

CELEBRATE INDIAN SANGEET

This explosion of colour, music and dance is one of the key events leading up to a Hindu wedding. A Sydney family share the special traditions and their vegetarian feast for this joyous occasion.

It's a rainy Friday night and the Gulati family home in the north-west Sydney suburb of Eastwood is like a Bollywood film set: a swirl of bangles, saris, sandals and spices. The house is decorated with garlands of gardenias and images of the Hindu elephant deity Ganesh. It is also filled with impeccably groomed men, women and children, clad in vibrant swathes of silk.

For Suresh Gulati and his wife Adarsh, it's an auspicious day: it's their daughter's Angeli's *sangeet*, the first of many Hindu rituals to be held over the next seven days to mark her marriage to Vijay Ponnuru, in two days' time.

Suresh immigrated to Australia from northern India in 1968, aged 19, with his parents Vidya and Faqir, a former diplomat. Suresh credits his parents, who arranged his 1978 marriage to Adarsh, with inspiring him to preserve such belief-based traditions.

"A *sangeet* is a lovely prelude to the wedding and a chance for the groom and bride's families to get to know each other," says Suresh. "We come from a large extended family and we are determined to continue these customs because without culture and identity, you have nothing," says Suresh.

Holding court in the living room is bride-to-be, Angeli, a senior business analyst, who has been sitting patiently for about three hours having henna painted onto her hands and feet for *mehndi* (see page 48), a symbolic part of the ceremony. Angeli's grandmother Krishna Sardana – known as Nani-ji – says *mehndi* symbolises the strength of a couple's love. "It is about making the bride look beautiful," says Nani-ji, who had her own *sangeet* some 63 years ago, aged 15. "The darker the henna becomes, the more the husband and in-laws will love the bride," she says. Angeli's *mehndi* is a traditional Mughal design, which has been used in wedding ceremonies for centuries by Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus.

Australian-born Angeli believes many of the age-old Indian customs have survived because they have evolved with the times.

"A *sangeet* used to be about the women... like a hen's party but, in recent years, it's become more about bringing the two families together," says Angeli, who is wearing an embroidered emerald-green *lengha* (traditional outfit consisting of a skirt and top), an eye-catching *bindi* (forehead decoration) and colourful bangles. "A *sangeet* is a very social, sacred occasion. It's also about looking beautiful for your husband," she adds.



The bride's sister Sonia Scoufis puts the final touches to the *sangeet* decorations.

The word *sangeet* is Sanskrit and translates as 'sung together'. While the Bollywood-inspired song-and-dance routines add to the magic of this gleeful event, the food, too, is a focal point. Smells of turmeric, onions and spices drift about the house, while *dhokla* (semolina cakes), *papdi chaat* (chickpea and condiment snacks) and samosas are passed around.

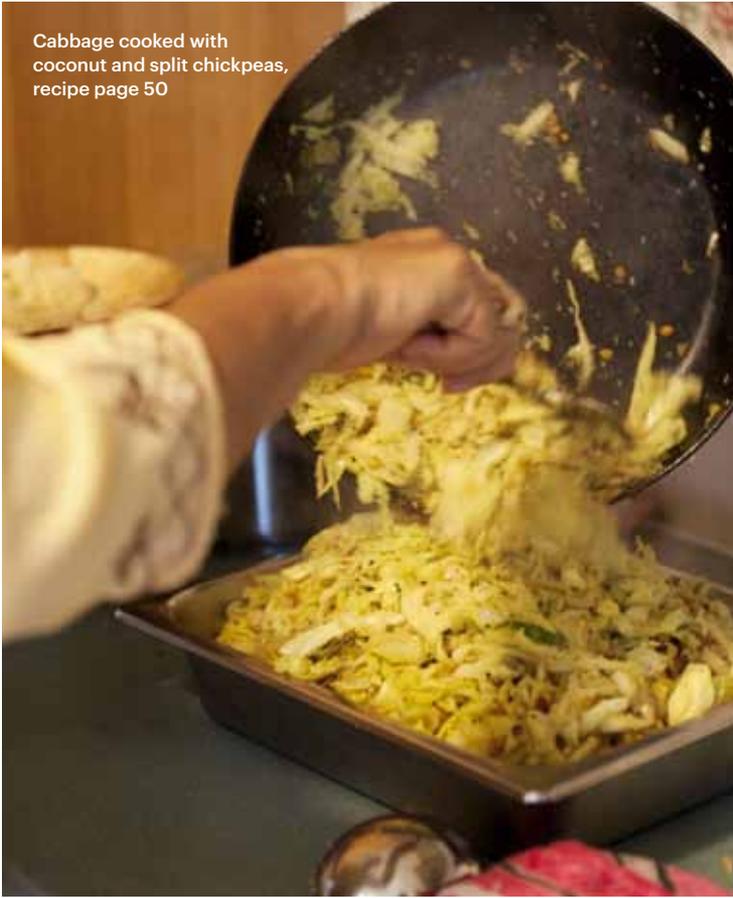
Nani-ji is a *pandit* (priest) and, when all of the 80-odd guests have arrived, she leads the prayers to Ganesh – asking that the couple be blessed with good fortune. Angeli and Vijay, a software engineer, are then besieged by well-wishers, many of whom perform a routine related to marriage and romance.

