



## The Epi Log

### Q&A with Author Raghavan Iyer, the Man Behind "660 Curries"

by Esther Sung  
on 07/15/08 at 02:35 PM

So you think you know Indian food? Not too long ago, I had the pleasure of talking with acclaimed cookbook author [Raghavan Iyer](#) who recently published [660 Curries](#). Among other things, he explains what curry really is, and divulges his theory on the four S's.

Q&A after the jump.

#### Epi-Log: You were a chemistry major?

**Raghavan Iyer:** I was. That was my first bachelor's, and I got that from Bombay University with a major in chemistry and a minor in math. [Iyer eventually came to the U.S. in 1982 to attend Michigan State University for a degree in hotel management.]

#### E-L: What happened in between the science background and pursuing a completely different field?

**RI:** To me, cooking is part science, part art. And I think when you combine the two, the end result can be quite magical. So, having come here with a degree in chemistry initially and really not knowing how to cook, I learned to cook the Indian way in a foreign land. And if I can cook Indian, anybody can because being the youngest male child of a large Indian family, I had no reason or desire to get into the kitchen. When I came here, it was a survival issue and if I didn't cook, I couldn't eat. I always inadvertently revert back to my chemistry background when I'm creating, testing, and I seem to fall into a rhythm.

#### E-L: This book came partly out of your teaching, your passion to educate when you started your school.

**RI:** I think people have always had a love-hate relationship with curry. Some people absolutely love it, some people don't. I wanted to sort of project a very enlightened approach to Indian curries. A lot of it really came from the fact that when I had students who came in, their association with curry was really with curry powders, blends. It's such a foreign concept, coming from India, because we don't have the word "curry" as you know it in any of the 23 languages we speak. We have words that sound similar to curry and all those words really signify dishes that have a sauce to it.

#### E-L: Out of the different styles and types of curries, do you have a favorite?

**RI:** I always revert back to the curries of my childhood, which is Southern Indian, but I also love some of the curries from the northwestern part of India. Gujaratis [those living in Gujarat, a state just north of Bombay (now called Mumbai)] are primarily vegetarians and they have such a depth of knowledge when it comes to handling legumes and spices and vegetables. It's a flavor profile that I adore.

#### E-L: What exactly are "contemporary curries"?

**RI:** I lived in India for 21 years, and I've been in the United States for almost 26. I always thought we could take the concept of curries now and incorporate that in a more Western environment and show people dishes [like Pork Ribs with a Sweet-Sour Glaze or Spaghetti with a Spicy Tomato Sauce] that they wouldn't imagine being curry; to us, it is curry. Go back to sauces. It's all about sauces. If it's not a sauce, it's not a curry.

#### E-L: You write that [Moghalai](#) is the most popular Indian food recognized in the western world. Has the trend shifted? Where is it headed?

**RI:** I think it's shifting because now Indian food is being recognized as one of the upcoming and emerging flavors in the Western world, especially in the United States. And along with culture, I always say food is a window to the culture. And it's such a common denominator. And now you're starting to find people realizing there's more to Indian food than tandoori chicken. [Also,] about seven years ago, I edited [Betty Crocker's Indian Home Cooking](#), which was sort of a quiet testimonial to how Indian food is coming into play here.

#### Any final words?

**RI:** When it comes to the world of Indian curries, I always say, associate the four S's: saucy, spicy (as in well-seasoned), simple, and sensational. I think when you think about those four S's, the world of curries falls into place. But it's all about sauces.

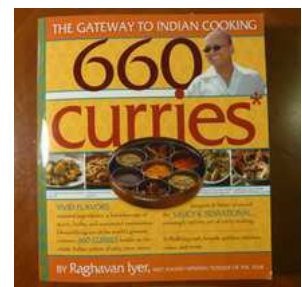
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Try your hand at a contemporary curry: [Scalloped Potatoes with Coconut Milk and Chiles](#).

Visit Raghavan Iyer at [raghavaniyer.com](#) and the [660 Curries blog](#).

Buy a copy of *660 Curries* (Workman) [here](#).

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