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## Currying flavor

On a Reno visit, an acclaimed cooking teacher celebrates an Indian staple

BY JOHNATHAN L. WRIGHT • JWRIGHT@RGJ.COM • AUGUST 27, 2008

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You've probably got one somewhere. In the back of a kitchen cupboard. Or tucked into your spice rack — or one of those spice carousels that seem to be everywhere these days.

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A bottle of curry powder, an all-purpose Indian seasoning that mingles turmeric, cumin, coriander, black pepper and other spices. It sits there now — gathering dust while losing flavor — but no doubt you've used the curry powder a few times to impart "authentic" Indian flavor.

But here's the thing. True Indian cuisines don't know from curry powder. The blend is actually a failed attempt by British colonists to replicate and harness the teeming complexity of Indian cooking.

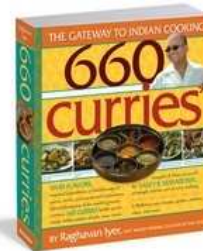
"No self-respecting Indian has a curry spice blend in their kitchen," said Raghavan Iyer, the award-winning cooking teacher and author of the new "660 Curries" (2008, Workman).



Scallops marinated in turmeric are cooked beneath a coverlet of wilted spinach spiked with a fragrant masala. The dish comes from "660 Curries," a new cookbook from Raghavan Iyer that explores this sprawling family of Indian dishes.

(Provided to the Reno Gazette-Journal)

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The cover of "660 Curries," the new cookbook from esteemed cooking teacher Raghavan Iyer that demystifies supposedly exotic curries of India and shows how these staples of every region of the subcontinent can be made at home.

(Provided to the RGJ)

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### TRADITIONAL CURRY GUIDELINES BASICS

Curries can be made with almost any food. Vegetable curries are most popular throughout India, as are curries that use moderate amounts of meat, lamb, poultry, fish, shellfish, eggs, lentils and other legumes.

Many curries will call for ingredients unfamiliar to many American cooks. These may include tamarind pulp, fresh curry leaves, fenugreek leaves, cinnamon leaves, green mango powder, white poppy seeds, Kashmiri chilis, Sichuan peppercorns, nigella seeds, black cumin and asafoetida.

These ingredients usually can be found in Indian, Asian or Middle Eastern markets.

### ESSENTIALS

Curry essentials include fresh ginger, garlic, onions, turmeric, cumin, coriander, cardamom, paprika, black pepper, red chili powder, fennel, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, mustard, fenugreek, bay leaves and garam masala.

Powdered spices are the easiest to use and will suffice for most recipes. However, Indian cooks prefer whole cinnamon sticks,

Last week, Iyer appeared at Nothing to It! Culinary Center to offer the real word on Indian curries. They're not simply spice blends or any dish "mottled with hot spices."

To Indian chefs, a curry is a dish built from fish, poultry, meat, fruits or vegetables that's simmered or draped in a sauce fragrant with herbs and spices.

"In my India, curry is never added — it just is!" Iyer explained.

The Moghul food of northern India is most familiar to Americans, but Iyer's cookbook provides curry recipes — along with copious tips and techniques for home cooks — from across the subcontinent. Some curries, like pan-grilled scallops with a Kolhapuri masala, or spice blend, are complex, but don't worry, Iyer makes them approachable.

Others, like a kicky potato spinach specimen in red chili sauce, can be prepared even by beginning cooks.

"660 Curries" ranks among several excellent cookbooks released in the past few years to take advantage of growing interest in the United States in Indian cuisines.

This interest is fueled in large part by the increasing availability of Indian ingredients at ethnic markets and specialty grocers like Whole Foods Market. Booking a culinary passage to India is easier than ever.

### RECIPES

#### PAN GRILLED SEA SCALLOPS

1 pound large sea scallops (about 12 to 15 per pound), shrimp or firm-fleshed white fish

1/2 teaspoon ground turmeric  
 1/2 cup unsalted dry-roasted peanuts  
 2 tablespoons canola oil  
 6 medium-size cloves garlic, finely chopped  
 1 pound baby spinach leaves, well rinsed  
 1 tablespoon Kolhapuri masala (recipe follows)  
 1 teaspoon coarse kosher or sea salt

Combine scallops with turmeric in medium-size bowl. Refrigerate, covered, 30 minutes or as long as overnight, to allow flavor to permeate the thick muscle (since there is nothing acidic to break down the mollusk's texture, it's fine to marinate them overnight).

