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CURRIES: Flavors are dynamic, complex and unique

Author Raghavan Iyer offers an easy-to-follow road map to delectable Indian cuisine.



Cathy Thomas
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The Orange County Register

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It boils down to the sauce. For years I thought that a curry was any warm concoction seasoned with curry powder. But Raghavan Iyer lovingly straightened me out.



SALMON CURRY: Wild Salmon Fillets Poached With Chilies, Tomato and Green Onions, a contemporary curry dish that incorporates Balchao masala prepared by Raghavan Iyer, author of the cookbook "660 Curries."

NICK KOON, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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[Cathy Thomas welcomes author and cooking instructor Raghavan Iyer to the kitchen where he demonstrates a curry recipe from his book "660 Curries."](#)

Iyer is an award winning, Minneapolis-based cooking teacher and the author of "660 Curries: The Gateway to Indian Cooking" (Workman, \$22.95), a comprehensive 807-page tome that demystifies one of the world's great cuisines.

"The word 'curry' is nonexistent in Indian kitchens, so don't think of it from the powder standpoint; instead think of it as a dish with sauce or gravy," he said at a recent cooking session in my kitchen. The sauce, he explained, is redolent with any number of freshly ground and very fragrant spices and/or herbs.

He said that curry isn't something that is added, it just IS.

"I use the four S's to define it: saucy, spicy – meaning well seasoned – simple and sensational," he said, his voice lilting in alluring songlike pitches.

Indeed, his curries exemplify the irresistible flavor profiles that are the building blocks of Indian cuisine: the interplay of sour, sweet, spicy heat, salty and bitter, along with umami (the taste found in meat, broth, mushrooms).

"I am a perfect hybrid, living the first 21 years in India and the last 26 years in the U.S.," he said, a gentle smile lazing in the corners of his mouth. "Having lived in two cultures, I have two styles of cooking."

So although the book is primarily focused on classic curries, he also includes "contemporary curries," dishes that showcase the flavors and spices of his native country teamed with ingredients and culinary techniques of his adopted homeland.

At the stove, we focused on a contemporary dish, wild salmon fillets poached with chilies, green onions and fresh tomatoes. Balchao masala, a red chili and vinegar paste, is the backbone of the sauce. I was amazed that my rather flimsy, everyday blender turned the assortment of soft and hard ingredients into an almost-smooth paste.

We sprinkled the salmon fillet with ground turmeric; the bright mustard-yellow dots of powder melted into to deep red-orange exterior of the wild fish. The fish's price tag relegates it to special occasions. One and a half pounds of wild Irish salmon cost about the same as a half-o-tank of gasoline. But I must say that its vibrant flavor and moist texture would bring me enormous palate pleasure.

In a separate bowl, Iyer combined coconut milk, a little of the paste we'd concocted, and fresh curry leaves. The leaves were bright green and citrusy. He explained that they are used like bay leaves are in Western cuisines, simmering in sauces to add delicate perfume.

"Curry leaves are sold in Indian markets, but of late they have been

harder and harder to come by," he said. "If you can't find them, simply leave them out. Don't substitute dried curry leaves."

After searing both skin-on and skin-free sides of the salmon fillet in a deep, large skillet, he added the coconut milk mixture, then brought the mixture to a simmer and added halved grape tomatoes and sliced green onion.

The kitchen filled with tempting scents, each offering distinct and separate subtleties for my nose to enjoy. Sweet? Yes, cinnamon, cloves, coconut and ginger. Sour? Yes, vinegar and tamarind. Spicy? Yes, a just-right amount of dried red chilies.

As the salmon poached, we chatted about the most common question he receives from new students: Can you share a recipe for basic chicken curry?

"They may as well ask me to come up with a peace plan for the Middle East!" he said. "Curries are so dynamic, so complex, everyone has a different recipe. It's hard to pigeonhole it. Westerners often think of tomato-based dishes as essential curries, so I offer a chicken curry with a spicy tomato sauce. The deep, full-bodied curry is delicious with bowls of steamed basmati rice. It represents to many Westerners the quintessential northern Indian chicken curry."

We served the heavenly salmon surrounded with cooked Trader Joe's Harvest Grains Blend, a packaged mix of dried Israeli couscous, orzo, baby garbanzo beans and red quinoa. Not a very traditional choice, but colorful and very tasty.

The salmon was perfection and after we polished it off, I hated to see Iyer leave. We had 659 curries left to try.

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