

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team.
00:00:19	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. Padma Lakshmi is a model, actress, and the host of TV’s <i>Top Chef</i> . She’s the person telling everyone to pack their knives and go home. Her latest television series is <i>Taste the Nation with Padma Lakshmi</i> , on Hulu.
00:00:34	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:00:35	Clip	Clip	Music: Twangy, warm guitar.
			Padma Lakshmi (<i>Taste the Nation</i>): Okay, here’s another thing I’ve never cooked before—antelope.
			Speaker: I have a couple times.
			Padma: <i>[Teasing.]</i> Just a couple?
			Speaker: Just a couple times.
			Padma: <i>[Laughing.]</i> Okay.
			Padma (voiceover): This antelope actually came from the San Carlos reservation, where I learned to forage with Twila.
			Speaker: So, we have a New Mexico red chile, sea salt, and garlic. Dried sage. And at the end I’m gonna add just sunflower oil, that’ll help rub that on there.
			Padma: What is your favorite game meat?
			Speaker: I think muskrat.
			Padma: Packrat was my first rodent. <i>[Laughing.]</i> So, I’m learning still.
00:01:05	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:06	Jesse	Host	Every episode, Padma travels to a different part of the United States to highlight an immigrant community. She breaks bread with folks across the nation to discuss the relationships between history and food. The show celebrates different cultures and their place in American cuisine. The results of the conversations she has often reveal stories that challenge notions of identity and what it means to be American. Padma’s also written several cookbooks as well as a memoir. When I talked with her in 2016, she’d just written an encyclopedia—literally. It’s called <i>The Encyclopedia of Spices and Herbs</i> . It is, as the cover says, an essential guide to the flavors of the world. Anyway. Here’s my interview with the immensely charming and significantly brilliant Padma Lakshmi.
00:01:52	Music	Transition	Synth heavy, relaxed music.

00:01:57	Jesse	Host	Padma, your new book is about spices. What are the spices that you remember most vividly from being a kid?
00:02:07	Padma Lakshmi	Guest	Probably black mustard seeds. Cumin. Curry leaves. Um. Red chiles. Those were the basic ingredients that my grandmother fried in a big, iron ladle with some oil. Usually mustard oil. Or sesame oil. And when you heard the crackling of the mustard seeds, something akin to little machine gun fire or sort of like popcorn, you knew, and you could also smell the aroma of the curry leaves frying. They're—it's a very distinct smell. You knew that dinner was on in a mere amount of minutes. And I think from a very early age, I sort of stood at the—at her elbow and... was fascinated by these little seeds and twigs.
00:02:56	Jesse	Host	Did you like the food that your grandma made when you were a kid? You came to the United States as a—I think like as a preschooler, when you were four or five, right?
00:03:04	Padma	Guest	Yes, exactly. I came when I was four. Yes, I did. I mean I was always a good eater and I was a very curious eater. And I really loved things that were heavily spiced, especially when you considered my age. And you know, there was a little bit of a cultural crossing. You know? To get used to American food when I got to the states. Everything seemed very bland to me. I think a lot of waiters in New York restaurants were charmed to have a four-year-old ask for tabasco.
			<i>[Jesse laughs.]</i>
00:03:48	Jesse	Host	They thought I was kidding, but my mother said, "No, she would really like some tabasco please." <i>[Laughs.]</i> Did you have cultural crossing issues the other way around? I know a lot of folks who grew up eating the food of their immigrant parents at home, who were also, like, uncomfortable bringing friends from school home or whatever because they were worried that their friend from school would think it was weird.
00:04:10	Padma	Guest	Oh yeah, definitely. I mean, I had cross cultural clashes left and right. You know. Going East and going West. In school, I can remember my mother used to send little Tupperware plastic containers with rice and some vegetable curry or kidney beans and tomato stew and—you know, it's very pungent, to put it mildly. And everyone else was having these very neat little wonder bread sandwiches of peanut butter and jelly—which to me seemed disgusting, to eat something that cloyingly sweet that stuck to every surface in your mouth. When I had birthday parties, I was always a little weary—wary, excuse me, of what my mother was going to cook. You know. And I just said, "Can't we just have pizza, please?"
00:05:00	Jesse	Host	What was weird about you—and especially the—maybe the food that you ate in, you know, your... food—food lifestyle, so to speak, when you were spending summers in India?
00:05:14	Padma	Guest	Well, I always had a mental list of things that I was going to eat as soon as the plane landed. And you know, I had a lot of street food. I had—have always had touchwood, a very good, strong stomach. And I had—you know—these things called chaat. C-H-double A-T, chaat. And they come in various varieties, but they're all crunchy and salty and tangy and sweet and hot and sour. And no two bites are the same. So, you can have puffed rice, tossed with fried besan flour and fried peanuts that has, you know, a date and tamarin sauce, but also a spicy green chile and coriander chutney. And

