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“The Indian Food Guide”

By
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Many people have a narrow definition of Indian food. For the novice diner, Indian gets stereotyped as some kind of a vegetable stew with lots of curry. But Indian food is as diverse as the many ethnic and cultural groups in India. The other stereotype is being “too spicy, too much heat.”

That is not true. Indian can be spicy, or it can be mild, and to taste.

When placing your order at an Indian restaurant, the waiter will ask how spicy you want your dish prepared: mild, medium or spicy. It’s that simple.

The main thing to consider is that most Indian cuisines are related by the similar usage of spices and the use of a greater variety of vegetables than many other cuisines. The main source of these spices is called “Garam Masala,” whose literal translation is: hot (Garam) spice (Masala). Please note that this is not a spice itself. It is a spice blend that is used throughout India and the rest of the Indian Subcontinent

If you have an adventurous palate and feel you are ready to indulge in Indian food for the first time, just remember that Indian food is designed to be eaten as a combination of dishes at the same time.

A basic meal will consist of a starch (such as rice and naan – a kind of flat bread). This could be followed by a main dish of meat/fish, or a lentil-vegetable combination.

For the neophyte Indian food diner, Balbin Der, co-owner of Taste of India suggests starting with Chicken Makhani: boneless chicken in a semi-sweet butter/tomato cream sauce, with nuts and raisins. For vegetarians, she suggests, Kadi Pakora, which are vegetable fritters cooked in a homemade yogurt sauce. Have either of those dishes, spicy or mild, the choice is up to you.

Indian menu 101

When encountering the Indian menu for the first time, well, it might as well be in Greek. Here are a few primers so you can go and face the food facts like a pro (as well as a few basics to get you started):

Tandoor Clay Oven: A very large clay pot, curved inwards, allowing temperatures to reach 900 degrees. At such high temperatures, foods have a crispy outer layer while retaining moisture inside. The Tandoor Clay Oven is akin to the traditional pizza oven.

Naan: Looks like a tortilla but it's white flour bread baked in a Tandoor clay oven and is the staple of the Indian meal. Naan also comes in the following flavors: garlic, chicken tikka, cooked lean lamb, and mushroom and cheese. Be adventurous and try the bread basket: naan, garlic naan, onion kulcha, and tandoor paratha

Samosas: Mashed potatoes and green peas, stuffed into pastry dough, and deep friend. This is most often eaten as an appetizer. Also try the cooked lean lamb samosas.

Tandoor specials: It can be chicken, beef, lamb, or fish cooked in the Tandoor clay over.

Balti Specials: A type of Kashmiri curry that is individually prepared with fresh ingredients. Balti entrees are stir friend and served in the special Balti bucket.

Biryani: Made from a mixture of spices, basmati rice, meat/vegetables and yogurt. In Biryani cooking the rice and meat/vegetables are cooked separately, then layered, garnished in a pot which is sealed tightly and baked or cooked on a low heat—very, very tasty.

Paneer: Homemade cubes of creamy cheese made from whole milk.

Lassi: A traditional Indian yogurt drink that comes in three flavors: banana, coconut, or mango.

Chai: Spiced milky tea. The love of Chai Tea has extended beyond the Indian restaurant scene and has found its way into most popular coffee shops.

Kheer: Creamy and cold rice pudding.

The Traditional Spices

The previously mentioned Masala or Garam Masala, as it is also called, is used throughout Indian cooking and is used in dashes at the finish or is fried in the beginning of a meal to add a subtle flavor to the dish.

The spices in the Masala are usually cumin seeds, dry cilantro, turmeric, dried green peppers, cloves, cardamom pods, curry leaves, and saffron. This combination may seem excessive, but they are used in only small quantities as to not overpower the dish. However, it is these complexities of Indian food that make it a so very fascinating to try. Don't let this cornucopia of spices scare you, as these spices exist for the sole purpose of adding a subtle aroma and flavor to the food. The spices are prepared tastefully to add a delicate aroma and flavor to the food rather than assaulting your senses. Many Indian dishes require an entire day's preparation of cutting vegetables, pounding spices on a stone, or simmering on the fire for hours prior to cooking.

If this guide has been helpful and you're ready to dive into some well prepared Indian dining, I would recommend visiting any of the places listed below. While

dining folks, remember, it is not a meal to be rushed—relax and enjoy the subtle complexities of Indian cooking.

(Sidebar)

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