

# The Indian Larder

So you think an Indian larder is too complicated to acquire and maintain? It ain't so!

One of the reasons people in the West often shy away from preparing Indian food is that they think an Indian grocery and spice list is difficult to obtain and too much to maintain. That is not the case as you already have much of it and the Internet can bring everything else to your door almost overnight—even to the flattest plain or prairie. While it may not yet be totally fleshed out (if you are reading this book soon after its publication) we have created a website that will provide up-to-date listings of places from which to order provisions. Have a look at <http://www.chefzubin.com>. If you can add to the list you find there please tell me your experiences in purchasing Indian products online by writing to me at [zubin@chefzubin.com](mailto:zubin@chefzubin.com)

Westerners think too that Indian cookery requires esoteric ingredients that are complicated and unavailable even beyond the complexity of its spicing. Not at all true. If you scan through the recipes in this book, the foundations of the majority of the dishes are things already in your kitchen: potatoes, onions, cauliflower, carrots, lentils, garbanzos, tomatoes, ginger, scallions—look for yourself and you'll find dozens more that you have in your kitchen right now, or you can find in your local supermarket. If you find this hard to believe, please see page 13 where I've broken down the entire book by its ingredients.

Indian food is not complicated. The versatility of its few basic spices and the lengthy existence of its cuisine has brought together basic ingredients, spicing, and methods that tend to complement each other in the overall, thus allowing one to constantly innovate and invent new flavor combinations. These combinations work simply because time has allowed this cuisine to learn its best ways of working together. This makes the need to stock a large array of spices unnecessary. Indian recipes, while they work perfectly when followed to the letter, are really just guides to Indian cookery.

I will lay out the basics of a reasonably stocked Indian kitchen. I have purposely not included ingredients that are probably already in the American kitchen.

*Red chili powder* Opt for the milder versions that are sold as 'Deghi Mirch'. This version is high on color and flavor but low on the heat scale. Such powders

are great substitutes for fresh chilis or to pep up a mild curry that needs to be woken. Get different kinds, keep the ones that work best for you, and give the others to your cooking friends whose preferences are different from yours.

*Turmeric* is very versatile. It is used in almost all Indian meals for color and flavor and is a most valued spice among Indian cooks. Be sure to cook out the raw flavor completely as it can make a great tasting meal turn absolutely awful. However, turmeric burns easily, potentially spoiling a dish. Do not add it while roasting other spices, but cook it along with the main ingredients that provide moisture, protecting it from getting superheated.

*Cumin seeds* are unique in flavor, but familiar to the American palate in that they are used in many international cuisines. They add great flavor to almost everything and it is one of the spices that an Indian cook would absolutely have to take to the proverbial desert island.

*Cinnamon, cardamom, clove* this whole-spice trio adds instant flavor and appeal to standard favorites such as biryanis and stews.

*Mustard seeds* These add a tinge of sharpness to the dish. Always add only a pinch because an excess of these seeds can make the final product somewhat bitter.

*Dried red chillies* These are used in a variety of ways as shown in the recipes. In their simplest use, they can be pounded in a mortar and pestle into coarse chili flakes that will spice up any mild dish.

*Tamarind* Available in the form of cakes, paste, pulp or whole, it adds sourness and an entirely new dimension to the dish.

# Chilis

Yes!—one inevitably comes to the question of chilis!

Chilis of quite differing kinds are grown all over the world. Indians grow several thousand varieties for domestic consumption as well as for export. So how are we to decide on the type of chili we should use to give the best result?

Before I answer that, let us have a brief history of this much loved and sometimes wisely feared fruit.

The chili is believed to have originated in South or Central America between 5,000 B.C.E. and 3,400 B.C.E. They were originally used as weapons. Dried and powdered it was thrown at an enemy. It is still occasionally used in India and elsewhere by a variety of bag-snatchers and other low lifes. The use of chilis may be the earliest recorded version of chemical warfare on the planet.

