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Fight heat with flavor

Venture to exotic world of curries at area shops

BY KATI SCHARDL • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER • AUGUST 13, 2008

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Take a virtual voyage to India for a tour of the country's savory, sensual cuisine. The comprehensive, entertaining and enlightening cookbook "660 Curries" by Raghavan Iyer can serve as both ticket to ride and tour guide.

Iyer is an award-winning teacher and food writer who came to America to study chemistry. Homesick for his mother's cooking, he shifted his focus from the laboratory to the kitchen and embarked on the ambitious undertaking of researching the diverse regional variations of India's culinary heritage.

The results of Iyer's journey of tasting and testing are showcased in "660 Curries," a hefty, colorful paperback tome that retails for around \$23. It's as comprehensive as any curry compendium could hope to be, given the infinite variations on the spicy subject.

Iyer provides history, a glossary, a shopping cheat sheet and easy-to-follow recipes for a mouth-boggling array of curries. He tells you how to make your own spice blends and pastes (not as difficult to concoct as you might think), includes a chapter on contemporary curry hybrids and provides recipes for such traditional "Curry Cohorts" as raitas, chutneys and breads.

You'll want to start your adventures through this exotic realm at one of the Tallahassee markets specializing in Indian spices and ingredients.

According to Devendra "Dev" Patel, proprietor of Little India in Mahan Square, most non-Indians who visit his store are looking for ready-made items they can take home and pop in the oven.

"The favorite is the chicken curry," Patel said.

But some of Patel's customers want to create home-crafted curries.

"They ask what kind of spices are used in Indian dishes and what are the most popular dishes," he said.

If you want to whip up an Indian feast at home, keep a couple of things in mind. Substituting ingredients is all part of taking a recipe and making it your

own. Don't have cilantro for your raita? Use mint instead. Can't find skinned black lentils? Grab that jar of regular green lentils.

For cooking the Indian way, Iyer advises that you measure and prep all of the ingredients before you start cooking and have them lined up and ready when you turn on the burner.



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Little India has a variety of spices available that combine to create a sweet aroma in the store. (IRICKA BERLINGER/Democrat)



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Little India owner Devendra "Dev" Patel can steer customers to help them find something that might suit their taste buds. (Iricka Berlinger/Democrat)

TASTY TRIVIA

Eating spicy food during the dead of summer might seem a little, well, contrary. But some of the globe's hottest cuisines spring from countries with very sultry climates. Chowling down on chili-laden dishes can make you perspire at first, but it often results in a cooling effect as sweat evaporates.

HEAD TO MARKET

Visiting an international market is like taking a trip to a foreign land. Wander the aisles and pretend you're in a faraway bazaar at these markets catering to Asian and Indian cooks:
India Bazaar, 1141 Apalachee Parkway; 402-0091.
International House of Food, 2013 N. Monroe St.; 386-3433.
Little India, Mahan Square, corner of Mahan and Magnolia drives; 422-7701.

Mike's Seafood & Oriental Market, 1214 Capital Circle S.E.; 656-6148.

New Seoul Oriental Market, 2624 W. Tennessee St.; 575-7168

"Some spices, especially when they're sizzled in oil, take less than a minute to cook," he writes. "You don't want (them) to burn while you are scurrying around for the next ingredient."

Eggplant With Tomato And Garlic (Katarikai Thakkali Kari)

2 Tbsps. unrefined sesame oil or canola oil

1 tsp. black or yellow mustard seeds

1 Tbsp. skinned black lentils (urad dal, cream-colored in this form), picked over for stones

1 small red onion, cut in half lengthwise and thinly sliced

4 medium-size garlic cloves, finely chopped

12 small purple Indian (or 1 large Italian) eggplants (about 1 1/2 pounds total), stems removed, cut into pieces 2 inches long, 1 inch wide and 1/2 inch thick

2 large tomatoes, cored and cut into 2-inch cubes

2 Tbsps. finely chopped fresh cilantro leaves and tender stems

2 tsps. coarse kosher or sea salt

1 tsp. Sambhar masala (can use store-bought; see accompanying recipe to make your own)

15 medium-size to large fresh curry leaves

Heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add the mustard seeds, cover the pan and cook until the seeds have stopped popping (not unlike popcorn), about 30 seconds. Add the lentils and stir-fry until they turn golden brown, 15 to 20 seconds. Immediately add the onion and garlic, and stir-fry until the onion slices are light brown around the edges, 3 to 5 minutes.

Add the eggplant, tomatoes and 1 1/2 cups water. Stir in the cilantro, salt, Sambhar masala and curry leaves. Lower the heat to medium and heat to a boil. Cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until some of the eggplant breaks down and thickens the sauce, 18 to 20 minutes. Then serve with white or red rice tossed with plain yogurt. Can also be tossed with fresh, cooked pasta.

Serves 8.

Iyer notes that, "There are as many Sambhar masalas as there are kitchens in south India." Here's one that he includes in "660 Curries."

Sambhar Masala

1/2 cup firmly packed medium-size to large fresh curry leaves

1/2 cup dried red Thai or cayenne chiles, stems removed

1/4 cup yellow split peas (chana dal), picked over for stones

1/4 cup coriander seeds

2 Tbsps. cumin seeds

1 Tbsp. fenugreek seeds

1 Tbsp. black or yellow mustard seeds

1 Tbsp. white poppy seeds

2 cinnamon sticks (each 3 inches long), broken into smaller pieces

1 Tbsp. unrefined sesame oil or canola oil

Combine all of the spices in a medium-size bowl. Drizzle the oil over them and toss well, coating the spices evenly with the oil.

Preheat a medium-size skillet over medium-high heat. Add the mixture and roast, stirring constantly, until the curry leaves curl up and appear dry and brittle, the chiles blacken slightly, the split peas turn dark brown, the coriander, cumin and fenugreek turn reddish brown, the mustard seeds pop, swell up and look ash-black, and the poppy seeds are tan, 3 to 4 minutes.

Immediately transfer the pungent, nutty-smelling spices to a plate to cool. (The longer they sit in the hot skillet, the more likely it is that they will burn, making them bitter and unpalatable.) Once they are cool to the touch, pour half of the mixture into a spice grinder or coffee grinder, and grind until the texture resembles

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that of finely ground black pepper. (If you don't allow the spices to cool, the ground blend will acquire unwanted moisture from the heat, making the final blend slightly "cakey.") Transfer the ground blend to a small bowl. Repeat with the remaining spices, and thoroughly combine the two ground batches. The aromas of the light reddish-brown ground blend will be sweet and complex, very different from those of the pre-toasted and post-toasted whole spices.

Store in a tightly sealed container, away from excess light, heat and humidity, for up to 2 months. (In Iyer's opinion, refrigerating the blend adversely affects its flavors.)

Makes 1 1/2 cups.

Tips: Sprinkle this masala on everyday stir-fries and stews to yield highly flavorful results. And because of the large quantity of chiles, make sure you use proper ventilation when roasting this blend.

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