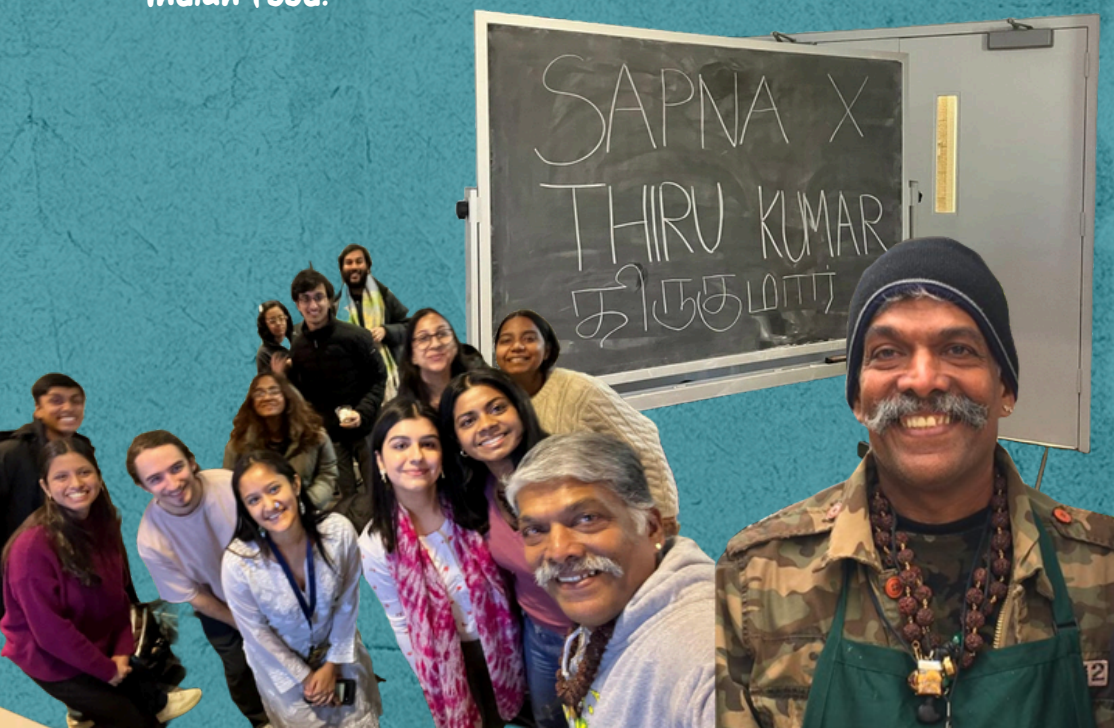


SPOTLIGHT

with Thiru Kumar

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I founded NY Dosas 22 years ago to bring the traditional South Indian dish of dosas to the people of NYC and beyond. I wanted to do something different that no one else was doing at the time. That is why I decided to start NY Dosas as a vegan/vegetarian push cart that serves South Indian food.



SPOTLIGHT

with Thiru Kumar



nydosas Hi yes we are open today

My desire was to make South Asian food more accessible to the people where I could make the dosas in front of their eyes. When I started my business, most of the food carts in the city were hot dog carts. Almost everyone I knew said that this was not a good business idea but I trusted my gut and followed my dreams to serve good quality, healthy South Indian vegan food to the world.

SPOTLIGHT

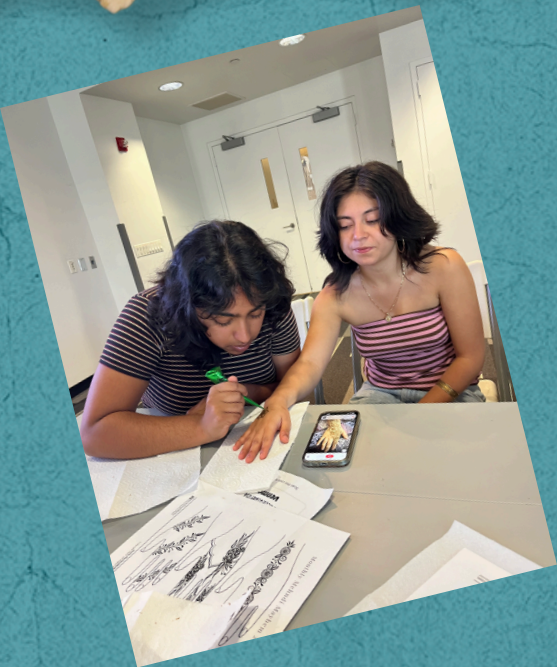
with Thiru Kumar

I'm glad I followed my gut instinct as over 20 years later, I'm continuing to provide good quality, healthy South Indian vegan food to a loyal fan following. I've accumulated many accolades over the years, like the Vendy Awards and features in various magazines and newspapers across the world. NY Dosas has encouraged people across the world, who may not have been familiar with the South Asian culture and cuisine, to experience it at least once.

