

Curry creations

TRAVEL THE GLOBE and you will learn that curry is open to interpretation. But before I lead you down this spice-laden trail I should clear up a misconception as to what curry really is. "Curry, is an Anglicization of the Tamil word kari, which means sauce or gravy. Masala, which means mixture, is the blend of spices used to flavour these sauces and other foods," says Devagi Sanmugan, a well-regarded Indian food consultant I met during a spice tour in Singapore last summer.



ERIC AKIS

This statement hit me like a 100-pound sack of lentils because I thought they were one and the same. In a way they are, but once I

thought about it, I realized curry was more like a stew or braised dish that required a proper marriage of both technique and ingredients, not just that bright yellow spice powder sold in North American supermarkets.

"Anything that looks yellow and tastes hot is automatically considered to be curried food. But nothing could be further from the truth," says Madhuri Anand, a Duncan author of the recently published book, *Authentic Indian Cooking* (Anand Enterprises, \$19.95). She notes that some curries are neither hot nor yellow.

We can probably look to the British for an explanation as to how this narrow vision occurred. During colonial days in India the British fell in love with — and are still crazy about — curry. Back at home they tried to replicate the spice combinations using spices brought from India and others found in Britain. Over time the hundreds of spice blend combinations used in Indian homes became reduced to the generic form of spice blend better known as curry powder.

Assorted Seafood with Bengal Lounge Bang Kob Curry Sauce

The chefs at Victoria's Empress Hotel use this versatile curry sauce in meals served in the Bengal Lounge. Serves 4 to 6

For the curry sauce

- 2 Tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 1/2 tsp ground cumin
- 1 1/2 tsp ground coriander
- 1 1/2 tsp turmeric
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- 2 Tbsp minced garlic
- 2 Tbsp minced ginger
- 1 onion, chopped
- sesame oil to taste
- 1/2 tsp chili flakes
- 1 14oz. tin coconut milk
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 2 Tbsp chopped fresh milk
- 1 Tbsp cornstarch
- 3 Tbsp water
- 2 Tbsp chopped fresh mint

For the seafood

- 16 peeled prawns
- 3/4 pound snapper fillet, cut into bite-sized pieces
- 1/2 cup water

- 16 mussels, rinsed
- 16 clams, rinsed

For garnish

- lime wedges
- fresh mint sprigs

Heat oil in a pot over medium heat. Add spices (except chili flakes), garlic, ginger and onions and cook, stirring, until the latter is tender, about 5 minutes. Add remaining ingredients and simmer 15 minutes. Mix cornstarch with water, then whisk into curry sauce. Bring sauce back to a simmer to cook the starch.

Add snapper and prawns to curry sauce, and simmer until both are cooked about 5 minutes. In another pan bring water to boil. Add clams and cook covered 2 minutes, then add mussels and cook until both just begin to open.

With a slotted spoon, lift out clams and mussels and arrange on a heated serving platter. Spoon over curry sauce. Garnish with lime wedges and mint sprigs. Serve with steamed rice.

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Indian homemakers have resisted any urge to mainstream their curry. There are still thousands of variations of how curry is made and there is probably no bottle of curry powder anywhere in sight. Personal tastes, available ingredients, economic conditions and environment all play a major role in what is created. Any resulting dish from these elements would not be called curry but instead named after its principle ingredients.

This point is proven in renowned cookbook author, Madhur Jaffrey's, classic and amazing book, *A Taste of India*. Here you will find only one recipe labelled curry.

Many of the curries in Anand's

book use spices one would find in a basic supermarket curry powder, such as ground turmeric, coriander, mustard seed, cumin, cinnamon, ginger and spicy cayenne pepper. But some are not always present and others often play a greater role

"Spice are not only for taste but for balance," says Anand. For example, full flavoured meat may welcome a little more heat from cayenne while a delicate flavoured fish may be overwhelmed by this heat but uplifted by aromatic fennel seed. A standard commercial curry powder makes no such allowances.

But things are changing. Companies such as Saltspring Island's

Mosoon Coast Exotic Indian Spices and others are now creating a range of quality spice blends — and recipes — specifically designed to create unique and more authentic curries and other Indian-style foods. Caribbean — another hot bed for curry introduced to the region by migrant workers from India and Sri Lanka in the 1800's — and Southeast Asian curry spice blends can now also be found in many food stores.

Southeast Asian curries differ as they usually come in the form of a paste created by the pounding together of dry spices such as cumin and coriander with fresh ingredients such as ginger, garlic, chili peppers and lemongrass. They are usually fiery hot.

Of course the best way to create curry is from scratch; taking individual spices and combining them in stew-like fashion with a favoured ingredient such as chicken, lamb or vegetables. For optimum flavour, dry-roast whole spices just before needed in pan over medium heat on the stovetop until lightly toasted.

