



Currying Favors

by E.B. Boatner

“If I can cook Indian, anyone can.” Disingenuous, coming from Bombay-born, award-winning Chef Raghavan Iyer? But it’s true—when Iyer arrived in the States in 1982 to study restaurant management, he not only couldn’t cook Indian—he couldn’t cook anything.

Starting at culinary ground zero, Iyer did what any college boy would do—he called home: “I would talk to my mother or my sister, and ask how to do a particular dish, and they’d walk me through it. There were no recipes. I think that’s probably where my [original] chemistry background came into play—I could figure out how to combine, and mix, and match, and come up with flavors.

“Because I learned to cook the Indian way in a foreign land,” the chef reasons, “I got to deal with the challenges that the average American living in a small town and trying to cook Indian would have to deal with.”

Why pursue Indian cuisine?

“Well,” Iyer muses, “I grew up vegetarian, and I had to cook. I would say that as an immigrant, the worst thing that you can do to yourself is to switch your diet completely. That’s really what I think nurtures your mind—what gives you comfort. You need things that have some resemblance to home.”

Now an internationally recognized chef, Iyer has birthed what amounts to a *Gone with the Wind* of Indian cookery in *660 Curries: The Gateway to the World of Indian Cooking*.

Quite a feat, considering, according to Iyer, “The word ‘curry’ itself is unknown in the Indian vocabulary. I think that’s the biggest misconception. People talk about ‘adding curry.’ I’ve always said that curry is never added, it just is.”

(It’s actually any combination of meat, fish, poultry, legumes, vegetables, or fruits, simmered in a liquid made with freshly ground spices and/or herbs.)

“Another,” the chef continues, “is that Indian food is hot. I always say that it’s not, because to us, it’s all about balance. Some of the things are hot, but they’re balanced with some other ingredients that tone them down.

“A third is that there’s ‘no diversity’ in Indian food. When I hear that it’s all the same, I think, ‘Well, then, you haven’t had the right Indian food.’ To us, it’s all about textures, colors, aromas, and tastes.”

Iyer suggests the best way to approach his daunting volume is to “open your refrigerator, and see what you’ve got, go to that chapter, and pick out a recipe that looks appealing to you—and go with it.”

The author appends a “Shopping Cheat Sheet,” listing items by both their English and Indian names to embolden the less intrepid to explore Indian markets.

I ask Iyer what he’d cook for me, a lamb enthusiast, and he doesn’t hesitate: “The opening chapter has an appetizer curry. Since I know you like lamb, I’d do lamb chops from a rib rack. I’d rub them with ginger and garlic paste and some freshly-ground spices, pan-sear them, grill them with mustard oil, and finish them off with a cream sauce flavored with fenugreek leaves. That would be a fantastic precursor to a memorable meal.

“And maybe,” the chef continues, “I’d take some of the flatbreads, and serve them with a legume curry as a part of the appetizer, so you get a different flavor and textural component. There’s a yellow split-pea dahl flavored with a very simple combination of cumin seeds, coriander seeds, garlic, and chilies that you’ve pounded in a mortar. Take a little bit of oil, and stir-fry the mélange, and add tomatoes to the cooked yellow split peas. Then, you’d go to the table, and have the main course....”

The main course....

“When I’m stressed,” Iyer confesses, “I go to the kitchen. I create. I cook.” In fact, he realized, once his partner pointed it out to him years ago, “The more upset I was, the more elaborate my meals would be.”

Iyer concludes with a broad grin, “My philosophy of cooking is just let it go. Don’t worry about being pigeonholed. Don’t get bent out of shape if you don’t have all the ingredients. Cooking should be fun—therapeutic.”

660 Curries: The Gateway to the World of Indian Cooking

Raghavan Iyer

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Raghavan Iyer lives locally with his partner and 8-year old son. He is also the author of Betty Crocker’s® Indian Home Cooking and The Turmeric Trail: Recipes and Memories from an Indian Childhood. For information on cooking classes and schedules, visit www.raghavaniyer.com.