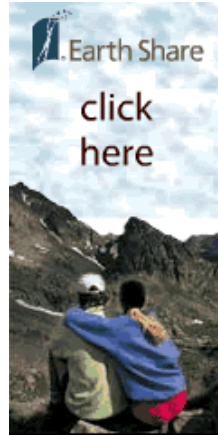







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May

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[660 Curries ... and some cohorts](#)

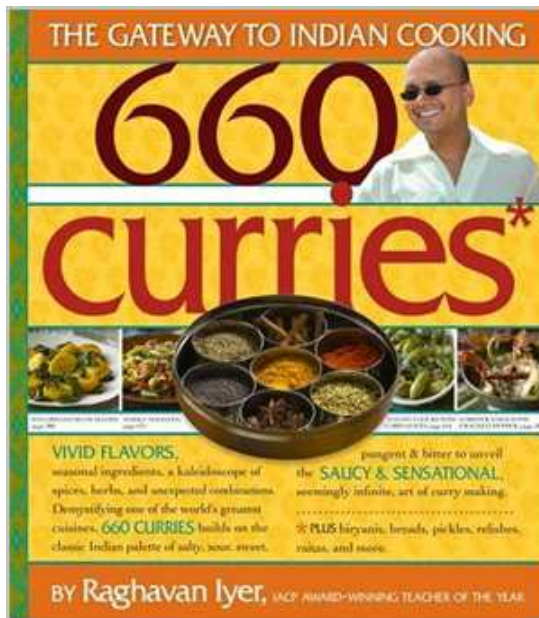
May 20, 2008 |

While we have close to 50 cookbooks in our collection, those featuring Indian food are surprisingly few. Most of the ones we do have are devoted to Indian regional cuisines. What we didn't have was one comprehensive "**Indian cookbook**".

Think about it. Is it even possible to capture, in one book, the complexity and nuances of a culinary tradition that goes back a few thousand years and spans a subcontinent where regional identities, cooking styles and ingredients vary every hundred miles?

Madhur Jaffrey and Yamuna Devi have been brave enough to attempt this task and pull it off with panache (The latter's work is confined to Indian vegetarian cuisine).

Three weeks ago, we found Raghavan Iyer's *660 Curries: The Gateway to Indian Cooking* in the bookstore. It's a labour of love - over 800 pages thick, with recipes collected by visiting home kitchens across the length and breadth of India, as well as several expat kitchens in the U.S. and his own 'laboratory' in Minneapolis, Minnesota.



Raghavan Iyer majored in chemistry at the Bombay University before moving to the U.S. 26 years ago. He went on to get a masters in Hotel, and Restaurant Management (Michigan State University) and has achieved acclaim as a cookbook author, culinary educator, and a co-founder of the [Asian Culinary Arts Institutes](#).

He has numerous feathers in his cap; two other critically acclaimed cookbooks, [Betty Crocker's Indian Home Cooking](#) and [The Turmeric Trail: Recipes and Memories from an Indian Childhood](#); as a culinary educator, he received the coveted 2004 **International Association of Culinary Professional's Award of Excellence for Cooking Teacher of the Year**, and was a Finalist for a 2005 **James Beard Journalism Award**. His work has featured in several leading publications.

His latest book, *660 Curries* is a veritable encyclopedia. As the name suggests, it has a wide range of curries (wet and dry) from the Indian subcontinent, plus a section on "Spices and Curry Pastes". About a third of the book is devoted to things not usually associated with the term "curry".

There's a chapter on popular street food (chaat), snacks and dips ("Appetizer Curries"), another on scrumptious one-pot rice based meals ("Biryanis Curries"), and forty-one "curry cohorts" with pulaos, breads and desserts.