yogurt and black cumin and red chili powder and all of these things put together. Or you can have flat disks of fried semolina with besan flour again. And, you know, boiled potatoes and boiled chickpeas.

And there were just different configurations of all these elements that had a lot of different textures and flavors.

00:06:24 Jesse Host

What was, like, weird and American about you when you were in Chennai or Madras, where your family was from, in the summer?

00:06:33 Padma Guest

My sense of dress. Because I went to America when I was four and—you know—when you're four, you're really not even aware of your gender so much. I wasn't taught like the other kids were to be bashful, to be reserved and covering of our skin. And so, when I would go back for summers, I—you know, it was so hot in south India that I would just wear shorts and a little tube top.

00:06:58 Jesse Host

I wanna ask you—we've talked a lot about the breadth of your palate, but I want to know what is gross to you to eat.

00:07:09 Padma Guest

Offal. Tripe. Anything *[laughing]*—

00:07:11 Jesse Host

Really?

00:07:12 Padma Guest

Yeah. I'm not a big organ meat person. I don't like eating tongue or, you know, heart or brain and things like that. I still get really, really squeamish about certain cuts of meat. I—you know, obviously came to eating meat much later. I—wasn't something I started doing until my adolescence, really. And it just—I have real trouble with those kind of cuts of meat. Like, it's the smell, it's the texture, it's the gamey, bloodiness of it.

00:07:45 Jesse Host

A big part of eating meat is pretending that it's not a part of a living being.

[Padma agrees.]

And I think, you know, with tripe—you know, I—I don't know, I guess I probably only ever had it much in pho. But it's so—it's so goofy looking that it hardly seems like it could be part of the body of an animal. *[Laughs.]* So, I think that's why I'm cool with eating it.

00:08:06 Padma Guest

Yeah, I know. I know, but don't you taste that— isn't there that aftertaste? Can you not detect that's it tongue when you're eating a tongue taco? Even if it's chopped up?

00:08:17 Jesse Host

No, I'm pretty chill—I'm pretty chill with tongue.

[Padma laughs.]

I mean, there's definitely a big difference between—there's—it's one of those things where there's a big difference between if it's pretty good or if it's not that good. Sort of like yuca. Like, yuca is—if you get, like, stringy, weird yuca it's super gross. But then if you get it really good, it's like, "Oh, this is totally better than potatoes."

[Padma agrees.]

00:08:42 Padma Guest

Um, yeah, that's how—that's how I feel about—
But it doesn't have this sinister quality to it. It's still just a tuber.

[Jesse laughs and agrees.]

