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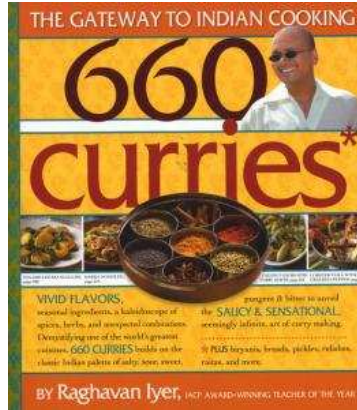
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COOKBOOK REVIEW

'Curries' runs a savory gamut

The Boston Globe



By T. Susan Chang
Globe Correspondent / July 9, 2008

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660 Curries

By Raghavan Iyer
Workman, 809 pp., \$22.95

Recently, there's been an explosion of Indian food memoirs, "modernized" Indian cookbooks, and Indian home-cooking collections. This summer heralds the arrival of Raghavan Iyer's magisterial "660 Curries," which has the unique distinction of being the best three-pound paperback cookbook I've seen.

Iyer, a revered cooking teacher and author, starts his volume with a broad, much-needed definition of curry: "Any dish that consists of meat, fish, poultry, legumes, vegetables, or fruits, simmered in or covered with a sauce, gravy, or other liquid that is redolent of spices and/or herbs." In other words, you could go on indefinitely eating nothing but curry. And for a week, that's what I did.

Every single recipe uses a different, very specific blend of spices (Iyer has a glossary of more than 30 different blends and pastes). Those mixes, along with fistfuls of green chilies and cilantro, can turn the kitchen into a dizzying bazaar of heat and scent. I felt like Indiana Jones being handed an ancient, subcontinental decoder ring, the one that says what to do with fenugreek and nigella seeds.

If you begin with tart chicken with roasted chilies, tamarind, and coconut, you'll be presented with a brilliant constellation of flavors. The ruddy-colored sauce, aromatic with a strong suggestion of sour, is thickened with ground split peas. Caramelized red onions create a sweet base for the spices in this and other dishes. Garlic shrimp with unripe mango is a lesson in the sour-sweet paradox of unripe fruit; the mouth-puckering tart mango turns sweet next to onions.

My favorite new comfort food is okra in spicy buttermilk (I realize that both are acquired tastes), made with the slightly bitter warmth of pan-toasted fenugreek

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and cumin in a thick, aromatic cream. A different kind of dairy decadence held sway in the paneer dishes. Spiced pan-fried paneer with mint is chewy and nutty tasting.

I never cease to be amazed how you can get a brilliantly rounded spectrum of tastes from the pale pink mash of masoor dal, or red lentils. A dish with tomatoes and lime is somewhat familiar (I'd learned another version from a friend). In this, the acid of tomatoes and lime are balanced by onions, bitter spices, and cilantro.

Other curries are less well defined, but still tasty. Spicy ground beef, with warm, sweet spices like cinnamon and coriander, has a subdued undercurrent of heat. Despite its alluring billing, lamb stew with a "triple-nut paste" is a rather murky presentation. And the cream and nuts make the lamb almost overwhelmingly rich.

"660 Curries" isn't as authoritative in the carb department, but a buttery basmati rice with spinach, the one starchy side we tried, is an easy weeknight upgrade of plain rice.

If you live near an Asian grocery, you might be surprised to learn you can find all the seemingly obscure herbs and spices you need (with the exception of the irreplaceable curry leaf, which was calamitously banned this winter, to the distress of Indian-Americans everywhere). Nor is it difficult to construct the spice blends for each dish, with the help of an old coffee grinder conscripted for the purpose.

I once lived in Manhattan's Little India neighborhood, where a small battered paperback by celebrated Indian cookbook author Madhur Jaffrey was my constant companion. How I wish I'd had Iyer's curry book back then! I'd have rampaged through the spice stores every night. So we're all lucky that "660 Curries" is here. Next time you're standing before a jar of fenugreek, go ahead and pick it up. The decoder ring is yours for the asking. ■

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