Geographically, it covers most of the **Indian subcontinent**, including the oft-neglected North-East, Pakistan, Tibet, Nepal and Sri Lanka. About 25% of the recipes in the book are non-vegetarian, ranging from favourites like *Lucknowi Gosht Korma* (Aromatic Lamb with Pounded Spices) to the unusual *Sengdana Lassoona Jhinga* (Shrimp with a Peanut-Garlic Sauce).

This book traces, in enchanting detail, the origin and evolution of "curry" as we know it, through the various immigrant populations that settled in the Indian subcontinent. It presents recipes of curries handed down through generations.

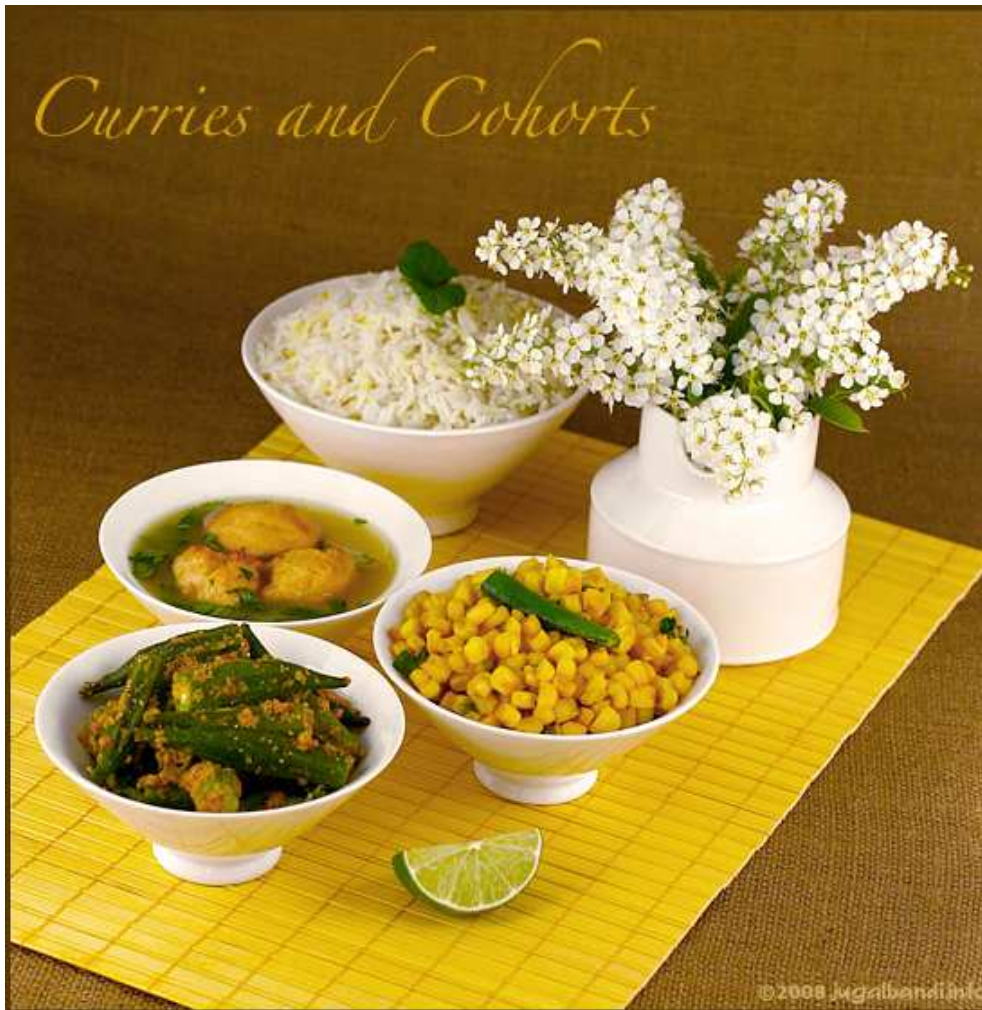
Some of them, like *Patara Poda* from Orissa (Leaf-Wrapped Cod and Mushrooms) or *Chilgozae Waale Palak aur Methi Saag* from the Himalayan foothills (Pine Nut-studded Creamy Spinach and Fenugreek) may be appearing in print for the first time ever.

