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Opening Extract from...

I Love Curry

Written by Anjum Anand

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I ♥ CURRY

The best Indian curries
you'll ever cook

Anjum Anand

photography by Jonathan Gregson

Quadrille
PUBLISHING

To my daughter Mahi whose smile, laughter and presence bring pure joy to my life

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introduction

During the week I wrote this page, I taught a class of 10-year-old boys how to make a chickpea curry. They had no fear, they trusted me and were excited to try their hands at something new. They all listened as I explained what to look for and how to tell when the base of the curry – the 'masala' – was cooked. And then came the moment when I suggested they try the dish; it was so lovely to see their faces light up as they tasted their own cooking. They had no idea how it would turn out, all these unfamiliar ingredients added one after the other and the dish ready to eat in less than half an hour. Surely Indian food isn't so easy to cook? But it is, you just need to get stuck in and watch as the complex flavours add up to more than the sum of their parts. When you are finished and you try the sauce, you will feel just as proud and elated as those boys.

I used to wince when I heard someone call any Indian dish 'a curry'. 'Going for a curry' simply meant eating at an Indian restaurant, and I wondered how such a majestic, broad cuisine could be shrunk down to just one word. To me – and to most Indian people – a 'curry' is simply a dish with lots of sauce or gravy, and might be a term introduced by the British Raj. The spices will change from region to region. So when mum said that our Punjabi family were having chicken curry for dinner, I knew what to expect. For us it meant succulent chicken in a light tomato and onion-based sauce with a north Indian mix of spices: green and black cardamom, cinnamon, bay, cloves and green chillies, finished with garam masala. But a child in Andhra would know her chicken curry was going to be more fiery, with red chillies and a more aromatic spice mix containing fennel and white poppy seeds, while in Mangalore the spices would be toasted before grinding and the dish finished with rich coconut and tangy tamarind.

So when my publishers and I started talking about a book of Britain's favourite curries, as well as a few of my own creations, I got really excited. Curry, in the real sense of the word, is the ultimate comfort food. We then got down to the thorny question of what a curry really is. Our conclusion – and the premise of this book – is that a curry is a stand-alone main course dish, with or without lots of sauce and with or without a dominant spice, that you only need some rice or bread to enjoy.

I've thought a lot about what curries people want to eat. The result is 54 curry recipes, both easy everyday dishes and restaurant classics, plus loads of ideas for starters and accompaniments. Here are all our favourites: chicken tikka masala, lamb do piaza, balti, vindaloo and many, many more. The more adventurous cook will also find lots of exciting new flavours, such as lamb chops with dried pomegranate, or Bengali mustard fish. This is the whole world of curries in all their glory.

It was great fun making up these recipes and I hope you'll find just as much joy in cooking them. Involve friends and/or children – or just put on some great music – and watch and taste the magic come to life... just as it did for those 10-year-old boys.

Anjum

making great curry: the secrets

The best way to learn a country's cuisine is to cook with a native, because you pick up so many tips that will make the difference between a good dish and a fabulous one. Because not all of us can cook beside an Indian, I want to be a stand-in here for you. I hope to give you a deeper understanding of how to cook a curry and maximise its flavours. So, when you get to the stove, remember these five distinct and vital building blocks…

STAGE 1: whole spices

Always the first ingredient to go into the hot oil. They add a greater depth of flavour than ground spices.

cumin seeds should be fried until they release a nutty aroma and have reddened a couple of shades. It should only take five seconds sizzling in hot oil.
fenugreek seeds should darken to medium brown.
mustard seeds start popping straight away in hot oil. As they pop, reduce the heat and, once the popping dies down, move on to the next stage.
nigella and carom seeds need only about 10 seconds in hot oil to release their full aroma.
other whole spices (cinnamon, cloves, cardamom pods, black pepper etc) should be cooked in hot oil for 20–30 seconds, to release their aromatic oils.

STAGE 2: onions

The base of most curries, so getting them right is crucial. Always make sure they are cooked through until soft and turning golden at the edges. After that, the further you cook them the deeper the flavours of the curry. For a lamb or chicken curry, cook onions until the edges are well-browned. In curries containing more delicate ingredients - such as vegetables or some seafood - onions only need to be golden, or their resonant taste could overpower the rest of the dish.

STAGE 3: garlic and ginger

I often make a paste of ginger and garlic for a smoother sauce. For small amounts, I grate both on a Microplane. For larger quantities, chop them coarsely, use a small stick blender and add a little water to help break them down. Cooking garlic fully is essential. You can tell when it's cooked by the fragrance, which changes from raw and strong to mellow. In a paste, garlic will start to look grainy and turn a pale gold colour.