Pour peanuts into bowl of food processor and pulse until they have consistency of coarse breadcrumbs. Heat oil in large skillet over medium heat. Add scallops, marinade and all (there won't be much at bottom of the bowl), arranging them in single layer. Sear scallops' two broad sides until light brown, 3 to 5 minutes per side. Transfer to plate.

Add garlic to same skillet and stir-fry until light brown, about 1 minute. Pile in spinach leaves, cover skillet, and cook until spinach is wilted, 5 to 8 minutes. (As steam rises from within, leaves will sweat and release liquid, which will deglaze pan and build yet another layer of flavor.) Stir in masala and salt.

Add scallops (including any liquid pooled on plate) and cover with blanket of wilted greens. Cover skillet and cook, without stirring, until scallops are firm to touch but not rubbery, 3 to 5 minutes.

Transfer scallops to serving platter. Add peanuts to spinach remaining in skillet, and stir to combine. Simmer, uncovered, stirring occasionally, to allow nuts to absorb excess liquid and thicken sauce, 2 to 4 minutes. Spoon spinach-peanut mixture over scallops and serve. Serves 6.

*From "660 Curries" by Raghavan Iyer (2008, Workman)*

#### KOLHAPURI MASALA

1 cup dried red Thai or cayenne chilis, stems removed  
 1/2 cup shredded dried unsweetened coconut  
 2 tablespoons sesame seeds  
 1 tablespoon coriander seeds  
 1 tablespoon cumin seeds  
 1 tablespoon black peppercorns  
 1 teaspoon black or yellow mustard seeds  
 1 teaspoon fenugreek seeds  
 1/4 teaspoon ground mace  
 2 fresh or dried bay leaves  
 1 teaspoon canola oil

1/2 tablespoon cayenne (ground red pepper) mixed with 1 1/2 tablespoons paprika  
 In medium bowl, combine all ingredients except cayenne pepper-paprika mixture and stir to coat with oil. (Coating whole spices evenly with oil ensures an even roast and is much easier to do in bowl than in skillet.)

Preheat medium skillet over medium heat. Pour oiled spices into skillet and roast, stirring occasionally, until whole chilis blacken slightly; coconut turns dark brown; sesame, coriander, cumin and fenugreek turn reddish brown; mustard seeds pop, swell up and look ash black; and bay leaves appear to be dry (especially if using fresh ones), 3 to 4 minutes.

Immediately transfer pungent, nutty smelling spices to plate to cool. Once cool to touch, place half of spices in spice grinder or coffee grinder and grind until texture resembles that of finely ground black pepper. Pour ground mixture into same medium bowl already used and grind remaining half of spices. Once spices are ground, add to bowl.

Stir in cayenne pepper-paprika mixture. The ground blend will be deep saffron red and aromas will be sweet and complex, very different from those of pre-toasted and post-toasted whole spices. Store masala in tightly sealed jar, away from excess light, heat and humidity, up to 2 months. Do not refrigerate. Makes 1 1/4 cups.

*From "660 Curries" by Raghavan Iyer (2008, Workman)*

#### POTATOES AND SPINACH IN GARLIC RED CHILI SAUCE

2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
 1 teaspoon cumin seeds  
 6 medium garlic cloves, finely chopped  
 6 dried red Thai or cayenne chilis, stems removed, coarsely chopped (do not remove seeds)  
 1/4 teaspoon turmeric  
 1 cup water

cardamom pods, peppercorns, whole seeds of cumin, coriander, caraway, fennel, fenugreek and mustard.

This preference arises because whole spices, freshly ground in a coffee grinder or pounded with a mortar and pestle, are incomparably more potent than those purchased already ground.

To intensify the flavor of any spice, whole or ground, lightly toast it in a dry skillet over low heat before using or grinding. This method also is a traditional first step in many curry recipes.