It's—you know. It comes from the ground. It's a plant. It's not—like, as bad as any vegetable, like, think—you know, people have an

00:09:16	Jesse	Host	aversion to eggplant or okra because, you know, it's not cooked properly and gets very slimy. But you know, it's still just a plant. Like, it's so innocuous. But when there's something slimy and nondescript or murky, when it's a nonvegetarian thing, I think it just takes on a whole other sinister thing, for me.
00:09:20	Padma	Guest	I like that you think of it as sinister, specifically. <i>[Laughs.]</i>
00:09:21	Jesse	Host	I do! I feel very— <i>[laughs]</i> .
00:09:23	Padma	Guest	Like, not just gross. Like, threatening. <i>[Chuckles.]</i>

I do. I feel—but that's how, you know, I was conditioned to feel like that, I think. I mean, I remember when I came to this country, my grandfather—who loved America—was an—you know, American lover of all American culture, from baseball to jazz to showtune to everything. And he made me memorize all 50 states and their capitals in alphabetical order. Which is something I know I can't do now, even.

But you know, he also said, "Be careful, because meat lurks everywhere. Even when you're not suspecting it. And it will be cold there and you'll order tomato soup or vegetable soup. And sure, it may have a few vegetables in it, but the broth is actually—you know, the boiled bone water of an animal. And so, anywhere that you look, meat can be lurking. Like French fries. You love French fries or doughnuts, but they can be fried in liquified fat of a pig. They call it lard."

You know. *[Laughs.]* So, you know, I felt like I was coming to another planet. The most dangerous things in my grandmother's kitchen—you know—was her coconut grater and the chiles! *[Laughs.]* That's—you know?

00:10:41	Jesse	Host	More of my conversation with Padma Lakshmi when we return from a break. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:10:50	Music	Transition	Cheerful, upbeat music interspersed with cheers.
00:10:51	Jesse	Promo	Support for <i>Bullseye</i> and the following message come from Green Chef.

Green Chef is a USDA certified organic meal kit, offering plans for every lifestyle—including paleo, plant-powered, keto, and balanced living. With Green Chef, everything is hand-picked and delivered right to your door. So, meal planning, grocery shopping, and prep is done, week after week. Go to GreenChef.com/bullseye80 and use code "bullseye80" to get \$80 off your first month.

00:11:26	Promo	Clip	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> Music: "War" by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong with lead vocals by Edwin Starr plays in the background.
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John Roderick: *Friendly Fire* is a podcast about war movies, but it's so much more than that.

Adam Pranica: It's history!

Speaker 1 (Film clip): Was just supposed to be another assignment.

Ben Harrison: It's comedy.

Speaker 2 (Film clip): Under no circumstances are you to engage the enemy.

Adam: It's... cinema studies.

Murdock (*Rambo: First Blood Part II*): That's a hell of a combination.

John: So, subscribe and download *Friendly Fire* on your podcatcher of choice.

Ben: Or at MaximumFun.org.

[*Music fades out.*]

00:11:52 Promo Clip

Music: Ominous, rhythmic music.

Rodney Carmichael: I'm Rodney Carmichael. And on this episode of *Louder Than a Riot*, the bias against rap lyrics seal the fate of No Limit's Mac Phipps.

Speaker: This guy should be incarcerated. And I know that his music got him incarcerated, but they got the wrong guy.

Rodney: Listen now to the *Louder Than a Riot* podcast from NPR Music.

00:12:17 Jesse Host

[*Music fades out.*]

Welcome back to *Bullseye*, I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Padma Lakshmi. She's the host of *Taste the Nation*, on Hulu, and the author of *The Encyclopedia of Spices and Herbs*. She and I talked in 2016.

How do you deal with eating, like, the sort of cavalcade of foods that is required for your job on *Top Chef*? Especially when there are a bunch of things that you have to eat and, you know, while you're eating them you also have to be... lending a hand in telling a story? So, like, you can't—you can't make a face.

00:12:58 Padma Guest

[*They chuckle.*] You have to make a very specific kind of face and that kind of thing.

