

purpose & passion



FROM SOCIAL WORKER TO SOCIAL EVENT CATERER, ANA CARMO COSTA, FOUNDER OF PRIVATE CATERING SERVICES ANISE - A CUISINE AFFAIR, WILL LEAVE YOU WITH A TASTE FOR ADVENTURE

Words: SALLY DIXON



A delicate touch with flavours and the way each dish is dressed are part of the Anise personality

IKIGAI – it's a Japanese word that literally means 'life' 'worth' when translated, but in broader terms is all about your reason for being, something that gives your life purpose. Many say finding your ikigai is the secret to a happy life.

Event caterer and founder of Anise – A Cuisine Affair, Ana Carmo Costa, found her ikigai in the art of cooking. Born to Goan parents in Mozambique, Ana was always fascinated with watching her mum and aunt cooking. She remembers: "There was always space for an extra person if they came to our house for a bite to eat, always extra food. I became intrigued by the preparation that goes into cooking, the behind the scenes, the ingredients, the time it takes to prepare, the presentation."

As a child, Ana and her family would spend holidays in Goa, staying in a house with a very old kitchen and an in-house chef who, in exchange for a room in the house, would cook for the family. Ana recalls: "He used to cook from scratch with very

basic cooking equipment. I got my pleasure for food and eating from that experience but also from watching my mother cook – she would never have a recipe or quantities but instead would say to me: 'if you want to learn, sit next to me and watch how to do it from scratch'. Throughout my teenage years, to get some extra pocket money I made chicken pies for my mum's colleagues. I actually went inter-railing with that money!"

Following a degree in Social Studies in Lisbon and a move to London to become a full-time social worker, Ana incorporated cooking into her evenings as a way of de-stressing.

"If I'm preparing a dish I really disconnect and I just wander in my mind," she says. "I love the transformation that takes place with cooking, from the solo ingredients to creating a delicious end result."

"My job on a child protection team in Bexley, London, was a difficult one as we had to work with the children of parents with substance misuse and disorganised households. It was hard to come back home and fully disconnect but cooking helped me to do that." ►



It's not just about the food, it is the detail that adds to the difference between this private catering service and so many of the others. Whether it's an intimate dinner party at home, or a grand affair with big numbers, everything is designed to be special, and meaningful

A career change

London proved to be life-changing for Ana as it was the city where she met her now husband, Portuguese João. After seven years of London life, the couple moved back to Lisbon where Ana continued to work in social care in a government institution in Lisbon. However, it was a different kettle of fish in working in social care in London and Ana became increasingly frustrated with her role.

One day, she had lunch with one of her two brothers and told him how she felt. "Why don't you do something that you really like," he asked. "Why don't you pursue that passion for cooking?"

Not knowing where to even begin, Ana had the idea of cooking for a housewarming party at her brother's new home as a way of getting people to know about her.

"And that's how it all started," she recalls. "In 2009, I catered a party at his house, got my first clients through word of mouth and started a new business, Home Food Events."

Ana worked two jobs at the same time, pursuing her love of

cooking while continuing her role as a social worker and looking after her two small children.

A move to the Algarve in 2010, due to her husband's job, saw the family put down new roots and Ana take a sabbatical from her social work career. After catering various events here, the family was soon on the move again – this time to Marrakesh in 2012, where they would stay for four years, and Ana would continue to pursue her passion for cooking through events there. The time was right to quit her old job, embrace her inner chef and take the plunge into event catering full time. 2016 saw the family head back to the Algarve where Ana rebranded her business to something less home focused. Anise – A Cuisine Affair was born.

On the menu today

From micro weddings and intimate dinners to cocktail parties and large corporate events, Ana puts the same passion and purpose into every Anise commission. "I always place myself in the position of the client, I would expect good service and

attention to detail," she says. "I like to know exactly what they want – I'm all about providing great experiences for people through food.

"For me the most satisfying thing at any event is when the client says it is exactly how they imagined it. When my team working on front of house come running into the kitchen and say: 'The guests are loving it, the feedback is incredible', that's when I know I'm in the right job." And that's her ikigai.

Ana's hands-on approach to catering means she's super attentive to a client's needs, meeting with them in person to discuss ideas, view the equipment they have in their home kitchen if it is a home event, and thinking about food presentation.

Aesthetics is important to her – Ana has a large collection of pottery and plates, collected from her travels, that she likes to use to present her food. "People eat with their eyes, presentation is so important," she says. Everything is prepped in the days leading up to the event in her home kitchen which she is in the process of expanding.

Cookbooks are a big source of inspiration for Ana along with the familiar Indian cuisine she grew up with. She says: "I'm a very curious person by nature, which is lucky as I don't have a degree in cooking. I like food that comes from the heart. I'm always experimenting with new dishes and trying new flavours."

And what about her favourite place to buy cookbooks? That would be London, "Waterstones in Piccadilly is very special for me," she giggles, "not just for the cookbooks – it's where I started dating my husband!"

Ana's two children are now teenagers and fully appreciate the cooking queen that she is. She says fondly: "I love to cook, but what I don't like to cook is everyday meals. So sometimes I'll create something for my boys, like a pumpkin risotto. My older boy said the other day: 'This is so good, I'm so lucky, I don't think my school friends would eat like this for dinner.' It made me laugh!"

A chance to learn

The Covid-19 pandemic didn't do anything to quash Ana's passion for cooking, in fact it sparked a new idea. During lockdown, a friend of Ana's suggested she do weekly cooking classes over Teams video conferencing for the friendship group. Ana would send through the ingredients list ahead of time and then every week a new cooking class helped the friends connect and forget about what they were living through with the pandemic.

Classes included a session for teenagers on how to cook to impress their friends, a Mexican night, cheese and wine pairing, and curry nights. Once the pandemic was over this gave Ana the idea to do private cooking classes with small groups of people in their homes, sharing her love for cooking and inspiring others to connect through food.

If your enthusiasm for something close to your heart is anything like Ana's, then finding your ikigai and following it can really take you places.

Anise – A Cuisine Affair caters for events throughout the Algarve as well as in Lisbon. ©