The magic of spices

My short take on how spices can imbue the simplest dishes with the most sophisticated and subtle flavors

Being from India, food has always played an important part in my upbringing and culture. The food styles in India vary significantly from region to region depending on the ingredients found and the cultural and historical impacts on those places. Hence, there are places (like Kolkata) where people are primarily non-vegetarians and love to eat meat and fish. Then there are places (like Haridwar) where almost the entire population tends to be vegetarian. Dishes across the country range from extremely hot and spicy, spicy and sour, sour and sweet, delicately flavored, creamy sweetness, and so on. It would take several blogs for me to document all the different Indian cooking styles and cuisines.

However, irrespective of the variation across the country in terms of cooking styles, the thing that remains constant is the flavor. I believe very few cuisines can bring forward such consistency in flavors with so much variation. And I truly believe that this is the magic of spices.

The three primary senses in determining a dish's quality are sight, smell, and taste. Spices contribute to all three aspects of the dish. Some spices, like saffron and turmeric, are used as coloring agents to make the dishes look more appealing. (In fact, the Kashmiri red chili powder is used instead of other varieties of chili powders when we want a vibrant red color in the dish without spoiling the dish by making it extremely hot, as Kashmiri chilies are less pungent/hot!). Some spices are used to enhance the smell of food. And very few spices can be as universal as 'Garam Masala' when it comes to adding that exciting smell to a dish. Made from a bunch of spices (like peppercorns, cardamom, cinnamon, mustard seeds, coriander seeds, etc.), a sprinkle of 'Garam Masala' on the top of the dish just before serving would fill up the entire kitchen with smells that would make one's stomach rumble!

And lastly comes flavor! Each spice has its unique flavor, ranging from earthy and slightly bitter to sweet, hot, sour, etc. And the right combinations of these different flavors can create magic on the tongue! Take 'Garam Masala' for example; depending on the ingredients and proportions used, one blend of 'garam masala' can be slightly hotter, sweeter, or more earthy than other blends.

I believe that a good understanding of the spices being used in a dish would allow one to create magic every time food is served (unless you burn/undercook the food!). Sometimes, just adding another pinch of salt/sugar or squeeze of lemon is needed to balance out the flavors and make people go crazy over your food. Creating delicate flavors is all about balancing out flavors!

So, crack open those spice jars and start making your spice mixtures as it is time to turn up the heat in the kitchens. Happy cooking!