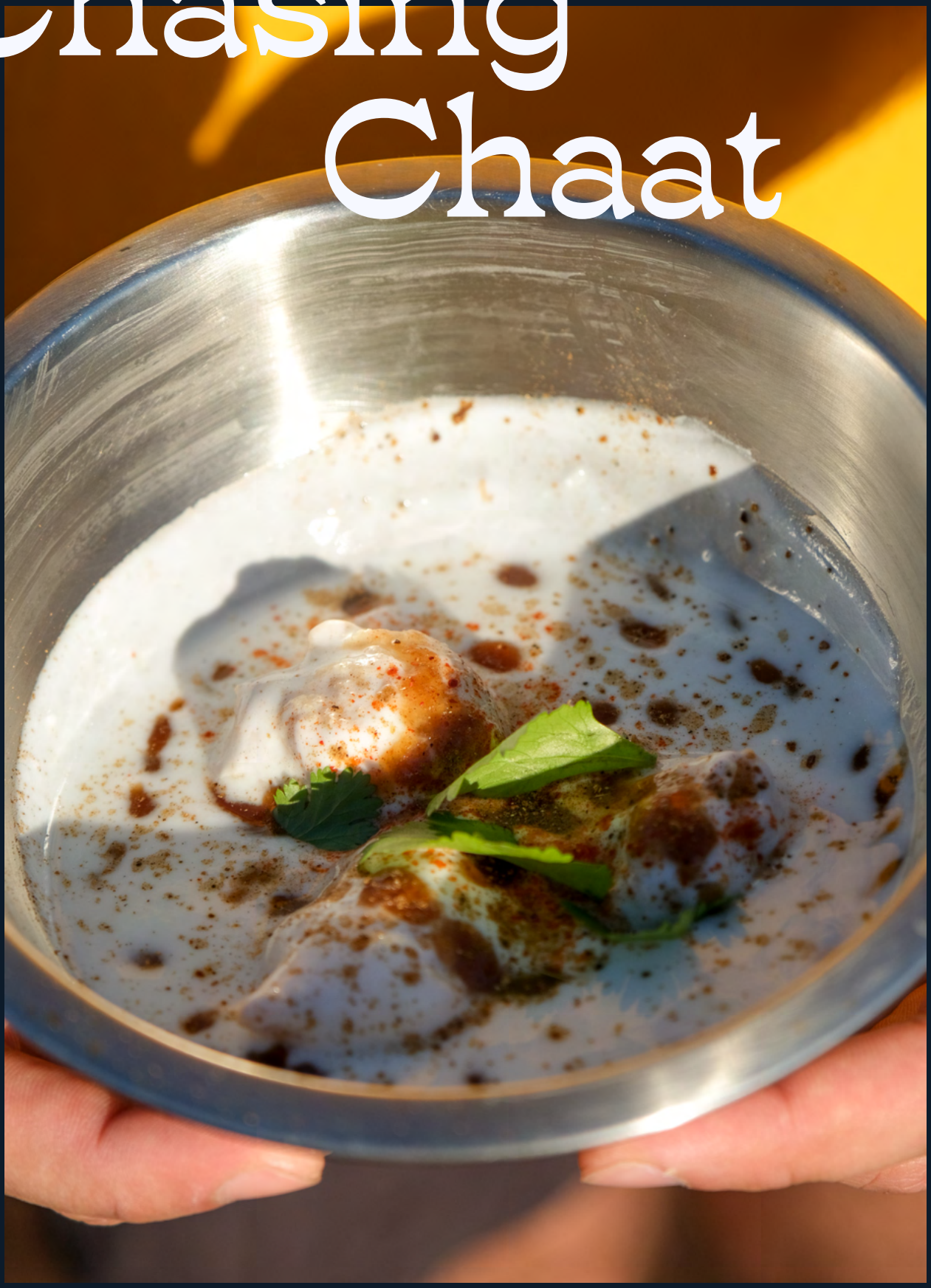
Chasing Chaat



Sohum Gupta

To *maa*, who makes the best
chaat outside of India.