STAGE 4: ground spices

grinding Whether you use a mortar and pestle, a spice grinder or a clean coffee grinder, make sure spices are really well ground so they melt into the sauce. Any gritty spices added will remain so in the finished dish.
cooking These burn easily so keep the heat down and stir often. Many people add a little water with their spices to ensure they don't scorch. They will cook in 40 seconds, or two minutes if you add water.

STAGE 5: tomatoes and/or yogurt

tomatoes Once these have been added, the ingredients in the pot are thought of as a 'masala', which simply means the mixed and spiced base of a sauce. The masala lets you know when it is cooked by releasing some oil back into the pan, so look for droplets of oil on the base as you stir. If you're not sure if a masala is ready, try a little. It should taste smooth. If it's still too strong, add some water and cook it for a little longer. Once the masala is cooked, you can *bhuno* it (see right).

yogurt This adds sourness and creaminess. You have to be careful, as it can split in the pan; this isn't a disaster but will mean the dish isn't as creamy as it could be. To avoid curdling, use full-fat yogurt at room temperature, as the fat stabilises the yogurt and a cold product added to a hot pan is more likely to split. Add yogurt in batches if it is a large quantity, stir constantly until it comes to a boil and continue to do so for a further few minutes. It should now be fine with only an occasional stir.

slow-cooking

In the early days of Indian restaurants in Britain, a curry was left on very low heat for hours with a chef stirring it every time he passed. This helped the flavours fully develop and, with every stir, the ingredients broke down into a more homogenous sauce. When you have time, try cooking your curry more slowly than the recipe suggests, stirring often, to help the ingredients melt together.

the bhuno-ing process

In Indian cookery dishes are often 'bhunoed', or browned, towards the end, to intensify the flavours, while constant stirring improves the consistency of the sauce. To bhuno a recipe, increase the heat and stir constantly for four to six minutes as the sauce reduces. If your pan seems dry, add a splash of water and bhuno until reduced again.

the role of water

When you start to cook, put the kettle on. You'll need to add water while cooking a curry and, if it's cold, you'll bring the temperature down in the pan, prolonging the cooking time and - some say - affecting the taste. Add a little at any time if you think an ingredient's about to burn before it's properly cooked, then cook off excess before moving to the next stage. Though I indicate specific quantities, be aware of how much liquid is in the pan; your heat may be higher than mine, or your pot wider with more chance for water to evaporate off.

a bony issue

I keep bones in fish, poultry and meat; it adds so much flavour. Indians cook fish steaks, heads and tails in a curry for maximum taste, while poultry and meat are cut into small bone-in pieces. But many people hate bones.
If you want to use fish fillets, ask your fishmonger for a firm white fish that won't flake too easily. Halibut is great. And if you really hate eating meat off the bone, ask your butcher for some bones to add to the pot while cooking, which can easily be removed before serving.

balancing the final dish

Just as a chef should never let a single dish leave his kitchen without tasting it, you must taste your curry at the end of cooking and before serving. A curry is a delicate balance of sweet, sour, spicy and salty and you need to correct all these flavours to achieve the most delicious dish. Here are your most important tools.

a note about chillies In all my recipes, I suggest a variable amount of chillies (such as 1-3) you could add. I want to leave it up to you to balance the heat of a dish to suit yourself. But, when using dried chillies, you should usually shake out and discard the seeds before preparing them, or your dish will be too hot.

add heat… Sprinkle in chilli flakes or halve a green chilli lengthways, add to the pot and simmer for few minutes.

…or tame the flame Add a little cream, coconut cream or sugar, depending on the other ingredients in the curry.

to add sweetness Use a little sugar, cream or coconut cream, depending on the dish. Restaurants add caramelised onion paste: to do the same, fry onions until golden or brown, depending on the dish (remembering delicate curries will be overwhelmed by over-brown onions), then blend with a little water until smooth.

for more acidity Try lemon juice, tamarind paste, dried mango or pomegranate powder, even sour cream. Be guided by the other ingredients in the curry as to which souring agent is most suitable.

to perk things up Add garam masala for warming spices, cumin powder (raw or roasted, see page 55) for earthy depth and black pepper for aromatic heat.

sleep on it Many curries improve overnight, as the flavours mature and permeate the main ingredients. You can cook chicken, meat, potato and lentil curries a day earlier, they will taste even better tomorrow.

serving a brilliant Indian meal

You can relax; there are no 'rules' about how to serve curry. Even traditional Indian dining mores were as fragmented as the country itself and every region - even every family - had its own customs.

In our Punjabi home we ate one-course meals with either rice or flatbreads, not both. Pickles were only brought out when the meal was very simple, and chutneys only served with snacks. At the other end of the spectrum, Bengali meals had a succession of courses, each dish eaten only with rice. Yet again, my husband's Marwari family ate three courses, the first something sweet, then flatbreads with vegetables and raita, then rice with lentils or a yogurt curry. They finished with poppadoms, used to cleanse the palate.

