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Clearing up confusion about curry

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June 26, 2008

By **VERONICA HINKE** Contributor

Hungry for a curry fix? You're not alone: Sales are up significantly and grocers are offering more shelf space to Indian ingredients.

"The trend was Chinese, then Mexican, Thai, Middle Eastern and now it's Indian," said Swetal Patel, vice president of sales for Raja Foods, a Skokie-based distribution company that supplies ingredients of the Asian subcontinent. Raja Foods also supplies a line of pre-cooked Indian foods, Patel's Meals, to stores like Fox & Obel, Garden Fresh Market, Jewel, Sunset Foods and Whole Foods Market.

Patel is also spokesperson for Patel Bros., the Indian grocery store chain his father founded in 1974. One of their 34 stores is in Schaumburg, another is on Devon Avenue in Chicago. He said his office has experienced a dramatic rise in calls from first timers making Indian foods at home. Two years ago, they received hardly any calls, but they've lately logged 5-6 calls per day from cooks seeking advice about instructions or where to purchase ingredients. He and the staff refer most callers to the recipes and pointers available on their Web site: www.PatelBros.com.

Patel frequently hears from people who misunderstand the meaning of curry.

If warm, mustard colors come to mind when you think of curry, it's because golden turmeric and brown coriander are spices commonly used in Indian cooking. But Minneapolis-based Chef Raghavan Iyer clarifies the loosely defined word in his latest cookbook, *660 Curries*, (Workman Publishing, 2008). Curry, Iyer insists, actually isn't even an Indian word. In fact, he claims to have never heard of curry powder until he discovered it on a grocery shelf right after he moved to the U.S. over 20 years ago.

"There is no such thing as curry powder in India," Iyer said. "A curry is something you make, not something you use. It's not something that is added, it just is."

Iyer and other chefs of Indian origin refer to curry as anything that gets cooked in a sauce. The sauce need not contain "curry" or "curry powder," a seasoning created within the Western culture.

In his book Iyer clears up the confusion about curry and makes it easy for novice cooks to try. The first section of the book includes curries, all with sauces that take less than 5 minutes to make. The second section covers 40 recipes for "curry cohorts," which are accompaniments like breads, rice, potatoes and chutneys.

One such cohort, his Stewed Pineapple with Raisins and Chiles, Iyer suggests is best as an accent for grilled fish or for topping off your favorite ice cream. This recipe also clears up another common misconception: That Indian foods are just comfort fare, best eaten during cold seasons.

Iyer explained that spices and chiles in curries make them great foods for the warmer seasons, too, because they release endorphins and actually cool body temperatures, "almost like a natural air conditioner," he said.

Iyer, who has a chemistry degree, tested and wrote all of the recipes himself. But you'd never detect his science background through his friendly writing style.

"I wanted to have the voice of a cooking teacher talking. I wanted to give people the impression I am in the kitchen with them," he said.

That kind of personal instruction is the province of Vidya Nahar, who teaches vegetarian Indian cooking classes in Buffalo Grove Nahar, who moved here from Mumbai 15 years ago, adheres to a strict diet that is common in India. She has never eaten meat, eggs or fish. She swears by lightly stir-frying, steaming or pressure cooking vegetables for her curries, being careful not to "kill off all the nutrients."

Nahar is also an advocate of seasonal foods. "Nature is the best resource manager," she said. "Look at and listen to nature when you eat."

That's an important step toward a healthier, more contented way of life.

"You want to eat to live, not live to eat. You can't blame marketing companies for unhealthy eating habits; it's your responsibility to figure out what's good for you," she said.

To learn more about Vidya Nahar's cooking, yoga, language and culture classes, log on to her Web page: www.VYanjan.US or call (847) 537-4710 .

Stewed Pineapple with Raisins and Chiles (Anaras Ambol)

This chutney (a condiment that accompanies curries and other East Indian dishes) takes center stage beautifully when served atop a piece of grilled wild salmon. Chef Raghavan Iyer also suggests serving it as a topping for premium vanilla ice cream.

2 T canola oil
 1 tsp. black or yellow mustard seeds
 2 C cubed fresh pineapple (1/2-inch cubes)
 1/2 C golden raisins
 6 to 8 dried red Thai or cayenne chiles, to taste, stems removed
 1/2 C crumbled (or chopped) jaggery (a dark, coarse brown sugar sold in East Indian groceries) or firmly packed dark brown sugar
 1 C water
 1/4 tsp. coarse kosher or sea salt

Heat the oil in a small 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 pineapple, raisins, and chiles. Reduce the heat to medium and cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until the raisins are plump and the pineapple is lightly browned, 5 to 8 minutes.

Add the jaggery and cook, stirring so it melts, 2 to 4 minutes.

Carefully pour in 1 cup water, and sprinkle in the salt. Cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until the sauce turns syrupy-thick, 10 to 15 minutes.

Serve immediately, or cover and refrigerate for up to 1 week. Reheat to warm it before serving.

Serves 8.



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