As early as about 2,000 B.C.E., archaeological evidence confirms the use of chilis in food in the western hemisphere. Columbus brought chilis back to Europe, referring to them as red peppers, an image that has held to this day. With the rise in maritime power of Spain and Portugal and their frequent trips to the Americas—stopping off in Africa for fresh water, supplies, and all the slaves they could carry—the spread of chilis across most of the known world was accomplished in the short span of about fifty years.

When the Portuguese landed at Goa in India, they brought with them several species of exotic plants from the new world. Along with breadfruit and potatoes were several varieties of chilis that were planted in the fertile Goan soil. From then on, merchants, travelers, and invading armies helped to distribute chilis all over India.

Although the chilis in India originated with the same chilis used in the cuisine of the Americas, the soil differences and climatic conditions have helped each variety to evolve individual characteristics in flavor and spiciness.

The basic rules for the use of chilis in cookery are simple enough.

- the smaller the fruit, the spicier it tends to be.
- removing the seeds helps reduce the heat level of the chili.

Many will contend otherwise, but in Indian cooking it does not matter which variety of chili is used. Indian cooking relies on a blend of spices for flavor, not

on the chili. The chili plays only a supporting role by adding heat, that heat varying according to the type of chili used.

Most of my recipes refer to green chilis, which is the only variety of fresh chilis available in Indian markets. These long green chilis are commonly available in the United States. Using a fresh red chili instead of a green one will make no difference in the final outcome.

Fresh red chilis are generally not available in the U.S. They are simply ripened green chilis.

Dried red chilis are much used in Indian cuisine. They are often quick-roasted in a pan with hot oil or are steeped in vinegar for twenty minutes to release their flavor before being ground to a paste.

When a recipe calls for red chili paste, I find that the best way forward is to boil dried red chilies in a bit of water for a minute and then simmer them for ten more minutes before grinding them to a paste.

A few recipes are chili-specific (some pickles and chutneys), but in most recipes, the variety of chili used is immaterial. I am sometimes pressed to be definitive about the type of chili to be used in a given recipe, but I recommend that one rely on one's own taste and preferences as to the introduction of heat.

There are perhaps four levels of heat, which we might call mild, medium, hot, and call 911! Your provisioner will help you to identify the heat level of the chilis it sells. If you're not familiar with a given variety do not hesitate to ask about it. If you don't, your family members or guests may not speak to you for the entire evening due to temporary laryngeal paralysis. (In some cases this may be a good thing.)

Some recipes call for chopped chilis; some for slit chilis (defined below); some for dried chilis. Any and each can be substituted for any other. If the recipe calls for a chili known to be quite hot and your preference is for mild, use the milder chili you prefer.

Residents of certain provinces in India are partial to their locally grown varieties and may even claim the ability to tell them from poorer flavored relatives. This claim is true enough as many of the native population enjoy fresh chilis eaten raw during the meal just as someone might choose a carrot stick.

The spread of chilis throughout the cuisine of India came more out of economic necessity than a cultural or food-related need. With the opening of new geographies and new trade routes, the demand for, and consequently the price of spices climbed higher, putting them out of reach of the poorer segments of society.

Chilis, a cheaper alternative than more expensive spices, put the zing back into the Indian's curry. It was also found that eating a lot of chilis prompted the drinking of much water to calm the burning feeling. This provided both an oral taste sensation as well as that the water filled them, providing a feeling of satiation in spite of the meagerness of their rations.

Removing the seeds and chopping the chilis will reduce the heat—but chopping the chilis also carries the danger of an unsuspecting guest biting into a chunk. Slit green chilis are perhaps a better alternative. Leave the head and the stem on the chili. Make a lengthwise slit in the flesh, (into the hollow of the chili, but not so deep as to release many seeds) and put it into the pot whole. This releases the flavor while leaving the chili available to be removed before serving.

Your experience will soon dictate the kind and amount of chilis that appeals to your palate. Moreover, it is certain that over time your palate will change—probably toward more, rather than less, heat.

The recipes in this book are moderately to mildly spiced. Enough chilis are added as to give you a good representation of how it is prepared traditionally, but restrained enough to ensure that hospitalization should not be necessary.