The term "*chaat*" comes from the word "*chatpata*", which is probably best translated literally as "spicy", yet which carries associations far beyond this. *Chatpata* feels elusive, and trying to chase it has an almost "you-know-it-when-you-see-it" quality to it that's reminiscent of the way umami functions in Japanese cuisine. In order for the term to be useful, however, I offer a reductive definition: that *chatpata* describes the synthesis of several intense, contrasting flavors which combine to be **more** than the sum of its component parts by being **less** than the sum of its component flavors, a South Asian analogue to 'balance' in Western cooking that eschews subtlety for hybridity.

Chaat, then, is emblematic of *chatpata* – and as it reflects a gustatory hybridity, so does it reveal a historic one. The creamy curries and *tandoori* meats that are so popular in the West are undoubtedly products of colonial and trade influences. Yet *chaat* reveals the ways in which these influences have made their way not only to the English kitchens dishing out hundreds of platters of chicken *tikka masala* each evening, but even to the lone metal stand handing out *bhel puri* in paper bowls on a Delhi street.

In this cookbook, then, I aim to reveal these influences, not through tracing the history of *chaat* itself, or even through the history of its dishes, but rather by analyzing the components that make *chaat* possible. In understanding the arrival of food products to the Indian subcontinent, we are not only able to reveal the history of the dishes that use these ingredients, but we question the nature of the dishes themselves. If the soft bread of *pav bhaji* is a consequence of Portuguese colonization, is it as much a Portuguese dish as it is an Indian one? At what point does food shed the associations of its geographic origin? How does history conceal racial, national, and colonial relationships, and how can we use food to reveal these?

This book may not answer all these questions – or any of them, for that matter. Hopefully, it'll make you think, and at the very least, I hope you'll make some of the dishes. I got them all from my mom, and it's certainly the first time they've ever been written down, so treat them well.

Histories

Tamarind

Tamarind is used widely in Indian cooking, especially in the dried or concentrate/paste form. In terms of chaat speficially, it has one very important use: *meethi chutney* (or *saunth*). *Meethi chutney* is an integral part of most *chaat*, from *papdi chaat* to *dahi vada*. Tamarind, especially as used in *meethi chutney* provides sweetness and acidity, which cut through spiciness and heavier elements (think samosas in *samosa chaat*). Outside of *chaat*, tamarind is used to provide sweet and sour notes to everything from curry bases to beverages.

As for how it entered the subcontinent, scholars think that it's been in India for a while – long enough that it's even hard to estimate at this point. In her book Fruits of Warm Climates, Julia Morton writes that "Native to tropical Africa, the [tamarind] tree grows wild throughout the Sudan and was so long ago introduced into and adopted in India that it has often been reported as indigenous there also".[1] Similarly, Food and Feed Crops of the United States states that "It is believed native to Africa, but has been long grown in India and has spread to other tropical and sub-tropical regions."[2]

1. Julia F. Morton, *Fruits of Warm Climates* (Miami, FL: Echo Point Books & Media, 2013).

2. J. R. Magness, G. M. Markle, and Charles C. Compton, *Food and Feed Crops of the United States: A Descriptive List Classified According to Potentials for Pesticide Residues* (New Brunswick, NJ: New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, 1971).

Coriander

Coriander – or as the leaves are often referred to in the US, cilantro – is the basis of one of two important *chutneys* in *chaat*: green *chutney*. Green *chutney* provides spice and brightness to *chaat* and plays well with the sweetness and tang of *meethi chutney*, as well as playing off of warm, savory ingredients (such as *chole* or *aloo tikki*). In the *chutney*, coriander leaves are blended to create a beautiful green paste, but coriander seeds are used extensively in Indian cooking, often one of the go-to spices, adding warmth and earthiness to a dish, along with a bit of a pepperiness and even a slight citrus flavor.