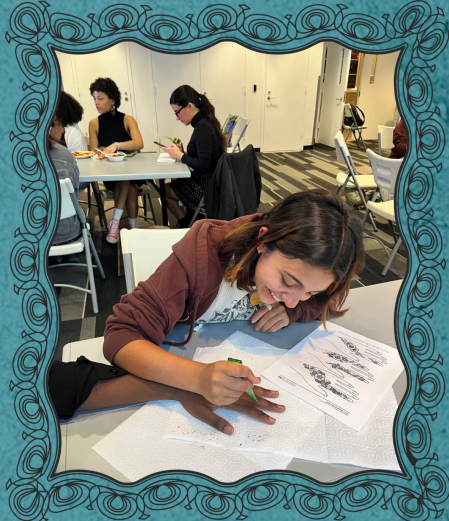
I've innovated within years with dishes dosa and kale dosas. From many fans, I've brand merchandise like bags, t-shirts and to continue to items on the

my menu over the like the samosa Due to requests also launched some NY Dosas tote hoodies. I'm excited launch new menu.





Henna Fundraiser

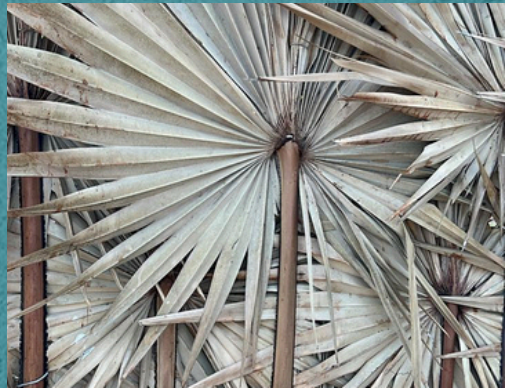


SPOTLIGHT

with Sarah Sukumaran



Sarah Sukumaran is the founder and CEO of Lilith NYC, a global luxury footwear brand based in New York.



Question: Tell us about your background and how it has informed your identity

I grew up in Queens, New York, the daughter of Tamil refugees, who left at the height of the civil war in Sri Lanka. At the time (1980s), there weren't many Eelam Tamils living in the area, let alone a "diaspora" community like the ones we see today in Toronto, London, Germany and elsewhere.

This undoubtedly shaped my own identity politics as I was raised pretty insular with respect to Tamil culture and community. (It wouldn't be until my teen years that I started to explore my Tamil identity and politics.)

Instead, my siblings and I were raised by all the rich and vibrant cultures that made up life in Queens, much of which was experienced through food.



Question: How did your parents share their South Asian identity?

Both my parents enjoyed trying new cuisines so while lunches consisted of all the delicious curries my mother had prepared, dinners were more often than not, take-out. Fragrant goat biryanis from the Pakistani spot around the way, the most tender beef rendang from a Malaysian eatery, that still stands today, to the spiciest of noodle dishes from the OG Thai spot in Elmhurst – Jaiya Thai.

Mummy, who has a knack for replicating dishes by taste, would bring home recipes from her co-workers, all of whom were Caribbean immigrants, which meant we also enjoyed jerk chicken and oxtail with coconut rice, chicken alongside arroz con gandules and maduros, the list went on.

Question: How was your work inspired by your South Asian identity?

When I started my footwear brand Lilith NYC in 2020, I knew I didn't want a cookie-cutter brand - one that brand agencies spit out based on a well-used playbook. At the core of what I was building, my hope was for folks to "feel seen" whenever they engaged with our brand and that certainly wasn't limited to South Asian folks.

I wanted a brand ethos that reflected my colorful childhood and roots in Queens and the island life that my parents so often reminisced about. Queens reflected the diversity that was desperately missing from the footwear industry's representation of its women consumers.



Question: How has your work helped you develop your South Asian identity?

In hindsight, it was our brand and footwear building exercises that allowed me to explore my Tamil identity further – something I kept separate from my work up until then. In the states, South Asian identity is synonymous to North Indian culture, Bollywood, Hindi etc. I often frequent South Asian events in NYC today and find myself to be the only Eelam Tamil (woman) in attendance – no different than when I was President of my college's SASA nearly 15 years ago.

Question: Where is there more work to be done?

Unfortunately, South Asian spaces haven't evolved beyond the North Indian narrative and have failed to be safe spaces for other sub-continent groups. Reflecting on this is why it's important for me to highlight my life as an Eelam Tamil Diaspora kid who grew up in Queens. To me, the future of Lilith NYC is digging deeper on global stories and communities that so often are overlooked.



All photos are from Sarah exploring Nainativu (island off northern coast of Sri Lanka) where her parents hail and have now retired to and the neighboring islands

(Dec 2023 - March 2024)

Learn more about Sarah Sukumaran

Website: <https://lilith.nyc>

Instagram: @lilith.nyc

Q&A

Are there aspects of your culture you've felt you need to confront? How did you do so?

loving my culture while also finding the flaws

interrogating generational teachings that I find harmful

educating myself and recognizing the need for collective and intergenerational reckoning with the past

unlearning harmful stereotypes and biases

recognizing harmful things that have been normalized

advocating for inclusivity

it's difficult to start conversations about cultural norms which can be very personal and ingrained

speaking up because if I don't discriminatory teachings will continue

putting my comfort aside and confronting prejudiced cultural norms

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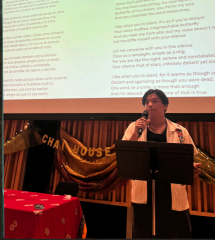
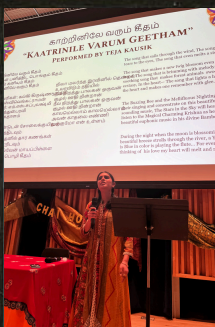
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