I want to hear from readers about the kinds of chilis you use and how you prepare them. I will try to compile this into a U.S. guide that will appear later on the website we are building (<http://www.chefzubin.com>) and incorporate it into a later printed edition. Send your email to me at [zubin@chefzubin.com](mailto:zubin@chefzubin.com).

## **Panch-Phoran—How To Make It**

This is a term used for a mixture of five spices, used predominantly in the cooking of the states of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. This mixture is often referred to as Indian five-spice and is usually prepared in quantity at home and stored for later use.

A very simple method, making it involves mixing together equal quantities of fenugreek seeds, cumin seeds, fennel seeds, mustard seeds and onion seeds. When used, a pinch of the mixture is thrown into hot oil. When the spices crackle and release their aroma, the remainder of the dish's ingredients are added as per the recipe being followed.

Panch Phoran gives a finished dish a complex mélange of flavors. However, this mix does not lend itself easily to experimentation. It is best used within the confines of prescribed recipes.

## **How to Chop Onions Without Adding the Salt of One's Tears**

Legend has it that a delegation of onions went to petition Lord Brahma, the Hindu god of creation. They stated that they do gladly sacrifice their lives to enhance the palatability of humankind's meals yet they receive no thanks nor even brief mention. Invoking his divine powers and grace, Lord Brahma granted them great favor by proclaiming that whosoever shall cut onions from that day on would weep with pain in the memory of their slain brethren.

A touching story! However, it has done absolutely nothing to slack the tide of self-proclaimed experts who dish out their secret recipes to combat this effect. In my many years as a chef, I have witnessed numerous "cures" that range from the possibly believable to the flat-out bizarre.

Many believe in the power of a slice of bread held between one's teeth while chopping the onions. I was once even offered the suggestion that the bread should be buttered!

Indian kitchens call for great amounts of chopped onions to be used as a base for any of several curries, as a thickener, or as a filler. Onions, tasting wonderful when cooked, and being one of the cheapest vegetables at the market, they quickly gained a place of great use in many recipes—because they add flavor and deliver satiety at an economical price.

Indians prefer using sharp red onions to their milder flavored white cousins because they have less moisture and caramelize faster and because, in India,

they are cheaper. In the U.S., red onions are commonly called Spanish onions, and the reverse is true; white onions caramelize more readily than red, and they are often cheaper.

What to do? You are faced with a basket full of onions requiring peeling and chopping. The easiest way to prevent crying yourself is to delegate the job to someone else. If your position in the home hierarchy grants no such privilege make sure that you are in a well ventilated area.

Always use a sharp knife to peel and cut. Onion cells contain a sulphur-based acid that is released into the air when cells are ruptured or broken. A sharp knife will cut more cleanly through the cell and allow less release of the juices containing the irritant to squirt all about. Placing the onions in a bowl of water after peeling them and quickly trashing the peels also tends to help a bit.

And now for something completely different. If my plan fails you are welcome to try a method that my pal Vishal swears by. He claims to have never cried while slicing onions because he keeps an onion circle tucked on his left ear. He hasn't yet figured out how to get his wife, Saloni, to ignore the smell that lingers into the evening!

## How To Cook Onions

Onions have been around for more than five thousand years. Ancient Vedic texts mention them, as do Sumerian writings, ancient Egyptian scrolls, and there is a brief mention in the Biblical book of Numbers.

Onions were originally believed to have mystical properties. The great Indian physician Charaka (c. 300 B.C.E.) mentions their antiseptic properties as well as their diuretic capabilities. The ancient Egyptians invested this humble vegetable with revered mystical qualities, interpreting its circle within a circle structure to represent infinity. They used onion in their mummification process in the hope that the dead would find them useful in the afterlife.

Some societies in ancient India banned the consumption of onions or garlic to widows, celibates, and sages because the carnal lust onions promote would cause the loss of status or concentration during meditation.

Onions were used in the treatment of cholera and thought to slake the patient's thirst.

Given that basic trivia about onions, what do they really do? They can be pickled rather easily They can be dried so they keep for long periods of time. But, most importantly, they are vital to Indian cookery.

