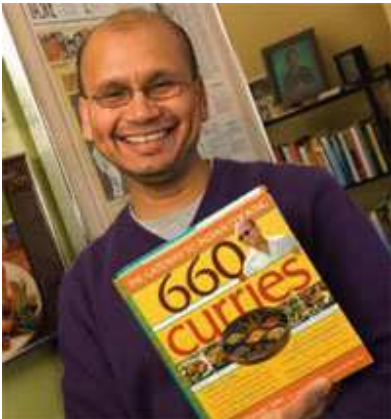


Twin Cities Natural Food Co-ops



Raghavan Iyer with his latest cookbook, 660 Curries.

Coming Home to Curry

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Consider the scent of toasting cardamom and cumin, the sizzle of chilies, the brilliant beauty of saffron, the bite of mustard oil, a tang of lime, and nutty-sweet basmati rice. When Raghavan Iyer was a 21-year-old student, creating a home in Minnesota meant decoding the flavors of his Mumbai youth, one recipe at a time.

Now a top-selling-cookbook author, celebrity culinary instructor, and industry consultant, he came into his career through memory and longing. He did not learn to cook until he had to, not simply as a means of feeding himself, but to nourish a sense of identity.

Through his work, in his classes and appearances, he shares more than recipes and techniques; like all good teachers, he helps us connect to ourselves and to the world.

Scent is our strongest sensorial memory, and Iyer's olfactory recall is especially keen. Credit the cooking talents of his mother, the vibrant food vendors near his home and Iyer's ability to translate those beloved impressions to a culinary career. The story of Iyer's approach to food is that of so many world citizens whose homeland foods enrich the way we all cook and eat today.

Though trained as a chemist with a degree in institutional management, Iyer didn't realize his passion (and his gift) for cooking until he understood how hungry he was for "home." Through kitchen trial and error, he drew in friends to share his meals. With the support and encouragement of his life-partner, Terry Erickson, he forged a catering company and then went on to teaching and writing recipes for his students.

Iyer's first book, *Betty Crocker's Indian Home Cooking*, brings the flavors of India into the home kitchen. His second work, *The Turmeric Trail*, weaves stories of growing up in Mumbai with recipes from his mother and sisters, as well as the "forbidden" street food he sought out as a youth. Nominated for the prestigious James Beard Award for his books and articles, he was named International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP) Teacher of the Year in 2004. His latest, *660 Curries*, is already a classic, detailing the kaleidoscope of flavors embraced by the single term "curry"-the term itself a gateway to Indian cooking. Presenting the array of curries from this vast country, Iyer demystifies one of the world's greatest cuisines.

The making of this vast, thorough book-creating, testing and writing-consumed several years as Erickson and their son, Robert Iyer-Erickson, now in 4th grade, and colleagues and friends ate their way through each chapter. "Most nights, it was without complaint," Iyer said.

Iyer illuminates his recipes and techniques with lively stories. From the opening chapter of *Turmeric Trail*, we read the heartbreaking tale of his grandmother who courageously left an abusive husband to begin her life again in Mumbai. He tells of ritual meals served at funerals and weddings and more casual Sunday suppers. In these books, as well as his classes, Iyer gives far more than preparation tips, ingredients and recipes. He offers us a window to this rich culture through personal anecdote and observation.

Iyer's kitchen quest embraces the foods of his adopted homeland. He and his family are avid Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) members (of Rock Spring Farm, Spring Grove, Minn.), looking to see what their share has to offer in planning their meals. "We made a wonderful rutabaga gratin, substituting root vegetables for the potatoes," Iyer said. By demystifying Indian flavors and techniques, Iyer hopes to inspire home cooks to spark their own recipes and kick familiar "American" ingredients-pasta, chicken and steamed vegetables-up a notch or two.

What shines through all of Iyer's endeavors is his warmth and his ability to make the flavors and unfamiliar techniques of Indian cooking accessible to Heartland cooks.

I remember 10 years back when my son Tim was 3 years old, and I was trying a chickpea recipe of coconut paste (with cinnamon, coriander, chili and mustard). Tim had climbed up on the counter to check things out

and tried a taste on the end of a spoon. I worried the flavors were so fiery and unfamiliar Tim might spit them back. But no, he wrinkled his nose, giggled, then opened his mouth like a bird, for more. Hopefully, when living someplace far from me, my son will seek to recapture these same sunny flavors seasoned with laughter. The gentle knowledge imparted to us by writer and teacher Raghavan Iyer is changes our lives, one bite at a time.

Beth Dooley is a Minneapolis-based food writer and cookbook author.