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Prominent Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders on the Heroes Who Inspired Them

Meet the elders who paved the way for these celebrities

AARP, April 1, 2021



DOMINIC VALENTE/HULLU; CHRISTOPHER HIRSHEIMER

Padma Lakshmi on hero Madhur Jaffrey

Padma Lakshmi had known about Madhur Jaffrey since college. A native of Delhi, the elegant Jaffrey broke barriers — first in the U.K., then in the U.S. — as an award-winning Shakespearean actress, TV host and food writer whose landmark 1973 book, *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, is credited with introducing Indian cuisine in the West. “She is a great writer and a great artist,” says Lakshmi, 50, who immigrated to the U.S. from India at age 4. “I just never saw a career like that anywhere else. There were not very many Indian women who were known outside of India for anything but being Bollywood actresses. I always admired her ability to be herself and rise.”

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When the two women first met in the early 2000s — Lakshmi’s then-husband was an old friend of Jaffrey’s — Lakshmi was in the process of inventing her own hyphenate career as a model-actress-writer-food expert. “I still didn’t know what my professional life was going to look like,” admits the longtime judge on Bravo’s Top Chef and host of Hulu’s Taste the Nation. “I had a great admiration for Madhur, but I don’t think I appreciated her accomplishments then the same way I do today. Now I know what it takes to have done the things she did, especially at the time she achieved them.”

In Jaffrey, Lakshmi found not only a role model but a mentor and friend. The older woman had learned to cook as an adult, via recipes that her mother mailed to her while she was a theater student in London, so she has a studied and intense relationship with the discipline — an intensity she recognized in Lakshmi. “When Padma really got into food, it was very interesting for me to watch how she explored the area, especially the way she brought attention to cuisines from Asia and around the world,” says Jaffrey, 87. “I have a lot of admiration for her for doing this. It’s how our relationship grew.”



[Link to NPR article on Ms. Jaffrey.](#)

The two share a conviction that food is more than just sustenance and sensory pleasure. “People often don’t take food seriously, but it’s a very serious aspect of a culture, because it has roots in history, religion, geography and just about everything else,” Jaffrey notes. “It’s an important part of learning about a country, about a people, about every aspect of their lives.”



[Link to article on Padma Lakshmi’s book.](#)

Adds Lakshmi, “Food is a way for people to pass their heritage and culture on to their children.” Her international cookbook *Tangy, Tart, Hot & Sweet* was recently rereleased in paperback.

“She is a great writer and a great artist,”

Asked how she feels about being a pioneer in bringing Indian food to American palates, Jaffrey responds that she doesn’t think about it much. “I don’t focus on being the first,” she says. “Instead, I think about people carrying on the work that I started. It needs people to take it in all kinds of new directions. I’m so happy to see Padma carry on the work in a wonderful way.”



ANNA MONEYMAKER-POOL/RALPH CRANE/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

Mazie Hirono on hero Patsy Mink

“Patsy Mink was a risk taker,” says Senator Mazie Hirono of Hawaii. A third-generation Japanese Hawaiian, Mink ran for Congress in 1964, “knowing that she would be the first woman of color to be elected if she won — which she did.” In Congress, Mink took a broad view of her responsibilities, championing national causes such as the creation of Medicare and the protection of equal rights. In 1972 she coauthored Title IX, the law that equalized education funding between the sexes. “Patsy really stayed the course,” Hirono recalls. “She kept pushing for what she believed in, and that was an inspiration to me.”

Hirono, 73, arrived in Hawaii from Japan at almost 8 years old, along with her brother and her mother, who was fleeing a difficult marriage. “I’m grateful that America afforded me many opportunities,” Hirono says, “but my experience as an immigrant from a poor background means I know what it’s like to not have opportunities. It’s why I so appreciate what Patsy did.”

According to Hirono, Mink’s signal characteristic was persistence. “She never gave up,” the senator points out. “She just kept fighting.” Mink left her congressional seat in 1976 to run for the Senate, a race she lost. After an appointment to the U.S. State Department and time leading a Washington lobby, Mink went home to Honolulu and won a seat on the city council. Two unsuccessful races later — one for governor one

for mayor of Honolulu — she again ran for Congress in 1990 and won her seat back. She remained a potent force in state and national politics until her death from viral pneumonia in September 2002.

The last time the two women saw each other was in July of that year. “I was the lieutenant governor of Hawaii then, and I was running for governor,” Hirono notes. “We were talking about it over lunch, and Patsy looked at me and said, ‘Mazie, you just have to win.’ I always remember those words. That was the hardest race I’ve ever run. And I didn’t win. But, like Patsy, I didn’t give up.” A few years later, Hirono won a seat in Congress, and in 2013 she became the first female Asian American senator. By 2017 there were two others — although one of those two recently stepped down to become the vice president of the United States. Says Hirono, “I think that Patsy would be pleased.”



Courtesy of Gwendolyn Mink/Patsy Takemoto Mink papers, Library of Congress



- The term “Asian American” is a surprisingly recent invention. Though people from Asia and the Pacific Islands have been coming to the U.S. mainland since before the country was founded, it wasn’t until the 1960s that the term was coined by two activists, to unite Americans with roots from across the Pacific.
- The Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community is some 6 percent of the U.S. population. According to 2018 census data, that includes 22.6 million Americans with ancestors from China, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent, plus 1.6 million with roots in the Pacific Islands, such as native Hawaiians, Samoans and Marshallese.

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