#### BALANCE

Indian cooking cannot be fully separated from the Indian medicine system of ayurveda, which relies heavily on herbs and spices and the desire to keep the body in balance.

Similarly, a properly assembled curry reflects a balance of textures and ingredients, a combination of sweet, sour, salty, spicy, bitter and astringent components.

For example, cinnamon sticks lend sweet and astringent properties to a dish, while tomatoes and yogurt act as souring (acid) agents, hot peppers add spice, and fenugreek provides a hint of bitterness.

#### GETTING STARTED

Start with ingredients you are familiar with, suggests Raghavan Iyer, author of "660 Curries" (2008, Workman). Try a basic chicken or potato curry.

Or experiment with Indian spice combinations in dishes more familiar to you. For example, add a sprinkle of garam masala to a traditional beef stew and see how it changes the flavor.

Black pepper, cayenne, cinnamon, cumin, coriander, garlic, fresh ginger and turmeric are among the easiest spices to learn. With time and experimentation, many uses and combinations of the spices will become obvious.

"I tend to have some basic rules," says Floyd Cardoz, chef and partner at New York's fusion Indian restaurant Tabla, and author of "One Spice, Two Spice: American Food, Indian Flavors" (2006, William Morrow)

"If I'm cooking fish, I always use coriander seeds. Vegetables, always cumin seeds. Lamb and goat, cardamom," he says. "With meat, I'd use coriander seed, cumin, black pepper, and cardamom."

#### THE PROCESS

Most curry dishes follow a general order, starting with the preparation of one or more pastes. For example, fresh ginger or garlic often is puréed with a little water.

Next, oil is heated in a deep, heavy skillet or pot and the spices are added and are cooked until they sizzle and become aromatic. Once the spices are toasted, the onions usually are added and sautéed.

Liquids, such as the pre-made ginger or garlic paste, water, broth or tomato sauce, are added, followed by the showcase ingredient (such as fish, meat or more vegetables). This combination then is simmered until cooked.

Before serving, sprinkle the dish with an aromatic spice, such as black pepper or garam masala, or a drizzle of ghee (clarified butter). Pour the curry over rice, noodles, eat as a soup or stew, or serve with Indian-style bread.

1 pound new potatoes, scrubbed and halved, or 1 pound white or yellow skin potatoes, cut into 1 1/2-inch to 2-inch chunks  
 1 large tomato, cored and cut into 1-inch pieces  
 1/4 cup finely chopped fresh cilantro leaves and tender stems  
 1 tablespoon firmly packed dark brown sugar  
 1 1/2 teaspoons coarse kosher or sea salt  
 8 ounces fresh spinach leaves, coarsely chopped

In medium saucepan over medium-high, heat oil. Add cumin seeds and cook until reddish brown and nutty smelling, 5 to 10 seconds. Immediately add garlic and chilis. Sauté until garlic is lightly browned and the chilis blacken, about 1 minute. Sprinkle in turmeric, then carefully pour in water. Stir to deglaze pan, releasing any browned bits of garlic.

Add potatoes, tomato, cilantro, brown sugar and salt. Stir once or twice, then bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover pan, and simmer, stirring occasionally, until potatoes are fall-apart tender, 20 to 25 minutes. Add spinach, a couple of handfuls at a time, stirring until wilted, 2 to 4 minutes per batch. Serves 8.

From "660 Curries" by Raghavan Iyer (2008, Workman)

### FISH MOLEE

1/4 cup coconut oil  
 2 teaspoons black mustard seeds  
 1 1/2 cup chopped red onion  
 2 large garlic cloves, minced  
 2 teaspoons minced fresh ginger  
 1 or 2 serrano chiles, split lengthwise and seeds removed (leave in some seeds if spicier sauce desired)  
 1/2 teaspoon turmeric  
 1 teaspoon salt  
 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper  
 1 cup diced tomato, divided  
 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 pounds cod or haddock fillets, cut into 2-inch chunks  
 1 cup coconut milk  
 1/2 cup fish stock, clam juice or water  
 10 to 12 fresh curry leaves (or handful fresh cilantro leaves)  
 6 lime wedges

In large, deep skillet, warm coconut oil over medium heat. When oil is fragrant, stir in mustard seeds. When mustard seeds begin to crackle and pop, stir in onion. Once onion has become limp, after about 2 minutes, stir in garlic, ginger, chiles, turmeric, salt, pepper and 1/2 cup diced tomato. Sauté, stirring frequently, until tomato has softened and begun to break down, about 5 minutes.