While the couple's marriage wasn't arranged, as such, it was, according to Angeli, "a set-up". Angeli's parents encouraged her to communicate with Vijay via email in September 2010, when he was living in New Zealand. The couple met face-to-face for the first time two months later and, soon after, Vijay moved to Sydney to be closer to Angeli. He proposed on Valentine's Day last year.

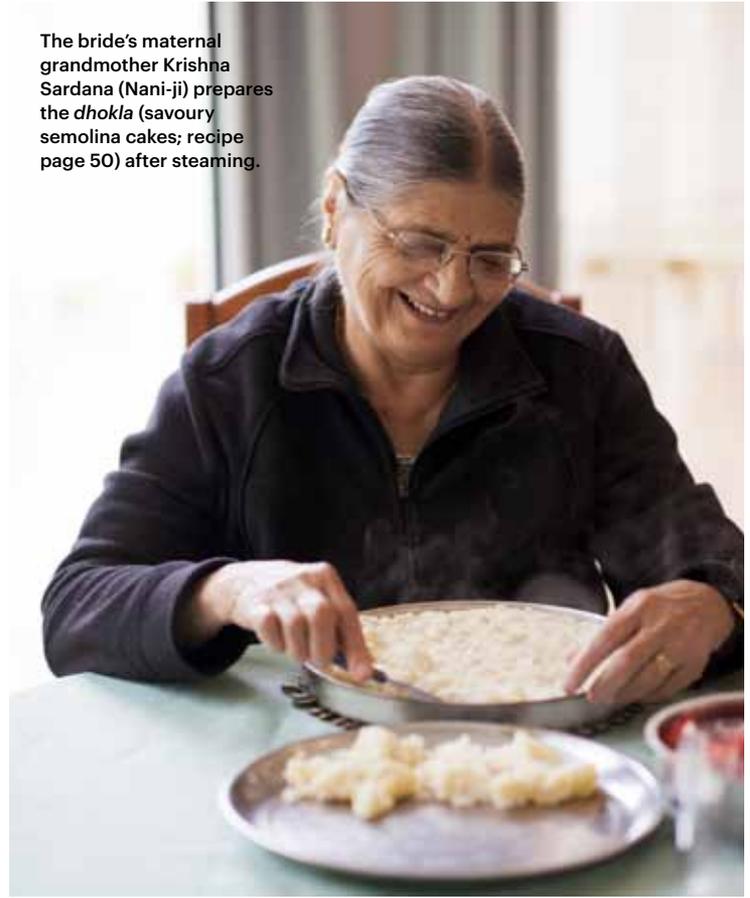
Vijay says he and Angeli are both intent on honouring customs that are central to Hindu culture. "This is a very happy day for me," says Vijay, whose family hails from the south of India. "A *sangeet* is a visual feast. Indians love dancing, colour and music. We also like to have fun, and so we perform lots of skits and have a laugh and that's a bonding experience," he explains.