There's a section called "Contemporary Curries", which features Indo-Chinese favourites (like *Hakka noodles* and *Gobhi Manchurian*), and unusual pairings of Indian flavours with "foreign" ingredients such as *Ziti with Arugula*

and Jaggery, Asparagus with Tomato and Crumbled Paneer, Potato-Stuffed Peppers in Guajillo Chile Sauce.

See a sampling of Raghavan's recipes at [HIS BLOG](#).

Here are some we tried.



Eating India: North South East West

Featured, anti-clockwise: **Zarda Chaawal** (Saffron-laced Basmati Rice, page 716), **Rasa Vadai** (Lentil Dumplings in a Spicy Tamarind-Lentil Broth, page 75), **Sorshe Bata Diye Bhindi** (Sweet-hot Okra in a Mustard-Poppy Sauce, page 529) **Makkai Nu Shaak** (Sweet Corn with Cumin, Curry Leaves and Chillies, page 486).

Little wonder he claims getting this book to print was like “giving birth to a horse”. It was a four-year process where he channelled his inner chemist to deconstruct the techniques, ingredients, spices and herbs that give “curry” its form, texture and body.

In an era when any recipe is available for free on the internet on your fingertips, why bother with another cookbook?

For starters, we were impressed by the sheer size of the compilation. Seven hundred recipes - each one well-researched and explained in painstaking detail.

This book is for the casual as well as the vocational cook. It takes absolutely nothing for granted.

There's a glossary at the end that explains what various ingredients are called in different parts of India, what they are used for, and where to find them in the U.S.

If you don't find it, he suggest substitutes. e.g. ("tamarind paste dissolved in water with a drop or two of natural smoke flavor" in lieu of [Kudampuli](#))

There's a list of mail order sources, a shopping cheat sheet in the end, and the teacher's voice of quiet authority as he guides you through every step.

Most recipes come with tips: e.g. in the footnotes to *Dhansak*: "Canned pumpkin is not a good substitute (for fresh) because it is way overcooked and mushy. Use sweet potatoes instead."

.. and very precise instructions: "8 minutes for an electric burner or 10 for a gas burner".

What we really dig are the narratives surrounding each dish - its history, and whose kitchen it came from.

"Jyotsana Rayadurgh handed me a piece of paper in the parking lot of our children's school one nippy day. "My mother used to make this all the time when we had a cold back in Karnataka," she said, as she chased after her beautiful daughters ... "

prefaces the recipe for *Menalina Saru* (Peppery Pigeon Peas with Garlic and Cumin)

His *Aloo Tikki Chaat* (Stuffed Potato Shells) comes from his childhood neighbour in Bombay.

"Mrs. Chandwani, whose ancestral roots were embedded in Sindh (now Pakistan), purchased her aloo tikkis from the same woman, also a Sindhi, every week for fifteen years. It was her way of showing support for the hardworking widowed mother of two. It was also her opportunity to complain, in Sindhi, about the growing cost of vegetables, and about not being able to see her children and grandchildren often enough.

Years later, those patties made it into my American kitchen ..."

And his *Bolly Cauli* (Aloo Gobhi) is inspired by the movie *Bend It Like Beckham*,

"where the hockey-stick wielding tomboy heroine is forced to learn how to make this Punjabi delicacy to prove her capability as a dutiful housewife to her Indian husband."

He focuses on what works in an American home kitchen. So how does he get idli batter to ferment in the frigid Minnesota weather?

Ha!!! He doesn't. He uses yogurt and Eno fruit salt. His recipe sure works for us way better than "put the batter in an oven with the light on and say a prayer". (Read Bee's idli rant [HERE](#)). It's nice to encounter a cookbook author who values practicality above the *tsk tsking* from purists.

Raghavan Iyer is eloquent. And darn funny.