While scholars agree that coriander is "native to the eastern Mediterranean region and southern Europe",[1] the routes that led the spice to India are less clear. However, translations of the *Charaka-Samhita*, thought to have been written likely between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE,[2] show that coriander was known in the subcontinent at the time the text was written – specifically, a section about greens states that "coriander, wild carrot and *sumukha* are appetizers, fragrant, not very pungent and rouse the morbid humors."[3] This suggests that coriander was brought to India through an early Trans-Asiatic trade route, likely set up by the Austronesian peoples.[4]

1. James E. Simon, Alena F. Chadwick, and Lyle E. Craker, *Herbs: An Indexed Bibliography, 1971-1980: The Scientific Literature on Selected Herbs, and Aromatic and Medicinal Plants of the Temperate Zone* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1984).

2. "Charaka-Samhita," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed December 10, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Charaka-samhita.

3. Shree Gulabkunverba Ayurvedic Society, "Chapter 27F - The Group of Greens (Harita)," Wisdom Library, May 24, 2021, https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/charaka-samhita-english/d/doc627543.html.

4. Gwyn Campbell, ed., *Early Exchange Between Africa and the Wider Indian Ocean World* (Springer International Publishing, 2018), https://www.google.com/books/edition/Early_Exchange_between_Africa_and_the_Wi/XsvDDQAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.

Mango

Mango is one of the most popular fruits in India, and often the fruit that the subcontinent is most associated with. Even when writing about the Mughal emperors' cultural assimilation into India, Lizzie Collingham explains that the later emperors' love for mango, especially as opposed to the earlier emperors' longing for the fruit of Central Asia, represented a fundamental Indian-ness – put another way, that "the conversion to mangoes is a telling sign that the Mughals were now Indians at heart."[1] Such a claim seems extreme, but mangoes are near and dear to the hearts of Indians – ask any Indian what their favorite mango is, and they'll have an answer. As you would expect, then, mangoes make a common appearance in Indian food, from the ever-popular mango *lassi* to their inclusion in brothy soups and curries. In terms of *chaat*, what is more relevant is *amchoor* powder – powdered dried green mango. Green mango is used often to add sourness and brightness to recipes, and *chaat*, being tangy and spicy and bright, is no exception.

Scholars generally agree that mangoes are native to northeastern India – Julia Morton writes that they are "native to southern Asia, especially eastern India, Burma, and the Andaman Islands",[2] and an article in the Biochemistry of Fruit Ripening Journal states that mangoes "originated in the Indo-Burmese region".[3]

1. Lizzie Collingham, *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (London, UK: Vintage Digital, 2010).

2. Julia F. Morton, *Fruits of Warm Climates* (Miami, FL: Echo Point Books & Media, 2013).

3. C. Lizada, "Mango," *Biochemistry of Fruit Ripening*, 1993, pp. 255-271, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-1584-1_8.

Sugarcane

There's not much that needs to be said about the use of sugarcane. If you've had Mexican Coke, you know the allure that cane sugar provides. Crystallized into jaggery, a common use of sugarcane in India, it takes on an even more molasses-y flavor, similar to piloncillo or panela, and is used for desserts, drinks, and anywhere where sugar could be used. It's good on its own, too – you haven't lived until you've had a fresh glass of sugarcane juice on the street.

The history of sugarcane seems to be a bit of a troubled one. While some scholars state that "sugarcanes indigenous to North India and China and cultivated from prehistoric times are referred to as *S. barberi*",[1] others are more conservative, claiming only that "the sweet juice and crystallized sugar were known in China and India some 2500 years ago".[2] In his book *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 6*, Joseph Needham writes that "the current position is that S. Officinarum undoubtedly evolved in New Guinea [...] thus making New Guinea the center of diversity", yet that "a minority of technologists have always believed that some elements of the Indian sugarcanes rose independently in North India".[3] Complicating this even further, Needham claims that "there were no wild known relatives in China and India from which *S. sisense* and *S. barberi* could have been selected directly."[4] Needless to say, sugarcane has been around in India for a few thousand years – recipes for wine made from the crop even show up in the Charaka-Samhita.[5]

1. Andrew H. Paterson, *Genomics of the Saccharinae* (New York, NY: Springer, 2013).

2. J. R. Magness, G. M. Markle, and Charles C. Compton, *Food and Feed Crops of the United States: A Descriptive List Classified According to Potentials for Pesticide Residues* (New Brunswick, NJ: New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, 1971).