After the main meal, the singing and dancing continues until 11pm, when the sweets are served and then the last of the guests flutter out the door. The next time everyone will meet is at the wedding ceremony, when Vijay makes his entrance on an elaborately decorated horse at the Mukti-Gupteshwar Mandir temple in Minto. Although the wedding is more serious than a *sangeet*, Vijay says it will be another opportunity to again "unite family and friends through food, music and prayer".

Cabbage cooked with coconut and split chickpeas, recipe page 50



The bride's maternal grandmother Krishna Sardana (Nani-ji) prepares the *dhokla* (savory semolina cakes; recipe page 50) after steaming.



Preparing the *boondi ladoo* (fried chickpea flour, cardamom and cashew nut balls), one of the many Indian sweets.



Sonia and her mother Adarsh



THE MENU

Savoury semolina cakes

Cabbage with coconut and split chickpeas

Chickpea masala

Ricotta & potato koftas

Mango kulfi

Almond burfi



The bride's paternal grandmother, Vidya Gulati (Dadi-ji).



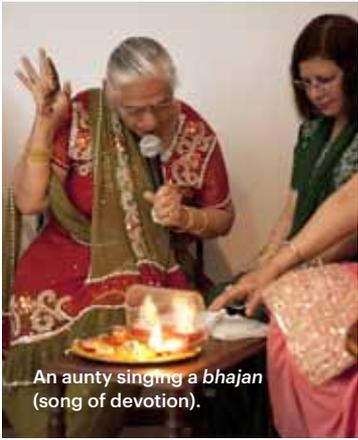
Ricotta & potato koftas, recipe page 52

The feast

Preparations for Angeli's sangeet begin at 6am, as three generations of women gather together. On the stove sits a pan of mushrooms bobbing in a rich buttery sauce. On another hob are chickpeas cloaked in tamarind. Later in the evening, the great variety of pastries, curries and condiments produced during this five-hour labour of love are laid out on the table to share. Angeli's mum, Adarsh, who learned to cook alongside her grandmother, says she loves preparing food for a sangeet because "it's such a jovial day. Today is a chance for me to spend time with my daughter before her wedding day," says Adarsh, who has also taught her son, Arun, 24, to cook. Although Angeli's sangeet is meat-and-alcohol free, Adarsh says many Indians now shrug off the old-fashioned format. While the savoury dishes are chosen due to their ease of preparation, Angeli's dad, Suresh says the sweets are the "jewel in the crown". "Mu mitha kar lo is Hindi for 'sweetness in the mouth'. Dishes such as *burfi* and *kulfi* give pleasure, so they are seen as auspicious to serve at a sangeet," he says.



The bride Angeli Gulati (centre) with her sister Sonia (left) and sister-in-law Srilekha (right).



An aunty singing a bhajan (song of devotion).



Savoury semolina cakes, recipe page 50



Vijay's niece Sejal. Below left: Vijay's brothers Santosh and Shobhan get ready to perform a dance.



The vegetarian spread, which also included a kofta and mushroom curry, cheese and spinach quiches, salad, roti and rice.



Mehndi

Hidden, somewhere, in the intricate henna motif on Angeli's hands, is her fiancé Vijay's name. It's his job to find his name in his bride's mehndi on their wedding night to impress her with his 'active mind'. Mehndi artist Zeenat Lokhandwala says hiding the groom's name in the swirling patterns "encourages intimacy between the couple. I make it hard for the groom to find his name so he must sit close to his bride and hold her hands... it's very romantic," she says. Zeenat says it's customary for all women attending the sangeet to have the vegetable dye painted on one hand for *shagun* (luck).

But she says the bride's design is always the most elaborate, adorning both the hands and feet.



