



As in her book *Love, Loss, and What We Ate*, Padma Lakshmi is not a model, TV personality or a millionaire at this meeting at a cozy Italian restaurant in New York City.

Rajul Punjabi finds just another Indian girl telling her story, hoping to mobilize others to tell theirs as well.

On an unseasonably warm afternoon for mid-March, I find myself sitting across Padma Lakshmi at a cozy, ducked off Italian restaurant in the East Village neighborhood of New York City. I struggle to find a comfortable position in the tall, wobbly wooden chair, but she is perched on hers as if it were constructed just for her. I stare at her dewy, seemingly makeup-less face as she gently forks rigatoni with a delicate meat sauce into her mouth. I can't tell if she's enjoying it, because she's got her *Top Chef* game face on.

Lakshmi is an open book, though. At least, now she is. After modeling and acting in Europe in her 20s, penning cookbooks and then hosting Bravo's culinary challenge show, *Top Chef* for almost a decade, she's decided to discuss the woman behind the media figure in her recently released memoir, *Love, Loss, and What We Ate*. The title is short but apropos, as Lakshmi delves into food, family, and her most notorious relationship, as well as the loss of her partner and best friend to brain cancer.

"I knew that the book wouldn't be good if it wasn't truthful," she says, at a launch event hosted by the Asia Society. "Not provocative, but just truthful. I don't want to read about other women I'm interested in's non-answers. And I didn't want to write that kind of book."

But what she doesn't consider provocative inevitably raises eyebrows. The memoir tracks Lakshmi's battle with endometriosis and subsequent difficulty conceiving, and also reveals her growth through each romantic relationship — one of which yielded what she claims as her greatest accomplishment to date: Her daughter, Krishna, now six years old.

At the book launch event that evening, she wore sleek black stilettos and a leopard print dress that left no secrets. Women — all shades of brown — blushed and waited patiently to look comically short in a picture with her. But at the restaurant on this particular afternoon, Lakshmi is not a model, TV personality or a millionaire. She's just another Indian girl telling her story, hoping to mobilize others to tell theirs as well.

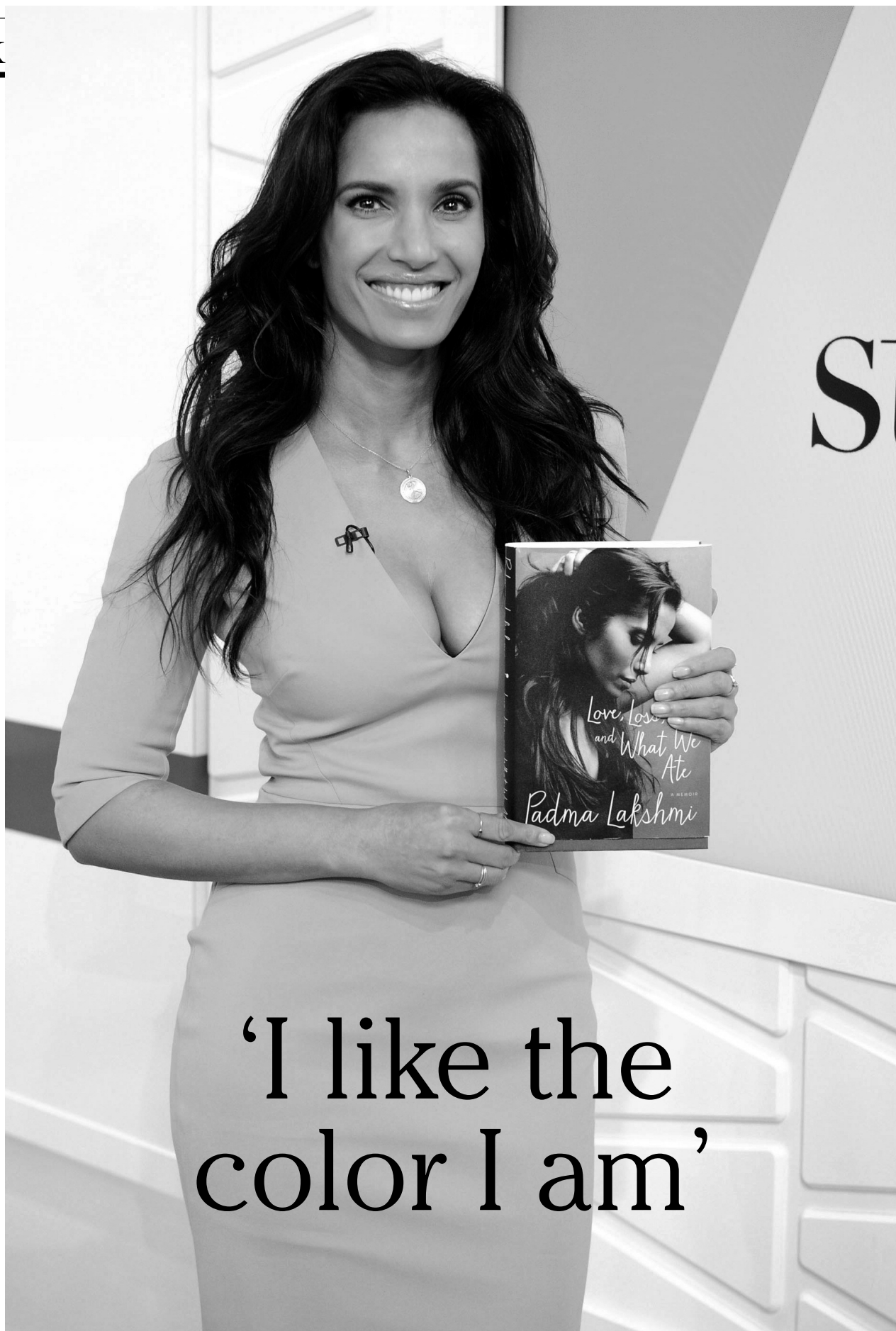
Whenever we see you on TV, you have a game face on. How do you manage to look so Zen all the time?

I think it's my background because Indian culture is so reserved. And as women especially we're taught to be very withholding and not freak out.

My grandfather is a very reserved person. Both my grandparents were. And my mother is not — about anything. So I think it has a lot to do with my own upbringing and culture.

And I think [*Top Chef*] doesn't work if I'm not that way because then there's no reason to watch. I try not to take a second bite sometimes because the contestants will say, "if she takes a second bite she really likes it." But sometimes I'm just not sure and want to make sure I'm making the right assessment so I take another bite. Or sometimes I'm just really hungry. There could be various reasons, but my game face is because for so long I didn't feel I had the right to speak, probably.

It's a part of the painful truth. For a long time I didn't



'I like the color I am'

CRAIG BARRITT/GETTY IMAGES

know I had permission to open my mouth or let my feelings out. And I don't really feel that is uncommon.

You don't seem to care much about what people think about you anymore. Was there a crystallizing moment when that happened?

It has happened very gradually. Gloria Steinem told me that women become more radical as they age, and I think she is right.

A part of it was that I really had nothing to lose. So much of my business was already out there. And for a long time I purposely didn't comment on it because I wanted the focus to be about my work not what was happening in my private life and who it was happening with. But they said it anyway

and they said it in the most callous, cynical way without checking their facts or anything like that. So, I think it actually came out during the process of writing this book.

This book is like an Adele album in the way that it is very revealing and honest, but also unapologetic.

It was the most difficult thing I ever had to do. Sometimes I wrote late at night or when my daughter was at school. Or on the weekends that she went to see her dad. There were parts of my writing where she wasn't even in school yet because it took me so long... and there were times where I would literally be crying when I wrote it.