3. Joseph Needham, Gwei-Djen Lu, and Nathan Sivin, *Science and Civilisation in China. Volume 6, Biology and Biological Technology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

4. Ibid.

5. Shree Gulabkunverba Ayurvedic Society, "Chapter 27G - The Group of Wines (Madya)," Wisdom Library, May 24, 2021, https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/charaka-samhita-english/d/doc627544.html.

Chili Pepper

Spice, and thus the chili pepper, is today synonymous with Indian food. Green chilies, in particular, are incredibly common in contemporary Indian cooking, and is eaten pickled, sauteed, baked, or even raw. In the context of *chaat*, the green chili is used to add spice to the ever-present green *chutney*. Since green *chutney* is an uncooked *chutney*, the spice provided by the green chili is untempered, and provides along with it a hit of fruitiness and pepperiness. *Chaat* is meant to be *chatpata*, and it would be nothing if not for the green chili pepper.

Yet while the chili pepper is seemingly so important to the cuisine of the subcontinent today, it is a relatively new addition to the Indian culinary palette (and the Indian culinary palate). It is generally agreed that "*Capsicum annuum*, originated in the South America [...] [and] was first introduced to India by Portuguese towards the end of the 15th century".[1] On top of this, there are other cultivars of chili peppers available in India, such as *Capsicum Baccatum* var. *Pendulum*, which "is little known outside South America, although it has reached Latin America (Mexico), the Old World (India), and the United States (Hawaii)."[2]

1. E.V. Nybe, N. Mini Raj, and K.V. Peter, *Spices* (NIPA, 2020).

2. Jules Janick, James E. Simon, and W. Hardy Eshbaugh, "Peppers: History and Exploitation of a Serendipitous New Crop Discovery," in *New Crops: Exploration, Research, and Commercialization: Proceedings of the Second National Symposium* (New York, NY: Wiley, 1993), pp. 132-139.

Cumin

Cumin is essential to Indian cuisine, and a staple in every Indian family's well-worn spice box. Cumin seeds are as prevalent in Indian food as is ground cumin – though while the ground cumin you might find in the store is a bright brown, almost an ochre, the ones used in Indian dishes is roasted before being ground, with a deeper, almost black color. Cumin, especially when roasted, is warm, earthy, and nutty, and when used in *meethi chutney*, provides a complex, savoury backdrop from which the sweet and sour flavors of the tamarind emerge.

While Indian cuisine is so reliant on cumin, however, it is not native to the subcontinent, although "it has been cultivated, utilized, and traded for so long that no botanist or archeologist is sure where it originated. Although the broad-brush-stroke answer to its place of origin is Western Asia, various historians have suggested Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Ethiopia, and even Southwest Asia as the locus of its domestication".[1] Even with the hazy past of the spice, however, "it appears that Arab spice traders first took it to India".[2] If nothing else, the complex history of cumin reveals that love of the spice transcends both space and time.

1. Gary Paul Nabhan, *Cumin, Camels, and Caravans: A Spice Odyssey* (University of California Press, 2014).

2. Ibid.

Black Pepper

Whether it dots the top of a steaming scoop of *biryani* or provides the kick in a sinus-clearing and soul-cleaning sip of *rasam*, it is impossible to divorce black pepper from Indian food, but to ignore the impact that this spice has had on the history of cuisine throughout the world would be irresponsible. Black pepper is in everything from Italian cacio e pepe to lemon pepper wings, but in *chaat*, black pepper is a key ingredient for *meethi chutney*. Sure, you could talk about how it's providing a slight tingle to the *chutney*, while also adding a fruity, sweet background note, but really, Indian food wouldn't be Indian food without black pepper, and I think we can leave it at that.