A coffee grinder is a great tool for grinding spices. Store unused spices in a tightly sealed jar away from direct light.

Curry is food that speaks of life: it can be aromatic, intoxicating, awakening, spicy, hot, healthy, complex, beguiling, and inviting. If this appeals to you, then I encourage you to try different recipes and learn all you can on the subject. Then go out and create curries that suit your tastes, whether it's fiery hot or heavenly aromatic, because the world of curry is really quite open to one's own interpretation.

Eric Akis's column appears in the Life Section Wednesdays. He would like to hear your stories, comments and suggestions. Please write him at the Times Colonist Life Section, 2621 Douglas St., Victoria, B.C., fax him at 380-5353 or e-mail him at akise@tnet.net

Recipes: Melding ingredients, method

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Coconut Cauliflower Soup

Doug Hall, owner of Monsoon Coast Exotic Indian Spices on Salt Spring Island, provided this delicious and very aromatic soup recipe. Hall, who has travelled India extensively, has developed a line of Indian-style spice blends that are available in Victoria at Savory Fine Foods at Mattick's Farm, Lifestyle Markets, Capers Whole Food Market and the Peninsula Coop, and at the Mobile Market, Coastal Currents and the Ganges Village Market, on Salt Spring Island.

- 3 Tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 Tbsp black mustard seeds
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 sweet pepper, cubed
- 1 Tbsp minced fresh ginger
- 6-10 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 Tbsp soy sauce
- 1 medium potato cut in small cubes
- 2-2 1/2 cups water or stock
- 1/4 of a medium cauliflower cut in small florets (2-3 cups)
- 2 Tbsp curry powder (see below)
- 1 tsp turmeric
- 1 14 oz. can coconut milk
- 1/2 cup fresh or frozen peas
- 1 small bunch cilantro, chopped
- yogurt (optional)
- salt to taste

Sauté the mustard seeds, onion, pepper, ginger and garlic in the oil until the onion is translucent. Stir in the soy sauce and potatoes, add the water and bring to a light boil. Add the cauliflower,

curry powder, and turmeric, then reduce heat and simmer until vegetables are cooked. Blend until smooth. Stir in coconut milk, half the cilantro and the peas. Cook on low heat for about 5 minutes, stirring regularly. Garnish each bowl with a dollop of yogurt and a sprinkling of cilantro.

Serves 6.

For Basic Curry Powder:

Mix together 3 Tbsp of coriander seed with 1/2 tsp of cumin seed, 1/2 tsp fenugreek seed, 5 black peppercorns and a 1 Tbsp of crushed chilies. Grind in a coffee grinder or with a mortar and pestle and then mix with 1 Tbsp of turmeric. If you have access to fresh curry leaves, toss a few in when you cook with curry for a delicious added flavour.

Note: The curry powder in this recipe can be substituted with Monsoon Coast Mogul Curry.

Palak Gosht

(Curried Pork with Spinach)

The following recipe is from the recently published book, *Authentic Indian Cooking*, authored by Madhuri Anand of Duncan (See Cookbook Review, B3). It is available at Bolen Books and Crown Publications in Victoria and Volume One Book Store and Overwaita Supermarket in Duncan. Or order by calling (250) 746-6903.

- 1 1/2 lbs spinach
- 1 lb pork tenderloin, cut into cubes

- 2 Tbsp butter
- 1 Tbsp oil
- 1 cup finely chopped onions
- 4 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 tsp grated ginger
- 1 tsp turmeric
- 2 green chili peppers, seeded
- 1 tsp cayenne pepper
- 1/2 tsp salt
- *1/2 cup diced tomatoes, skin removed
- 1/2 cup water

Wash spinach well in several changes of water and remove tough stalks. Chop crosswise 1/2 inch in length, then set aside.

Heat butter and oil in a saucepan and sauté onions until golden brown. Add garlic and ginger and fry for a few seconds. Add turmeric, green chili peppers, cayenne and salt. Fry for another few seconds.

Add meat and cook until meat changes colour. Add tomatoes, stir and, covering pan, cook until tomatoes are soft and pulpy. Add water and cook until meat is half done, about 30 to 45 minutes.

Add spinach and cook until meat and spinach are tender. If sauce is too thin, cook over high heat, uncovered, until liquid evaporates and butter separates from sauce.

Serve with naans, roti (Indian-style breads) or rice.

Note: To skin tomatoes, remove stem portion with a sharp knife. Fully immerse tomatoes into boiling water for about 20 to 30 seconds, then remove and cool in cold water. When cold enough to handle, remove and peel. The skin should slip away easily.