

BOSTON COMMON

FALL FASHION

PADMA *lakshmi*

SPICES UP BOSTON
KITCHENS FOR TOP CHEF

FASHION
PLATES
*WHERE BOSTON'S
STYLISH SET DINES*

CLOSET RAID!
*A SNEAK PEEK
INTO THE CITY'S
COOLEST CLOSETS*

PLUS:
CHELSEA CLINTON,
TOM HAMILTON,
ALY RAISMAN,
AND A DOG
NAMED DELILAH

• *perfectly* simple

TOP CHEF HOST, FORMER
SUPERMODEL, AUTHOR,
AND ENTREPRENEUR
PADMA LAKSHMI ADDS
MIT CONSULTANT TO
HER IMPRESSIVE LIST OF
ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

By Nichole Bernier
Photography by Robert Ascroft

The office of MIT's director of gynepathology goes from silent to buzzing with the opening of a door. Padma Lakshmi's crew has arrived, with the former supermodel at its center, leggy in navy short-shorts and black ankle boots, with a vintage military-style band vest over a white tank.

If they're late because MIT's 77 Mass Avenue complex is a citylike warren of science, it's entirely understandable; even the janitors aren't certain where to find Building 16. If they're late because Lakshmi was wrapping shooting on Season 12 of *Top Chef*, which she hosts, or working on a cookbook or her jewelry or tableware lines, or writing a fashion column, or shuttling her 4-year-old daughter to the airport to visit her father, Adam Dell (yes, that Dell), in New York, or dodging paparazzi questions about ex-husband Salman Rushdie's memoir or whether or not she's dating Richard Gere—that's entirely understandable, too.

"Simple" is not a word that comes to mind in describing the life of Padma Lakshmi, but it is among her favorite words. "Simple" as in simple, wholesome roast chicken; simple, timeless wardrobe items; simple, casual picnics. Even her visit to MIT arises perhaps from the simplest impulse of a passionate, intellectually curious person: to remedy what she sees as an omission in medical information and teach the public about a disease that drastically impacted her life.

Ecrú blouse (\$2,400) and
blue/black skirt (\$3,100),
Chanel. 6 Newbury St.,
617-859-0055; chanel.com.
18k rose-gold, diamond, and
onyx Amulette de Cartier
necklace (\$4,450) and 18k
rose-gold Juste un Clou
bracelet (\$7,200), Cartier.
40 Newbury St., 617-262-
3300; cartier.us



Lakshmi was diagnosed with endometriosis in 2006, her first year as host of *Top Chef*. She was 36 years old and finally able to put a name to the pain she'd experienced for years. Then began the treatment—and self-education.

"I went through five surgeries and a very painful divorce, and I was alone," Lakshmi recalls. "And in the process of all these tests, I was told that I probably wouldn't be able to have children. I just got so mad." After her health was stabilized, she channeled that anger into founding the Endometriosis Foundation of America. "I was angry because I *did* have access to great healthcare," she says. "I was fortunate; I wasn't living in a remote area of the world—[I was in] New York, LA, London. And like many women of my generation, you don't investigate your fertility, then you don't know until it's too late. I thought, How could I have gone through my life and not known about it? I thought other women should know about it."

Sitting elegantly on a leather couch, Lakshmi makes those days seem very distant. We are in the office of Linda Griffith, science director of the MIT Center for Gynepathology Research, whose relationship with Lakshmi began after she read a *Newsweek* interview about the model's commitment to EFA. Griffith, who'd recently won a MacArthur Grant, wanted to open the country's first research center on gynepathology. The funding and infrastructure were already in place; what she needed was someone to be the public face of the disease, which typically strikes women in adolescence (i.e., the age of MIT undergraduates). She cold-called Lakshmi with the request to be a friend to the new center, which resulted in the *Top Chef* host adding the role of medical speaker and fundraiser to her already diverse résumé.

The MIT Center for Gynepathology Research was established in December 2009 in conjunction with Keith Isaacson of Newton Wellesley Hospital. It focuses on complex diseases like endometriosis and adenomyosis, as well as the role of infection in preterm birth and how resistance to HIV is compromised in women suffering from other infectious diseases. The center's latest initiative, in conjunction with Lakshmi's foundation, involves building software applications to raise disease awareness and to gather better symptomatic data from patients, starting with their first doctor's visit. Which is to say, to harness the voices of patients in understanding the diseases that affect them.

"It's insane we didn't have [a gynepathology research center in the US]. Gynepathology affects half the population—as in, half the residents of the world are women. And yet we don't have a research center in one of the leading medical countries of the world," Lakshmi says, adding in a sing-song voice, "But... we... do... no-ow."