Yes. It's very funny, because I have no poker face. So, you know, once I take a bite, the camera will usually cut away [*laughing*] from me. But I—it's hard! You know. It's really hard, because it's not like just overeating. It's not like having a fourth portion of lasagna or a third portion of, you know, pulled pork tacos or whatever the heavy dish is. It's having all of those things. It's having a little bite of this and a little bite of that and each dish has, you know, 12 or 15 ingredients in it and components on the side. It's... I mean, I don't have a poker face. I think, you know, sometimes I'm really trying to figure out what the chef's intention is. You know. What were they going for? Because if they were going for something that was kind of bitter, then okay, they succeeded. Whether it's pleasurable to me or not, if that is the best example of what they were trying to do, then you have to give them points.

Like, if they make a great tongue salad, you know, and I *[laughing]* don't happen to like tongue, I can't—I can't take points away from them.

00:14:11 Jesse Host You were a model for a long time, and you know—the—obviously a big part of being a model is... you know, whatever. A gift. You know. Being very good looking.

00:14:24 Padma Guest Heredity? Yeah.

00:14:26 Jesse Host Yeah. *[Chuckles.]* Which, I will stipulate, you are.

[Padma thanks him.]

But I think the other—the other part of being a model and one of the skills of being a model is being aware of how you look. You know. A gift and a curse, obviously. But part of it is, you know, you are reflecting—you are able to produce whatever this image is supposed to look like, in your face and body and so on and so forth. And I don't think there is any time, except maybe like in the middle of laughing, that we look weirder than when we are eating.

[Padma agrees with a laugh.]

And I wonder if you—I wonder if you had to develop, like, the skills to eat in a way that wasn't weird or embarrassing looking on camera.

00:15:19 Padma Guest I'm—yeah. I mean, I'm a—I talk with my mouth full all the time! We—you know, it's funny that you say that, because sometimes I go online, which is not a good practice usually, but—and read some of the comments. You know. I think *GQ* did a piece on me recently and they posted on their social media and I went to see—read the comments there. And one of the guys said, “Ugh,” you know, “She's so heinous. She—she's terrible, the way she eats.”

[Laughing.] And I actually, like, answered him on their—on their Instagram and said, “I'm sorry. I'll try and do better next time.”

[Jesse laughs in sympathy.]

But you know, it's difficult! I try not to be too messy, but—you know, and I try not to spill, because obviously we're—you know, we're a small cable food show. And so, we don't have two of everything. So, if I soil my blouse, it's going to remain soiled. I mean, we'll stop production and try to get the stain out, but if we can't get it out it's not like we can—you know, we're gonna change the top. We're just gonna note it and move on.

00:16:25 Jesse Host It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Padma Lakshmi.

If you were gonna give me, a casual home cook who primarily is cooking pork shoulders and green beans with butter, um—a spice. A single spice. What would it be? And I'm not talking about salt or pepper. Something that—something that probably isn't in my spice rack right now. Or that I might not think of that you would have me think of it.

00:16:59 Padma Guest If it's not salt and pepper, I would say probably sumac or perhaps za'atar. Sumac is in za'atar, but za'atar is a Middle Eastern spice blend. It has thyme—wild thyme—in it. It also has sesame seeds. It's a lovely—you'll see it often rubbed on middle eastern flatbreads.

Sumac is a dried, red berry. It used to grow in North America. It grows all over the Middle East. If it's—if you eat, you know, a bushel of it, it's poisonous. But you wouldn't. But when it's dried and powdered, it has this beautiful, rich vermilion color. This lovely, lovely burgundy red that you can just sprinkle on things. And it gives a fruity tartness that has a depth to it that is beautiful.

When we add acidity or sourness to a dish, usually we add it with citrus, like lemon or lime or with vinegars. This allows you to add sour notes to a dish without adding moisture. And it—you know—doesn't seem like a big deal until you talk about different things that you wanna season. Like your pork shoulder. You know, it'd be beautiful as a spice rub on your pork shoulder.

00:18:22 Jesse Host

I would love to be able to credibly use the phrase “rich vermilion”.

[Padma laughs.]

I'm a public radio host. That should be, like, one of my—that should be in my rack of skills, but... I just haven't got it, *[chuckling]* Padma.

[Padma laughs.]