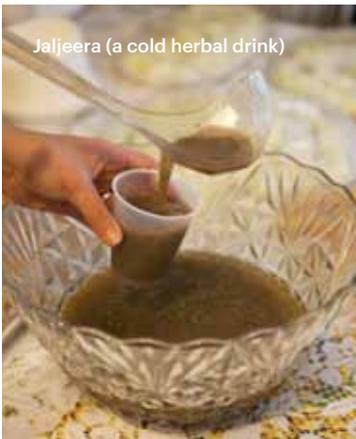
Bride and groom
Angeli and Vijay



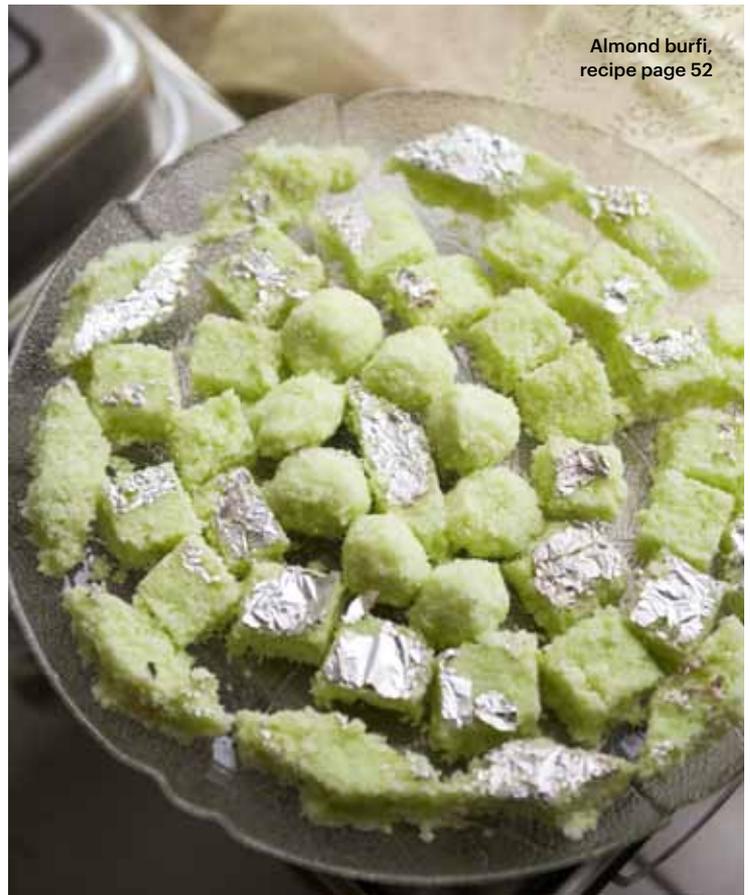
Chickpea masala,
recipe page 50



Mango kulfi,
recipe page 52



Jaljeera (a cold herbal drink)



Almond burfi,
recipe page 52



Papdi chaat (yoghurt,
potatoes, chickpeas,
herbs and spices)



Sangeet entertainment

Groom Vijay beams with pride and amusement as he watches his bride-to-be Angeli performing a song-and-dance routine. When Angeli finishes, she sits down besides her sister, Sonia, who has spent the last month or so coordinating tonight's entertainment line-up with her young cousin, Megha Sardana. She says they used technology to encourage the guests, 40 of whom live overseas, to rehearse their routines. "We made up some dances, made videos and sent all the performers a YouTube link so they could practise the routines. Early in the evening, elderly family members thump along on the *dholki* (a double-headed drum) but as the night progresses, a DJ and more contemporary tunes come into play.

SAVOURY SEMOLINA CAKES

DHOKLA

MAKES 16

160g (1 cup) fine semolina
1 tsp Eno*
1 onion, finely chopped
2cm-piece ginger, finely grated
1½ tbs sunflower oil
95g (½ cup) natural yoghurt
½ tsp yellow mustard seeds
12 curry leaves
1 bunch coriander, stems and leaves finely chopped
1 long green chilli, cut into julienne

1 Combine semolina, Eno, ½ tsp salt and onion in a large bowl and form a well in the centre. Whisk together ginger, ½ tbs oil, yoghurt and 100ml water in a jug, pour into the well and gradually stir in semolina mixture until a thick batter. Set aside for 30 minutes to rest.