In India, onions are among the cheapest vegetables one can obtain. Since economics is often a prime factor in the consideration of diet and many vegetables prove expensive to a significant portion of the population, large quantities of onions were used to bulk up meals. When cooked, onions are a great thickener and they impart a characteristic sweetness that helps to balance other tastes in the dish.

Indians take the browning of their onions seriously. Traditionally a lot of oil is used to ensure that the onions are well browned which in turn results in the final product having a distinct oily feel to it, but the rich flavor of the caramelization caused by frying them brown is what's important.

When onions are immersed in oil at high heat, moisture from the onions evaporates rapidly and the onions brown faster and more evenly. Some Indians deep fry sliced onions until they are golden and crisp before grinding them.

Most dishes call for onions to be cooked until they are golden brown. Care must be taken because there is a fine line dividing desirable golden brown from acrid "golden" black. Simmering the onions while occasionally stirring them is the best way to ensure that they are cooked to perfection. I prefer a copper pot or a non-stick casserole. Stainless steel heats faster and causes the onions to stick and burn if they are not carefully watched. A convenient but not so healthy option (if you have a deep cooker always at the ready) has some chefs separately deep fry the onions until they are golden, processing them to a paste. They use this in curries to eliminate their diners coming across partially cooked onions—which among Indians is equivalent to culinary heresy.

### **How to Make Ginger Paste**

Grind peeled ginger in a food processor with an amount of water that will result in a paste. Indian provisioners carry pre-packaged ginger paste or you can use finely chopped ginger as a substitute.

### **How to Store Fresh Herbs**

Coriander leaves, fresh mint and dill leaves are three herbs often used in Indian cuisine. Storing them so they retain their vitality is of great importance, especially in areas where they are not easy to obtain fresh.

The best method I have come across is to cut off the roots, place the herbs stem first into a bowl of steaming hot water so that they are immersed halfway up



# How Well Do You Know Your Curry?

Like all things Indian, diversity has made its way into our cuisine. When my mother cooks, she can make the same curry in a hundred different ways. (It helps that she regularly forgets the correct ingredients and their sequence.)

Regional indicators play a large role in discovering where your curry originated. Styles of food are influenced by the produce regionally available, history, religious practices in the region, and the economic factors that govern the majority of the populace.

When we refer to the northern states in India, we speak of Kashmir, Punjab, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh (creators of the famous Awadhi cuisine based on slow cooking; see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awadhi\\_cuisine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awadhi_cuisine)) and parts of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar. One finds a lot of star anise used in Kashmir, cinnamon in Himachal Pradesh, and other whole spices used in Punjab and Delhi. The food in the north is rich, teems with ghee, and, often, cream and butter. The use of wheat, tandoor-style cooking (Indian clay oven), and whole spices are distinguishing characteristics.

There is an element of Muslim influence that is seen in the kebabs and biryanis. Curries are flavored with a variety of whole spices. Saffron is often used, with onion and tomatoes employed as a method to thicken their curries.

Bihar, Bengal and Orissa that lie toward the east use mustard oil in their food. These regions also regularly use Panch Phoran, the spice mix discussed on page 36.

Rajasthan and Gujarat often use yogurt as the base for their curries with a dash of asafoetida to compensate in flavor for the lack of onions and garlic in their food. There is a tendency to use dried red chilies as the region is a leading producer of these chilies; each variety of chili seeking to rival another in terms of its heat. Here curries may be thickened by the addition of gram flour.

Food from Goa shows a historic influence from Portugal and their colonies in Africa. The use of vinegar as a souring agent, much coconut milk, and the use of chili pastes is a giveaway in pinpointing Goa's traditional curries.

Curries from the southern states may be thickened with lentils or coconut milk. Its food is flavored largely with mustard seeds, dried red chilies, curry leaves, and a pinch of roasted lentils that imparts a nutty flavor to the food.

Not surprisingly, as beaches are where much coconut is found, the coastal regions use a lot of coconut in their curries. This may be in the form of coconut oil, grated coconut, or coconut milk, or all of them together.

In the present era of globalization, many influences have travelled about, fusing themselves as inextricable parts of a cuisine, so these broad indicators are just that--broad indicators that soon may just designate historic origins.