Before it existed in dishes from cultures around the world and in little glass bottles on every American table, "black pepper originated in the tropical evergreen forests of the Western Ghats [a mountain range in western India]; and the Malabar coast of India was the centre of the pepper trade from time immemorial".[1] The pull of black pepper was strong – "like a giant magnet, pepper pulled the world to India, the land of black pepper".[2] From India, black pepper trickled into Southeast Asia, China, the Middle East and eventually into Europe, where the Romans discovered that it was incredible on food. The rest, then, is history (everything before that was history too, to be fair).

1. P. N. Ravindran, Black Pepper: *Piper Nigrum* (Australia: Harwood Academic, 2000).

2. Marjorie Shaffer, *Pepper: A History of the World's Most Influential Spice* (New York, NY: Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Press, 2013).

Ginger

Ginger is not foreign to Asian cooking in general and is certainly a staple in the Indian kitchen. Whether grated into *chai* to add a kick to an otherwise sweet, warm drink or mixed with honey and thickened to create a strong elixir to fight colds, ginger is often used to add brightness and pungency to dishes. In *chaat*, ginger is used in various applications – it is included in some recipes for *meethi chutney*, and ginger is often an ingredient in *dahi vada* batter or in *pani* for *pani puri*.

The history of ginger, as with many of the other ingredients we've looked at so far, is quite blurry. Sources claim that it "has been grown in tropical Asia since ancient times",[1] or that it was part of Greek and Roman medicine traditions two millennia ago,[2] but do not seem to make conclusions about its source of origin. In *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices*, however, Andrew Dalby argues that "ginger is a very ancient spice, perhaps the most ancient of all", citing that it is propagated through roots rather than seeds (revealing its extensive cultivation) and that the etymology of the name can be derived from early Austronesian languages.[3]

1. Phil Rasmussen, "Potion or Poison? Ginger," *Journal of Primary Health Care* 3, no. 3 (2011): p. 235, https://doi.org/10.1071/hc11235.

2. Andrew Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (London, UK: British Museum Press, 2004).

3. Ibid.

Potato

The humble potato needs no introduction, especially in the context of contemporary Indian cuisine. From their starring role in the simple, comforting *aloo parantha* that every house has a variation of to their use as the base of the *koftas* in the ever popular, creamy *malai kofta*, potatoes are used all over the subcontinent. In terms of its use in *chaat*, it is often added to dishes such as *papdi chaat* and *pani puri* in a boiled, unseasoned form, acting as a sponge for other flavors, but is also used in more cooked, savory applications, such as the base for *aloo tikki* or the filling for *samosas* in *samosa chaat*.

It is generally thought that the potato is a descendent of many species of tubers from South and Central America, and "domestication of *S. tuberosum* was likely accomplished around 10,000 BCE by Andean farmers, probably in the Lake Titicaca basin".[1] After reaching North America in the late 1600s and spreading to Europe soon after, the potato was then introduced in by the British "into India, where they were cultivated in mountainous areas, especially the Punjab", likely in the 19th century.[2] The two-hundred-odd year history of the crop in India, then, is surprisingly brief, especially given its ubiquity in the cuisine today – a fact which perhaps suggests the ability of the crop to act as a blank slate upon which to build flavor, and in fact, culture.

1. Andrew F. Smith, *Potato: A Global History* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2011).

2. Ibid.

Asafoetida

Asafoetida is certainly the most obscure of the ingredients in this compendium. Regardless of this – or perhaps because of this – it is also the ingredient most associated with Indian cuisine. Asafoetida (or *hing*, as it is called in India) is a dried resin harvested from the root of several herbs and is known for its pungent smell. In India, however, it is widely used to provide an allium-like flavor to dishes, and often comes in handy when cooking for those who don't eat onions or garlic. In *chaat*, its usage is much like its usage in the rest of the cuisine, in that small pinches (actually, often puffs from a small bottle) are added to dishes such as *meethi chutney* or the batter for *dahi vadas* to provide an onion-y flavor.