On eating, Indian style:

"We Indians wash our hands, sit at the table, tear off pieces of bread (with one hand only, and yes, it's the right one because the left is considered "unclean", best reserved for other body functions - no need to go further), wrap them around morsels of curry, and in it goes. We repeat this until we are done with "breaking bread".

Then we mix the leftover curry with rice and, using the fingers of the right hand, we scoop up little mouthfuls and devour until we can eat no more.

If you're left-handed "Oy veh, you are so out of luck!" as my friend the cookbook author Judy Kancigor would say. Or you'll just have to resort to the *pardesi* (foreign) manner. and yes, the foreign way would be to use fork, knife, and spoon to transport your curry meal. Of course, I say eating with silverware is like making love through an interpreter; something is lost in the translation, n'est-ce pas?"

This book is a real joy to read, and to cook from.

In the three weeks since we bought it, we've tried ten recipes - with outstanding results.



We particularly love his lentil (*dal*) and bean creations. We've tried three so far, and really enjoy the way he combines them - brown and white chickpeas, urad and mung dal, chickpeas and kidney beans, to create a medley of perfectly balanced flavours.

There's a *doodhi/lauki* ([bottle gourd](#)) languishing in our crisper. What should it be for dinner tomorrow?

Raghavan has FIFTEEN recipes to jazz up this rather lackluster vegetable. Browsing through them, one is transported from Kerala to Bengal to Kashmir. And there's his own creation: *Lauki Patra nu Shaak* (Squash with Taro leaf Roulade).

Suddenly, we're excited about *lauki*.

Anything to complain about? There are a few gorgeous pictures by the brilliant [Ben Fink](#) and some others taken in India, but there could have been more. We have a weakness for bright, shiny distractions to break up the text.

But then, this book would have cost 50 dollars instead of 22. And it's already huge. Adding more pages would mean having to rent a U-Haul to bring it home.

Watch this space for some recipes from this inspiring book.

[Raghavan Iyer's Website](#)

[His blog](#)

[Media reviews of 660 Curries.](#)

If you would like to purchase this book, you can support **Jugalbandi** by buying it through [our Amazon Store](#) at no extra cost to you.

- **Bee and Jai**

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7 Comments so far

1. [Raaga](#) on May 20, 2008 11:54 pm

I saw this book 2 weeks ago but feared being thrown out of the house if I take back even 1 more cookbook! :-)

2. [Srivalli](#) on May 21, 2008 12:22 am

Nice review...and your pictures are breathtaking as usual!

3. [Pelicano](#) on May 21, 2008 12:31 am

I'm intrigued! Especially so because I know next to nothing about the somewhat-cloistered northeast corner of India...and those vadas in rasam look so tempting; brilliant composition in your photo BTW.

4. [Arundathi](#) on May 21, 2008 12:53 am

Thanks for the information - I've seen it and been debating buying it.

5. [sushma](#) on May 21, 2008 1:47 am

Hey Bee thanks for such a wonderful info and i can add this book to my shelf.. as usual ur photos are awesome..

6. [Shyam](#) on May 21, 2008 1:48 am

Very nice review, J & B. I've been toying with the idea of buying "The Turmeric Trail" - now it looks like I'll have to buy that as well as this book! 😊 Raghavan saar should thank you for raising the sales of his books by two!

7. [sia](#) on May 21, 2008 1:50 am

16 bottle gourd recipes in one book alone??? really??? wow...

Back to the [BLOG](#).

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We are grateful for your input. Hope you visit us again...and happy surfing.

Jai and Bee.

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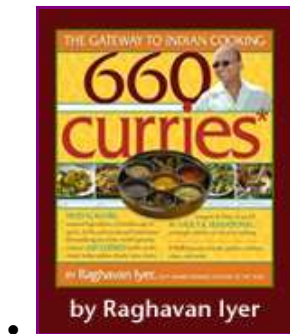
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