

# INDUSTRYINSIDER

Deanna Rosolen

## Preena Chauhan, owner, Arvinda's

Preena Chauhan took her research for her master's degree to a whole other level, and parlayed it into a full-time job. In 2005 she started her own company, Oakville, Ont.-based Arvinda's, selling cooking ingredients for Indian cuisine. But the inspiration for her products, which include masalas, spices and frozen ingredients, came from Preena's mom, Arvinda. Since 1993 Arvinda has operated an Indian cooking school (Preena, who began as an assistant when she was 15, is now a teacher at the school), and often sold her spice blends to clients. "We gained a large following through the cooking school with some of the masalas that we had," says Preena. "[My mom] used to sell them in little pouches...People just kept passing them on to friends." With the help of Preena's brother the pair began working on bringing these products to market. Today the company has its own manufacturing facility, where it also prepares made-to-order products for foodservice clients. Arvinda's products are sold in specialty and gourmet retailers in B.C., Ontario and Quebec, and in Sobeys' stores in the Greater Toronto Area.



Preena and Arvinda Chauhan

## Q&A

### What do you love most about your job?

"It's a family business and I work very closely with my mom and brother. We all bring different things to the table and it's very rewarding working together. I'm also very passionate about food; I've grown up in the kitchen. My mom has been cooking since she was seven, and she transferred that knowledge to me. I also get to meet so many fantastic people who share that passion."

### What is your management philosophy?

"It's about evolving and constantly improving, and because we're small right now we're able to hear what our customers are saying and evolve based on that. I like to take a grassroots approach, talking to consumers one on one and creating relationships with consumers and retailers."

### What is the most challenging part of your job?

"Running the two businesses. It's a lot of switching hats. Although our goals are the same, the needs for each business are very separate. Educating consumers can also be a challenge, trying to teach people how to use our product. Our spices are a little different from a curry powder, which you can add in large quantities to your dish, for example. Ours are really concentrated, so it's about trying to make things as easy as possible for consumers."

### What issues is the ethnic foods sector facing?

"One of the challenges is keeping things as authentic as possible while using local ingredients. We try to promote using local ingredients with all of our recipes. Obviously with Canada's climate we can't grow our own spices, so the challenge is how to promote using local ingredients and pair those with the flavour profiles of Indian cooking. Consumers are also becoming more health conscious, so we try to emphasize a more healthy style of cooking."

### What about opportunities opening up in ethnic foods?

"Opportunities are just amazing right now. People's palates are really open to trying new things. And being in Canada, which is so multicultural, people are really embracing it. Ethnic cuisines are becoming mainstream and widely available and people are more familiar. Also we're seeing more and more Canadian companies manufacturing ethnic products in Canada. And that's a huge opportunity for retailers to promote Canadian companies because consumers are looking for local businesses to support."

## INTHE SPOTLIGHT

**FIRST INDUSTRY JOB:** "Server at Just Desserts. I started as an assistant in the cooking school at 15."

**FAVOURITE FOOD:** "I like making gourmet meals. If I've had something in a restaurant, I always want to try to recreate it."

**INDUSTRY MENTOR:** "My mom's been very integral in our business. Also, my business mentor Rony Israel, and my professors at York University, Dr. Gerda Wekerle, Dr. David Wheeler and Dr. Asaf Zohar."