Asafoetida is native to "Herat (in modern Afghanistan) [...] and also in the mountains of Laristan in south-western Iran" and traveled across land to the Mediterranean and to Europe.[1] It was used widely in Roman cooking, and eventually was also known in China.[2] Its introduction to the Indian subcontinent is as of yet unknown, but it also appeared in the *Charaka-Samhita*, with the advice that "asafoetida is pungent and hot, cures constipation, assists the appetite, helps in colic, and 'adds relish to food'".[3] While we may never learn when it exactly made its way to India, it has been a part of not only the country's medicine but also its cuisine since the writing of the *Charaka-Samhita*.

1. Andrew Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (London, UK: British Museum Press, 2004).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

Mint

Mint – specifically *Mentha arvensis*, known as wild mint or field mint – is not as widely used in Indian cooking as many of the other ingredients in this collection, but it is often included in *chutneys*, marinades, rice dishes, and simple, cooling beverages in the summer. In terms of its use in *chaat*, mint is primarily used to make the *pani* that is so essential to *pani puri*. The *pani* must be spicy and bold, but relies on herbs – namely cilantro and mint – to provide earthiness, sweetness, and body to what would otherwise feel simply like a cold spiced broth. Mint leaves, then, provide a light sweetness and cooling sensation that plays well with the chilies in the *pani* and helps make sure that *pani puri* is bright and refreshing.

Wild mint is native to India, as well as essentially all of northern Eurasia, from "Europe to Kamchatka and Nepal".[1] Yet while wild mint is the traditionally used mint in India, the Hindi word *pudina* tends to apply to all types of mint. In the United States, for example, where wild mint is not easy to find outside of specialty Indian grocers, people will often use peppermint or spearmint in its place, still referring to it as *pudina*.

1. "Mentha Arvensis L.: Plants of the World Online: Kew Science," Plants of the World Online, accessed December 15, 2021, https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:30026217-2.

Green Pea

The green pea is a common feature of Indian kitchens, often in the form of a plastic bag of peas stuffed in the back of the freezer. Peas show up everywhere in Indian dishes, from the simple, comforting *matar chawal* to the ever popular *matar paneer*. Peas are generally used in Indian cooking as a vegetable that provides texture and sweetness, as well as a source of vegetable protein. In *chaat*, peas are usually used as part of the cooked filling for *samosas* or *aloo tikkis*, rather than as an ingredient that stands out on its own or as a garnish.

The pea in its domesticated form is native "in the wild, to the Mediterranean basin and south-west Asia".[1] The pea was spread to other regions thousands of years ago, with it spreading across Europe in the 8th millennium BC.[2] Eventually, the pea was "present in ca. fifth-millennium BP Harappa [...] and in several other Harappan sites in Pakistan and north-west India, from the older phases of this culture onward".[3] While it is unknown, then, how exactly the pea spread from the Mediterranean and southwest Asia to the Indian subcontinent, it has surely been in India for thousands of years.

1. Daniel Zohary and Maria Hopf, *Domestication of Plants in the Old World: The Origin and Spread of Cultivated Plants in West Asia, Europe and the Nile Valley* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

Recipes

Green Chutney

The French have their five mother sauces – bechamel, hollandaise, and whatever the other three are (is spicy mayo one of them?). *Chaat*, on the other hand, is much less finnicky, and only requires two – one being this green *chutney*, and the other being *meethi chutney*, i.e. the next recipe. Green *chutney* is fresh, bright, and spicy, with a kick from the raw chilies. It's not only for *chaat* – sop it up with some warm *samosas* or use it in a panini.

Makes ½ cup · 10 minutes

1 bunch cilantro
2 green chilies
1 pinch cumin seeds
1 tsp amchoor powder
1 tsp ground coriander
Black salt

Pick off the large stems from the cilantro. Smaller, tender stems are fine – you'll be blending the whole affair anyway.

Add everything else to a blender and blend the whole thing to a paste, seasoning to taste with black salt. If you're spice averse, start with one green chili and add another one later if you think you can handle it. Alternatively, add as many green chilies as you think you can handle.

Jar your chutney and store it in the fridge. It should last for 2 weeks or so – freeze it if you need to store it for longer.