2 Pour batter into a greased 20cm round cake pan and cover with a sheet of baking paper, then a sheet of foil to seal. Place in a large steamer basket, cover with a lid and set over a large saucepan of simmering water. Steam for 20 minutes or until a skewer inserted into the centre comes out clean. (Alternatively, place a tea towel in the base of a large saucepan, place the cake pan on top and fill the saucepan with enough hot water to reach halfway up the side of the cake pan. Cover and steam as above.)

3 Stand semolina cake for 1 hour, then turn out onto a plate. Cool to room temperature, then cut into 3cm diamond-shaped pieces.

4 Heat the remaining 1 tbs oil in a wok or heavy-based saucepan over medium heat. Add mustard seeds and cook, stirring, for 30 seconds or until seeds start to pop. Add curry leaves, coriander, chilli and semolina cake pieces and cook, stirring gently, for

2 minutes or until heated through and fragrant. Serve hot or at room temperature.

* *Eno is an antacid fruit salt available from supermarkets, pharmacies and Indian food shops. Substitute ¾ tsp bicarbonate of soda and ¼ tsp citric acid.*

CABBAGE WITH COCONUT AND SPLIT CHICKPEAS BAND GOBI SABZI

SERVES 8 AS PART OF A BANQUET

900g small white cabbage, cut into 3cm strips
1 tbs vegetable oil
1½ tsp yellow mustard seeds
½ tsp ground turmeric
12 curry leaves
1 long green chilli, cut into julienne
100g (½ cup) dried split chickpeas (chana dhal)*, rinsed well, drained
65g (¼ cup) desiccated coconut
Steamed rice and roti, to serve

1 Rinse cabbage and drain well. Set aside.

2 Heat oil in a large wok or frying pan over high heat. Add mustard seeds, turmeric, curry leaves, chilli and split chickpeas, and cook for 3 minutes or until chickpeas start to brown. Add cabbage and 60ml water, and cook, stirring, for 8 minutes or until cabbage is softened. Remove from heat, stir in coconut until well combined and season with salt.

3 Serve cabbage hot or at room temperature with rice and roti.

* *Split chickpeas, not to be confused with yellow split peas, are available from Asian food shops.*

CHICKPEA MASALA CHANA MASALA

SERVES 8 AS PART OF A BANQUET

Soak the chickpeas overnight, changing the water every 2 hours, if possible.

250g (1¼ cups) chickpeas, soaked overnight

1 tsp black salt (kala namak)*

1 black tea tea bag

¼ tsp bicarbonate of soda

1 tbs ground coriander

1 tbs cumin seeds

1 tbs garam masala

2cm-piece ginger, finely grated

35g (about 2cm-piece) seedless

tamarind paste*

Sliced green chillies, coriander leaves,

steamed rice and and roti, to serve

1 Drain chickpeas and place in a large saucepan with 800ml water, ½ tsp black salt, the tea bag, bicarbonate of soda and 1 tsp salt. Bring to the boil then reduce the heat to low and simmer, covered, for 30 minutes or until chickpeas are tender. Drain, discard the tea bag and cooking liquid and return chickpeas to the pan. Set aside and keep warm.

2 Meanwhile, heat a small frying pan over low heat. Add coriander, cumin and garam masala, and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes or until fragrant. Add ginger and cook for a further minute. Remove from heat.

3 Place tamarind and 125ml water in a small saucepan over high heat. Break up tamarind with the back of a spoon and bring to the boil. Reduce heat to low and cook for 5 minutes or until tamarind is softened. Strain through a fine sieve, pressing to extract as much liquid as possible. Discard solids and add tamarind liquid to chickpeas with toasted spices and remaining ½ tsp black salt.

