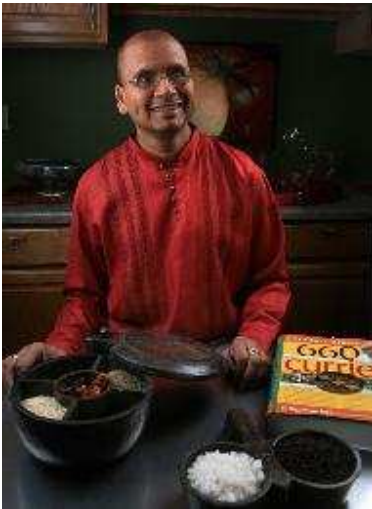


Taste: Curry up

Local author Raghavan Iyer seeks to shed some light on misconceptions about curry -- the word is unknown in India -- with a masterwork of his native cuisine.

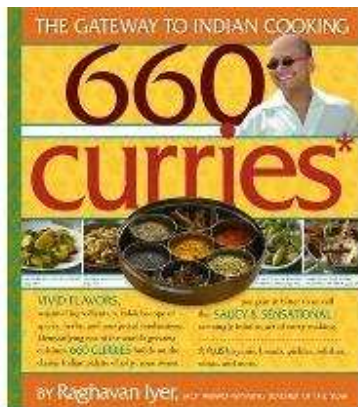
By [Kim Ode](#), Star Tribune

Related Content



Raghavan Iyer

Steve Rice, Star Tribune



To hear Raghavan Iyer, a champion of Indian curry, quote O.E. Rolvaag, a chronicler of Norwegian angst, is just the sort of amalgam of cultures that Iyer likes to nurture. Over breakfast of coffee and an éclair, he talked about the shock of moving from teeming Bombay, India, to Marshall, Minn., to study restaurant management. "Have you ever read

'Giants in the Earth?'" he asked, posing the Midwestern equivalent of asking Southerners if they've read "Gone With the Wind." Remember, he said, the scene where the wife, a reluctant pioneer, gazes from the door of the sod hut at the featureless prairie, and she says, "There is nothing to hide behind." That's how Marshall seemed. Twenty-five years later, Iyer is an award-winning cookbook author, culinary educator and recipe developer. He was a James Beard award finalist for his 2002 cookbook, "The Turmeric Trail: Recipes and Memories From an Indian Childhood (St. Martin's Press, 2002). Now he has, in his words, "given birth to a horse." For the past four years, the Eden Prairie chef has been laboring over a curry cookbook that clocks in at 832 pages. **"660 Curries: The Gateway to Indian Cooking"** (Workman, \$32.50) is a master's thesis of Indian food, culture and resources.

Are there *really* 660 curries?

Yes -- for starters.

"I first pitched it as 1,001, but Workman said, oh, give us between 600 and 800," Iyer said, laughing. Bottom line, the book has 701 recipes -- 660 for curries and the remainder for what he calls cohorts. That's his word for side dishes and such. "Accompaniments is very much a clinical term, while cohorts signifies compatibility."

No powder in India

Curry is the word that requires more clarification. The Western world regards it as a dish spiced from a jar labeled "curry powder." But Iyer said that curry isn't about spice, but gravy. "To us, it's all about sauces," he said. "No self-respecting Indian kitchen would have curry powder."

In other words, he's written a book about 660 sauces. Maybe, he mused, that would have been a less intimidating title. "Six hundred and sixty sauces -- that's doable, right?"

Ahem. Spoken like someone who was named Cooking Teacher of the Year by the International Association of Culinary Professionals in 2004. The thing is, despite arriving in this country with degrees in physics, math and chemistry, Iyer said he didn't know how to boil water.

He grew up in Mumbai, as the city has been known since 1997 when it reclaimed its original name from the British Bombay. He loved street food, much to the chagrin of his sister, who in many ways was as much his culinary instructor as his mother was.

Once in the United States, he began seeking ways to create the foods he missed. Ingredients were a challenge, but so was recreating techniques. The experience of teaching himself informed how he's written "660 Curries," with the method more detailed than you might expect. Bits of stir-fried garlic "should be light brown around the edges." A certain sauce is puréed to form "a thick, gritty, green-speckled paste."

"I wanted it to be as if a cooking teacher is talking, so there is more explanation, as if I'm there," Iyer said. He's also paid close attention to what aspects his students have questioned over the years, so there's an effort to anticipate questions that may come up in the preparation of ghee, which is clarified butter, or what you can substitute if you're fresh out of Horse gram. (Brown lentils are an excellent alternative.) The challenge, he said, "is how do I bridge two cultures, make things easy and recognizable?"

Front-end effort

Indian cuisine requires some pre-recipe prep, whether clarifying butter or grinding spices.

A word about ghee, the clarified butter that's the foundation of Indian flavors. "Ghee is the Indian way of prolonging the shelf life of butter," he said. Once the milk solids are removed, the remaining clear liquid will keep on the counter for months. Frozen, he said, it will last years, "even outlive you."

Undeniably, "660 Curries" asks for a lot of back-and-forth page-turning from any cook who's unfamiliar with this cuisine. The salmon recipe on page 670 calls for Balchao masala, a red chile and vinegar paste whose recipe is on page 17. Likewise, a first-timer confronts some upfront costs, gathering a list of seeds, spices and chiles that aren't part of the typical Minnesotan larder. But once made and properly stored, the spice mixes and pastes can last for weeks.

The book contains a much-needed glossary of terms, from amaranth to yogurt, with unfamiliar ingredients such as gongura, jaggery and screw pine in between. There also are metric conversion charts for quantities and temperatures, and mail-order sources for ingredients. (Locally, he recommends Asia Imports, 1840 Central Av. NE., Minneapolis.)

A world cuisine

The world has become a smaller place since Iyer moved to Minnesota. Now he can find cilantro, almost unheard of 25 years ago, as easily as parsley. He even sees curry leaves -- or kari leaves -- in some co-ops, which are used like bay leaves to flavor sauces.

Iyer, slim and soft-spoken with a ready laugh, is trying to make the world even smaller, having co-founded the Asian Culinary Arts Institute based in Minneapolis. It works toward the preservation and understanding of the culinary arts of Asia through tours and chef exchanges. Thus, he noted, "660 Curries" is not purely Indian, but also includes dishes from the cuisines of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Evidence of how Indian food is becoming mainstream is his recent partnership with Bon Appetit Management Co. to develop menus and train chefs to prepare Indian cooking in cafes of clients such as Yahoo, Target, Medtronic and Best Buy.

More tellingly, he and his partner have a son in elementary school who dives into Indian foods as easily as French fries. Which leads to Iyer's personal passion. "I'm a potato-holic," he said. "Any size, shape, variety -- you can wake me up at 2 a.m. for a potato."

Kim Ode • 612-673-7185