Lakshmi can bring a lighthearted twist to a discussion of endometriosis because now, in mid-2014, she is in a far different place than she was in 2006. For starters, she is a mother, an unlikely and thrilling surprise that came in 2010—and the "best thing that ever happened to me," she confesses. And that's no small statement in a life as dramatic as hers.

Lakshmi was born in India in 1970, the daughter of a Pfizer executive and a nurse who specialized in suicide prevention. They divorced when she was 2, and she split her early years between her grandparents in India and her mother in New York. Her modeling career began during a semester abroad while a student at Clark University, when she was discovered by a talent agent in Spain. From earning a BA in theater arts, she went straight into a modeling

career that would take her worldwide for the likes of Versace, Armani, Ungaro, and Lauren as the first internationally recognized Indian model.

Modeling, Lakshmi is the first to say, was her ticket to the world of travel, upscale restaurants, and writing (columns for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*). After appearing in nearly every major glossy magazine, as well as some films and television shows (notably guest-starring as an alien princess on *Star Trek: Enterprise*), she authored her first cookbook, *Easy Exotic* (which won the award for best first book at the 1999 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards), and hosted the Food Network series *Padma's Passport*.

She met Salman Rushdie, 23 years her senior, at a party hosted by Tina Brown, and their marriage (her first, his third) lasted from 2004 to 2007. In February 2010, Lakshmi gave birth to a baby girl she named Krishna Thea Lakshmi, and although the father's identity was not initially made public, he was later revealed to be venture capitalist Adam Dell, with whom she now shares custody. Lakshmi's partner in raising Krishna was Ted Forstmann (former financier for Princess Diana), and they were together until his death of a brain tumor at age 71 in late 2011.

Top Chef has been the constant in her life since 2006, and it marries many of her loves: travel, media, fine food, and ambition—people at the top of their

game operating under competitive pressure. "Our show is called a reality show, but it's really a game show—a game show operating at a very high level," she explains, "because it's not based on luck; it's based on skill." Lakshmi's role is host, issuer of directions, and axewoman. When a chef is eliminated, it's her trademark line that delivers the cut: "Pack your knives and go."

As a judge on the show, how does she balance honest appraisal with compassion for a chef who may be visibly trembling when she lifts the fork because her opinion matters so much? "It's hard," she says. "The most compassionate thing you can do is be honest."

But isn't one's taste just a matter of opinion and the judges' decision simply a personal preference? "It's not about what I prefer," Lakshmi says. "It's how well you did what that

dish is supposed to be like." She leans forward on the couch, insistent, a single-strand gold necklace swaying at her collarbone. "There's an empirical way to cook chicken and not cook chicken. I always try to be honest, but I try to give them good feedback, too. I will say, 'I can see what you're going for, and I really do appreciate that you wanted to do a pesto, but you didn't want to use basil so you used cilantro and mint. The problem is that cilantro and mint oxidize at a different rate than basil does, so you need to work on this. But it's a good idea and you should file this away.'"

That sort of knowledge about food at the molecular level comes only from studying what you love with a passion. But when it comes to cooking and the pairing of ingredients, is there such a thing as perfection?

Lakshmi thinks for a moment, then shakes her head, her long hair swinging halfway down her torso. "There's no such thing," she says. "Perfection only happens in nature—a perfect peach," for example.

Lakshmi packs her bags for a photo shoot in the new MIT lab, a joint venture between Dr. Griffith and the Endometriosis Foundation of America—a relationship that began when a very pregnant Lakshmi addressed an endometriosis conference at the college in 2009. "Imagine!" she says, laughing. "A lingerie model speaking at MIT!"

Now that's perfection. To view exclusive video footage of Padma Lakshmi's cover shoot, visit bostoncommon-magazine.com. **BC**

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Column dress, Kaufmanfranco (\$3,295). Neiman Marcus, Copley Place, 617-536-3660; neimanmarcus.com. 18k rose-gold Juste un Clou bracelet, Cartier (\$7,200). 40 Newbury St., 617-262-3300; cartier.us. 18k yellow-gold diamond Happy Spirit ring from the Happy Diamonds collection, Chopard (\$3,410). Saks Fifth Avenue, The Shops at Prudential Center, 617-262-8500; saks.com

Photography by Robert Ascroft/
robertascroft.com
Styling by Emily Barnes/
The Wall Group
Hair by Kozmo/Bryan Bantry using
Phyto Hair Care
Makeup by Vincent Longo/
Bryan Bantry using Vincent
Longo Cosmetics
Nails by Mar y Soul/Ray Brown
Pro using Chanel Le Vernis