4 Scatter over green chillies and coriander leaves and serve hot or at room temperature with rice and roti.

* *Indian black salt is actually pink-mauve in colour. It is available ground or as large crystals, from Indian food shops. It has a high sulphur content with an aroma that is reminiscent of hard-boiled eggs. »*



* *Tamarind, sold as blocks at Asian food shops or selected supermarkets, gives a sour element to dishes and is used extensively in Asian cooking. The closest substitute is lemon juice or vinegar.*

RICOTTA & POTATO KOFTAS PANEER KOFTAS

MAKES 24

1 (about 300g) sebago potato
500g ricotta
75g (½ cup) cornflour
½ cup coriander leaves,
finely chopped,
plus extra, to serve
1 long green chilli (optional),
finely chopped
1 tbs sultanas, rinsed, drained
Sunflower oil, to deep-fry
Crusty bread or steamed rice,
to serve

Kofta sauce

1 tbs sunflower oil
1 tbs tomato paste
1 cinnamon quill
2 cardamom pods, crushed
600ml pouring cream
Pinch of chilli powder

- 1 To make kofta sauce, heat oil in a wok or frying pan over medium heat. Add tomato paste and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes, then add cinnamon and cardamom, and cook for 1 minute or until fragrant. Add cream and bring to the boil. Season with salt and chilli, reduce heat to medium and simmer for 5 minutes or until slightly thick. Remove and discard the spices and set the sauce aside until needed.
- 2 Place potato in a saucepan of salted water and bring to the boil. Reduce heat to medium and cook for 20 minutes or until tender.

When the potato is cool enough to handle, peel it, then mash. Cool slightly.

- 3 Place mashed potato, ricotta, cornflour, ½ tsp salt, coriander leaves, green chilli and sultanas in a large bowl and stir to combine.
- 4 Shape heaped tablespoonfuls of the ricotta mixture into 24 walnut-sized balls and place on a tray lined with baking paper.
- 5 Fill a deep-fryer or large saucepan one-third full with oil and heat over medium heat to 180C (or until a cube of bread turns golden in 10 seconds). Working in 3 batches, gently drop the koftas into the oil and deep-fry, turning halfway, for 2 minutes or until crisp, golden and heated through. Remove the koftas with a slotted spoon and drain on paper towel.
- 6 Place koftas in a bowl and reheat the sauce. Spoon the sauce over the koftas, scatter with extra coriander leaves and serve immediately with crusty bread or rice.

MANGO KULFI

MAKES 18

You will need 18 x 70ml popsicle moulds. Start this recipe a day ahead.

310ml (1¼ cups) condensed milk
300ml thickened cream
300ml milk
2 (about 860g) mangoes, peeled,
roughly chopped
Fresh fruit or fruit jelly,
to serve (optional)

- 1 Blend all the ingredients together in a blender to a coarse purée.
- 2 Spoon the mango mixture into 18 x 70ml popsicle moulds and freeze overnight or until frozen.
- 3 Remove the kulfi from the freezer, hold the moulds in a tea towel soaked in warm water, then carefully remove moulds. Serve the mango kulfi immediately with fruit or jelly, if desired.

ALMOND BURFI

MAKES 28

200g (2 cups) full-cream milk powder
220g (1 cup) caster sugar
300g finely ground almonds
2 cardamom pods, seeds finely ground
Green food colouring
Edible silver leaf (optional), to decorate

- 1 Place milk powder in a bowl and gradually add 80ml water, stirring, until the mixture just comes together in a firm ball. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside for 1 hour or until the mixture is firm enough to crumble to a powder.
 - 2 Using your fingertips, crumble the ball into a fine powder.
 - 3 Place sugar and 125ml water in a saucepan over medium heat and bring to the boil. Add crumbled milk mixture and cook, stirring continuously with a spatula for 5 minutes or until mixture thickens and comes away from the side of the pan. Stir in ground almonds and cardamom, and cook for a further minute, then remove from heat. Colour with food colouring.
 - 4 Grease a 30cm x 20cm slice pan and pour mixture into tray. Using a knife, score the top into 28 pieces. Refrigerate for 4 hours or until firm.
 - 5 Cut burfi into pieces using the score marks as a guide and decorate with silver leaf, if using, to serve.
- * *Edible silver leaf is sold as thin flakes or sheets at Indian food shops, where it is known as vark, as well as cake decorating shops.* 🍴