You suffer from endometriosis. Which is... a condition that—I'll give a very quick summary and you'll tell me if I'm wrong, 'cause I went to public high school.

[Padma agrees with a chuckle.]

But it's—essentially, you know, the process of a woman's reproductive period involves shedding the lining of the uterus. And if you have endometriosis, that lining does not shed properly or as it does in other people. And it causes very serious cramping and pain, you know, for—a kind of a regular period of every month and also other related pain.

00:19:26 Padma Guest

Mm-hm, that's exactly right. Yeah. It's very debilitating. I mean, I wasn't diagnosed until I was 36 and, you know, I went through puberty when I was 13. So, that's a week every month for 23 years. You know. 25% of my life that I was in chronic pain. And when I say chronic pain, I mean taking prescription pain killers in bed with a heating pad or hot water bottle, feeling nauseous, having a headache. Feeling numbness. Pain running down one leg. Having back ache. Having digestive problems. And you know, I think when we get that talk about the birds and the bees from our elders, we're conditioned to accept that pain, because anything to do with a woman's reproductive system—childbirth, all of it—is our lot in life and is painful.

00:20:16 Jesse Host

Do you feel like talking about it has—and being so public about it—has changed the way that you relate to the world? Not just about this, but about other things?

00:20:29 Padma Guest

I think, yes. I think the only good that could come out of being undiagnosed for those many years is that it galvanized something inside of me and made me wanna do something about it. Because, you know, I didn't want the next generation of women to lose 25% of their life! And to not be able to play volleyball or go on the debate team or whatever they wanted to do. And... that was the first steps. Speaking out about it—you know, it wasn't overnight. It took some

cajoling and sort of getting used to. But it was very liberating to speak about it. And then once I spoke about that, it gave me courage to write my memoir. And you know, that was a very scary thing to do as well.

But I have to tell you, it's—it's quite... astonishing how—you know, I'm pretty much Indian. I'm very Americanized 'cause I've grown up in this country, but inside I'm still affected by my Indian culture and in Indian culture, like in many Asian cultures, you're taught to be reserved. You know? To be very reserved and not to speak too much about your personal life and all of that. And, you know, what I've done is just do the complete opposite. And it feels so good, because I'm not—I don't—I'm not a scaredy cat anymore. You know? All those things that I was embarrassed about or ashamed of or didn't feel I had worked out. You know. There's nothing anyone can say about me, now, that I haven't said about myself.

00:22:00 Jesse Host

Well, Padma, I so appreciate you taking all this time to come talk to me, on *Bullseye*. Thank you so much for doing it.

00:22:08 Padma Guest

Thanks for having me. I really appreciate it. It was a great talk.

00:22:12 Jesse Host

I guess it's time for me to pack my knives and go.

[Padma laughs brightly.]

[Singing.] Bada-da-dada-da! Ooo-woop!

00:22:23 Padma Guest

Okay. Thank you Padma, I really appreciate it.

00:22:26 Jesse Host

Take care. Thanks for having me on.

Padma Lakshmi, from 2016. *The Encyclopedia of Spices and Herbs* is a wonderful book. She's still on *Top Chef*. The show will return for its 18th season, next year. And don't forget to check out *Taste the Nation* on Hulu. It's wonderful. Our producer, Jesus, watched the show with his mom recently. And his mom, Yolanda, was a big fan of the episode where Padma goes to Arizona to eat foods that are indigenous to the United States. So, that's a classic *Bullseye* Yolanda pro-tip.

00:22:56 Music Transition

Thumpy transition music with synth guitar.

00:23:01 Jesse Host

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created in the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, my son Frankie—age three—has committed, full-boar, to Halloween costume: ghost pirate.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. He's away in the woods, this week. Far from all the rest of us. Jesus Ambrosio is filling in for him, this week. Jordan Kauwling is our associate producer. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it. You can keep up with the show on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Search on those platforms for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*.

00:23:58 Promo Promo

I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]