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In terms of how much to blend it, I would aim for at least as fine as the consistency of a salsa verde or a pesto. Personally, I prefer it a little chunky so I like to stop there, but go as smooth as you want.

Meethi Chutney

Meethi chutney – where "*meethi*" translates to "sweet" – is the second of the two *chutneys* that are essential to *chaat*. The *chutney* definitely lives up to its name; you might feel like you're adding a lot of sugar, but trust me, it needs it. The *chutney* is thick and glazey, and the sweetness from the jaggery does well to balance the tartness from the tamarind. If you're feeling adventurous, try using it as a fig spread substitute (just with more acidity).

Makes 1-2 cups · 30-45 minutes active · 1 day total

4 oz dried tamarind
½ cup jaggery
½ tsp salt, plus more
½ tsp black pepper
½ tsp red chili powder
1 tsp ground cumin
2 pinches of asafoetida
1 tsp black salt

Soak the dried tamarind in enough water to cover – if your tamarind is somewhat soft and pasty, soak it for as much time as you have (even 15 minutes is enough), but if it is very dry and hard, try to soak it overnight.

Boil the tamarind in the same soaking water until it's mushy – this will take 15-20 minutes, depending on how long you've soaked it. If necessary, add more water to cover the tamarind.

Let the tamarind and water cool, and after cooling, strain the whole thing, keeping the water. Press the tamarind into the sieve to squeeze out all the water, and discard the tamarind. Add ¼ cup of jaggery to the water and bring it to a boil. Add ½ tsp salt and reduce until it coats the back of a spoon, adding more jaggery to taste up to ½ cup total. Once reduced, add the black pepper, red chili powder, asafoetida, and ground cumin. Season to taste with black salt and chill before using.

You can also store this chutney in the fridge – again, it'll last for about two weeks, and any longer than that will require freezing.

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Some people like the chutney as thick as, say, a balsamic glaze – or even thicker – but my family prefers it a bit thinner than that. Feel free to reduce it as much as you want, but keep in mind that it will thicken as it cools.

Dahi Vada

Dahi vada is likely one of the oldest *chaat* dishes to exist – some sources cite recipes for it existing in the *Charaka-Samhita*. How old it truly is, I cannot say. What I can say, however, is that it still holds up. The *vadas* are not the simplest to make, but mixing them with yogurt, *meethi chutney*, and spices is better than it has any right to be. It's hard to get the batter soft and fluffy if you don't own a stone grinder, but all that we can do is try our best.

Makes enough for ~20 *vadas* · 1 hour active · 1 day + 3 hours total

1 cup urad daal
A pinch of asafoetida
1 cm ginger, peeled
Vegetable oil
2 cups yogurt
Meethi chutney
Salt
Red chili powder
Roasted ground cumin

In a bowl, add the *urad daal* and enough water to cover by about an inch. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap or a clean kitchen towel and soak overnight. The next day, drain the water and add the *daal* to a blender, with the asafoetida and the ginger. Blend it as fine as possible, adding water as necessary to achieve a soft-serve consistency. Try taking a teaspoon-sized ball of batter and drop it into a bowl of water – it should float. If it doesn't, keep blending. After it's blended, whisk it for a few minutes to aerate.

Heat up a *kadai* or medium-sized pot with at least 2 inches worth of vegetable oil. Gently drop tablespoon-sized balls of the batter into the oil, frying for 2-3 minutes or until lightly golden brown. Immediately after taking each *vada* out of the oil, add it to a bowl of hot water. Once all of the *vada* are done frying, soak them in the hot water for 2 hours, switching out the water every 30 minutes. After 2 hours, squeeze each *vada* lightly to get rid of excess water. Then, thin the yogurt out by stirring in a couple splashes of water, and add the *vadas* to the bowl. Soak the *vadas* in the yogurt until serving.

To serve, top with *meethi chutney*, salt, a few sprigs of cilantro, and a couple pinches of red chili powder and ground cumin.

