

A Taste of India and the Skills to Make It!

Nancy Zrymiak becomes an enthusiastic Indian cook – and grocery shopper! – under the guidance of two of Goa's finest chefs.

Over the past two years I have travelled throughout India and enjoyed a variety of tastes in each region of the country. However, as much as I enjoyed Indian food, I did not feel the need to cook myself. It seemed like a lot of work considering all the cheap and tasty Indian restaurants out there. But when a friend of mine from Canada wanted to visit and take a cooking class in Goa – I jumped at the chance to join her.

Our time in Goa turned out to be an incredible opportunity to learn from two food experts: first, our self-taught cooking Guru for the week was Judy Cardoza of On-the-Menu; and second, semi-retired Chef Rego of the Taj, who was to become our inspiration.

Our cooking course with Judy was packed with stories, recipes and cooking tips. We spent three full days cooking dishes from North India, South India and Goa. Another day took us out of the kitchen to the market and spice plantation.

We learned the importance of eating fresh and seasonal produce in India. Indian people go to the market, see what is fresh and then decide what to have for dinner. This really hit home with me. My style of deciding what I want for dinner and then going to five different stores to find all the ingredients has left me frustrated more often than not. Had I adopted the Indian way in the beginning I think cooking here might have been much easier.

Indian cooking takes time, but it is colourful and flexible. Flexible in that every region or state may make the same dish, but with their own twist on the flavours. The same goes for every household. The all important masala dabba, or spice box, is indispensable. Spices are contained to be added in an instant.

Judy taught us to experiment with recipes and be creative. Taste before and after adding an ingredient. Too salty, add sugar. Too sour, add tamarind or lemon juice. Too bland in color, add turmeric. To retain the individual flavours of spices, heat each one in oil first and add one at a time, stirring constantly.

Our visit to the local market showed us that one-stop shopping was possible. Fruit, vegetables, spices and rice were all under one roof. And just down the laneway were the meat market and the fish market, which contained much more than just fish: kingfish, prawns, lobsters, crabs, pomfrets, clams, ladyfish, mussels, and oysters.

The spice plantation was an education in itself. We wandered through a forest where spices blended in with trees and bushes. Peppercorns dangled from vines like mini grapes and wound their way up tall tree trunks. Nutmeg hung from trees and we learned that the outer husk of the nutmeg is mace. Ginger and turmeric would have gone completely unnoticed if not for our guide who pointed out the roots growing underground. We tasted cinnamon, the inner bark of the cinnamon tree, and although the cinnamon leaf is known as the bay leaf in Indian cooking, it is not a substitute for the western bay leaf.

After our four day cooking course finished, Gail and I still had cooking on the mind. We had a chance to meet the chef at our hotel: Master Chef Urbano de Rego. Semi retired after a 41 year career, he has cooked for such dignitaries as King Hussein of Jordan, the Shah of Iran, George Bush Sr., and an enormous list of India's jet set and politicians. The man himself is as humble as can be and readily sat with a couple of Canadian foodies and imparted his knowledge to us.



Market scene



Cooking Tips:

- * Indian food cannot be rushed. It takes time for the spices to infuse
- * Never add spices in dry form; always heat in a little oil, and then stir into dish.
- * Use sunflower oil; olive oil has too much of its own flavour.
- * Use Greek style yoghurt and always whisk it.
- * Use meat with bone-in for more flavour.
- * Chillies: darker and smaller are hotter.
- * When using whole spices don't just stir but apply pressure with back of spoon to release flavours.
- * When deep frying (onions, pakoras), fry in small batches and drain well to avoid soginess.
- * Turmeric is used for its color but has little taste.
- * Coconut, onions, cashews and tomatoes are thickening agents

Chef Rego grew up in Goa, has travelled the world and cooked many types of food, but Goan cooking remains his specialty and passion. Never having been to cooking school, Chef Rego believes "Anyone can become a food wallah. It is 25% God's gift, 75% hard work." From his mother's kitchen Chef

Rego learned the tastes and traditions of Goan cooking and throughout his career he incorporated her recipes into his own creations. Cooking should "come from the heart, cooking is an art," he told us.

Chef Rego told us of the lasting influence the Portuguese left behind on Goan cooking. Foods such as dried red chillies, potatoes, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, papayas, cashew nuts and pineapples were introduced by the Portuguese. The Portuguese bread "Poie," leavened with toddy was another important contribution.

The Portuguese brought with them a recipe for Galinha Piri-Piri (Chicken Piri Piri) from Mozambique. The Goans substituted ingredients and fried rather than grilled it and it evolved into Galinha Cafreal (Chicken in Toddy Vinegar), a Goan specialty.

A fiery pork vindaloo is another favourite; the word vindaloo comes from 'vin' for vinegar, and 'albo' which is Portuguese for garlic. We were surprised to learn that salted tongue, pork and homemade sausage were readily served in Goan households.

Chef Rego pointed out that Goan cooking is as fresh as it gets. Fresh spices are used, ground with a hand grinder. Food is cooked the authentic way in clay pots on charcoal and fresh water from the well is used, rather than the tap. Seafood is bought fresh and put straight into the curry; often not even put in the fridge and never into the freezer. There was so much to learn about Indian cooking and we were lucky to learn from two people with such passion.

Eventually we had to return to Bangalore and, armed with a new enthusiasm for cooking, I could not wait to try cooking my new favourite recipes. Step one was shopping for all the necessary ingredients and I found out right away that shopping for Indian food was easy. Every store had the basic spices and ingredients and since the ingredients were local and fresh, they were cheap too.

Indian cooking really does take time; spices must be ground and since everything was cooked on the stovetop it had to be stirred constantly. It was rather messy too; turmeric adds a beautiful color to food but when splattered on the floor or the tile backsplash it takes on another look altogether. I learned that hot oil can really fly – and it hurts!

Learning how to cook Indian food was not on the top of my list of things to do in India, but I am so glad I did it. Now, along with all my great memories of India, the people and the culture, I will be able to take home a taste of India too – something that will last a lifetime.



Photos by Nancy Zymak

Jeera Aloo

Recipe: Jeera Aloo (Potatoes cooked with cumin)

Peel and cut 4 potatoes into medium cubes. Heat 3 tbsp. oil, add ½ tsp. cumin seeds. When they crackle add 1-2 slit green chillies. Then add potatoes and toss till they brown lightly. Add ¼ tsp. turmeric for color. Sprinkle salt (to taste) and ½ tsp. sugar. Toss lightly, squeeze fresh lime juice over the potatoes and serve hot, garnished with chopped coriander and lime wedges. Enjoy!