As India has evolved, all such dining norms have been further diluted. The modern generation have their own rules, based loosely on how they grew up, but tailored to suit their lifestyles. As is the case all around the world, time is now at a premium, so dishes will be simplified, though the meal will remain well balanced, containing protein, carbohydrates and - if possible - fresh seasonal vegetables, even in the poorest families. These days we cook to the beat of our own drum, even if that drum has on it a faded (in my case), Made in Punjab stamp.

entertaining the indian way

When Indian people entertain, it is with huge generosity of spirit. Guests are always served the best food their hosts can afford. Punjabis are known for their love of food and people, and my childhood had an abundance of both. My parents entertained large groups of people regularly and my mother always made enough to feed her guests twice over!

The evening would start with drinks and appetisers which were bite-sized pieces of heaven: kebabs, mini samosas, crisp little potato cakes and more, all served with our family's spicy Tangy Herb Chutney (see page 27). As a girl I would have helped my mother in the kitchen earlier in the day, carefully filling samosas or shaping tiny potato cakes. These wonderful appetisers were the inspiration for my exciting and tempting 'bites', and the recipes for them start overleaf!

When we got to the table, there would be three or four curries, two of them always vegetarian, containing lentils or paneer. There would follow an array of vegetable sides, all carefully chosen for their different colours and textures, breads, rice and raita. There was always an Indian dessert, but also fresh or cooked fruits.

entertaining my way…

I have inherited my mother's entertaining style but have adapted it to be a little simpler and more practical for a modern way of life. My parties are smaller - and I have less time than my mother did - but my menu will still have a wonderful variety of vibrant colours, textures and flavours. There will always be rice and warm breads (some bought in, to achieve a good broad selection) and pickles... if I remember! I make only one appetiser, but often also provide a dip with crunchy crudités and some spiced nuts (see page 26). I like fruity desserts after Indian meals, to refresh the palate.

… and your way

Everyone has their own style and you must be true to your own. Don't overextend yourself with a complicated menu; it will just cause stress, which is not the point of having people over. Serve just one great curry, a vegetable or two, a raita and some rice or naan. That's more than enough to make your guests feel special and enjoy a great evening. The good news is that most curries improve overnight (though I would advise making those with vegetables, fish and seafood on the day of serving). Even a pilaf reheats really well in the microwave, covered with damp kitchen paper, while breads and dessert can be bought in. Entertaining should be a pleasure. It is about showing love for your friends, having a good time and living life according to your own rules.

1 BITES

chicken kathi rolls

One of my favourite starters: delicious chicken, a tangle of onions, tomatoes and herb chutney all wrapped in lovely pastry. I have been eating variations of this dish since childhood. You can substitute the chicken for lamb or even Fresh Paneer (see page 25) or stir-fried chickpeas. It does have a few stages, but is really easy to do and all the components can be prepared earlier in the day. I use puff pastry here, as it has the same character as the traditional paratha and is easily available, but make it with Paratha (see page 157) if you prefer.

Whizz together all the ingredients for the marinade with 2 tbsp water until smooth. Place the chicken in the marinade and leave for as long as possible (a minimum of one hour, or up to overnight in the fridge).

Using a 10cm bowl or saucer as a guide, cut out five circles from the pastry. Take one at a time and roll each out into thinner 15cm circles, using a little flour to help. Heat a non-stick frying pan, place in a pastry round, and cook until golden spots appear on the base (around 20 seconds), then turn over and cook the other side until golden. Meanwhile, spread a good layer of the egg over the upper surface, using a small spoon. Then flip and cook the egg side for 10 seconds. Take out and place on a plate. Repeat with the others.

Heat a saucepan, add the chicken and marinade and stir-fry for two or three minutes, or until you can see droplets of oil on the base of the pan. Add a splash of water (to deglaze the base) and the onion and cook for another minute or so until the chicken is done. Add the tomato, stir for 20 seconds, then remove from the heat. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

Taking one 'bread' at a time, egg side up, spoon a line of the chicken mixture down the centre, then add a rounded tablespoon of the chutney. Roll into a log and slice in half.

You can make these ahead, wrap the finished rolls in foil and reheat in the oven when you are ready to serve, but they will be a little softer.

makes 10 pieces

for the marinade

15g fresh root ginger, peeled weight
4 fat garlic cloves
2½ tbsp lemon juice
1½ tsp ground cumin
2 tbsp vegetable oil
¾–1 tsp chilli powder
¾ tsp garam masala
salt, to taste
¼ tsp freshly ground black pepper

for the rolls

2 chicken breasts (around 160g each), cut into small cubes
400g packet ready-rolled puff pastry
plain flour, to dust
2 small eggs, beaten
1 onion, sliced
1 large vine tomato, sliced into strips
1 x recipe Tangy Herb Chutney (see page 27)