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You want the batter to be as light and airy as possible, otherwise they'll be too firm when chilled in the yogurt. When frying, the oil should be hot enough that the batter sizzles when dropped in. When serving, don't be shy with the salt – it needs more than you think. Some people like to serve with green chutney *as well, but I prefer it with just the* meethi chutney.

Pani Puri

Pani puri, also called *golgappe*, are perhaps the quintessential *chaat* dish. For any Indian, they conjure up memories of standing at a street stall, where a vendor stirs a large vat of spicy green *pani* and hands you *puris* one by one. It's hard to describe them – they're sort of like popping boba, if popping boba was crispy, savory, and spicy. It might just be best to try one. It should be fiery and refreshing, and I promise you won't be able to stop.

Makes enough for ~20 *tikkis* · 20-30 minutes

For the *pani*:
½ bunch cilantro
1 bunch mint
2 green chilies, stems removed but not deseeded
1 cm ginger
2 oz dried tamarind
1 tsp salt
1 tsp black salt
1 tsp ground cumin
1 pinch of *chaat masala* (optional)

To serve:
1 potato
20 fried *puris*
Meethi chutney

For the *pani*: Soak the dried tamarind in enough water to cover, for at least an hour and up to overnight. Strain the tamarind, reserving the water and discarding the dried tamarind. Add the tamarind water to a blender with the rest of the *pani* ingredients and blend as smooth as possible. Strain the mixture, and if necessary, dilute with water until it is a total of 2 cups of liquid.

To serve: Boil the potato until cooked through. Let it cool, and then peel it and crumble it roughly with your hands. Make a small hole in the top of each fried *puri* with your thumb, being careful not to crush the whole *puri*. In each, stuff a bit of potato and drizzle in about ½ tsp of *meethi chutney*. Dunk each puri into a bowl of the mint-cilantro *pani* and eat immediately, putting the whole *puri* into your mouth.

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You should be able to find fried puris *at an Indian grocer. While you can make the mint-cilantro* pani *early and freeze for several months, a constructed pani puri should be eaten within a few seconds of the* pani *being added. It's going to be a bit messy, and you may need to wipe your chin more than a few times – revel in it.*

Aloo Tikki

The number of cuisines around the world that include dishes consisting of fried potato pancakes/fritters is astounding, and *chaat* is no exception. While *aloo tikki* is often plain, my family prefers to fill it with an intensely spiced sauteed pea mixture. The result is a warm, satisfying, crispy *tikki*, filled with soft, pillowy potato and spicy green peas. Douse them in *chutneys* (and whatever else you want, to be honest), and devour fresh.

Makes enough for ~16 *puris* · 30-40 minutes active · 1 ½ hours total

For the filling:
1 tbsp vegetable oil
1 cup frozen green peas
1 tsp ground coriander
1 tsp *garam masala*
1 tsp red chili powder
½ tsp *amchoor* powder
1 green chili (optional)
Cilantro (optional)

For the *tikkis*:
4 potatoes
2 tbsp cornstarch
Salt
Vegetable oil

To serve:
Green *chutney*
Meethi chutney

For the filling: Add 1 tbsp of vegetable oil to a kadai or medium pan, and heat on medium. Add the green peas, and saute for 5-10 minutes until dry and slightly mushy. If using green chili or cilantro, add those here and saute for another minute. Add the ground coriander, *garam masala*, red chili powder, and *amchoor* powder, and season to taste with salt. Make sure the filling is quite strong, adjusting the spices if necessary.

For the *tikkis*: Boil the potatoes until cooked through. Let them cool, and then peel them and grate them on the large holes of a box grater. Add the cornstarch and a couple of big pinches of salt and mix it all together with your hands.

To form each *tikki*, grab a small ball of the potato mixture and use your thumb to make it into a cup in your palm. In the divot, add about a teaspoon of the filling. Pinch the top of the cup together to form a ball and shape into the size of a burger patty. After forming all of the *tikkis*, shallow fry them in vegetable oil until crispy, flipping often – this will take about 10-15 minutes.

To serve: Serve the tikkis warm with green *chutney* and *meethi chutney* spooned over top.

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