Push onion mixture to side of the skillet and add fish in single layer. With spatula, scrape up enough of onion mixture to smear over tops of pieces of fish. Pour coconut milk and fish stock or water around and over fish. Scatter curry leaves or cilantro over everything. Cover and simmer 3 minutes.

Uncover and give skillet a swirl, rather than stirring mixture, which could break up fish. Cook a few minutes more, uncovered, if needed, to cook fish through. Sauce will be fairly thin. Spoon into shallow bowls, garnish with remaining 1/2 cup diced tomato and lime wedges, and serve. Serves 6.

From "Around the World in 80 Dinners" by Cheryl and Bill Jamison (2008, William Morrow)

### QUICK CHICKEN KORMA

1 1/2-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and coarsely chopped  
 5 to 6 cloves garlic, peeled and coarsely chopped  
 1 cup plus 3 tablespoons water, divided  
 6 tablespoons vegetable oil  
 3 bay leaves  
 2-inch stick cinnamon  
 8 cardamom pods  
 4 whole cloves  
 1/4 teaspoon whole black or regular cumin seeds  
 1 small onion, peeled and finely chopped  
 1 tablespoon ground coriander seed  
 1 tablespoon ground cumin  
 3 canned plum tomatoes, chopped  
 3 pounds boneless, skinless chicken pieces, cut into small chunks  
 1/4 to 1 teaspoon cayenne  
 3/4 teaspoon salt  
 3 tablespoons heavy cream

Source: Associated Press



Raghavan Iyer, award winning cooking teacher and author of "660 Curries."

(Provided to the Reno Gazette-Journal)

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In blender, purée ginger, garlic and 3 tablespoons water until a smooth paste forms. In large skillet, heat oil over high. When oil is very hot, add bay leaves, cinnamon stick, cardamom pods, cloves and whole cumin seeds. Stir, then add onion. Sauté 3 minutes, or until onion browns.

Transfer paste from blender to skillet. Add ground coriander and ground cumin, then sauté 1 minute. Add chopped tomatoes and sauté another minute. Add chicken, cayenne, salt and remaining 1 cup water. Bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat to medium, and cook 15 minutes, occasionally turning chicken pieces.

Remove cover, add cream, and cook on high, stirring occasionally, another 7 to 8 minutes, or until sauce has thickened. Use slotted spoon to remove and discard cardamom pods, bay leaves, cinnamon stick and cloves. Serve over rice. Serves 4.

From "Madhur Jaffrey's Quick & Easy Indian Cooking" by Madhur Jaffrey (2007, Chronicle Books)

## HOMEMADE GARAM MASALA

Indian curries often incorporate the spice blend called garam masala; many times, it's added just before serving. Garam masala lends a sweet, warming quality. It's available at most supermarkets, but the homemade version is easy and offers better flavor.

1 heaping teaspoon whole cloves  
 1 1/2 teaspoons black cardamom seeds (about 10 whole cardamom pods)  
 6 heaping tablespoons cumin seeds  
 1 tablespoon pounded cinnamon sticks  
 1/4 teaspoon ground mace  
 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg

Turn on your stovetop exhaust fan. In heavy-bottomed frying pan, heat cloves, black cardamom seeds, cumin seeds and cinnamon sticks on medium to high heat, stirring constantly. When cumin seeds become a darker shade of brown, remove from stove. Transfer roasted spices to bowl and cool 20 minutes.

Place roasted spices, mace and nutmeg in spice (or coffee) grinder and grind until mixture has consistency of store-bought ground black pepper. Blend can be used right away. Will also keep in airtight container in dark cupboard or drawer for up to 6 months. Makes 3/4 cup.

From "Vij's Indian Cuisine" by Vikram Vij and Meeru Dhalwala (2006, Douglas & McIntyre)

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