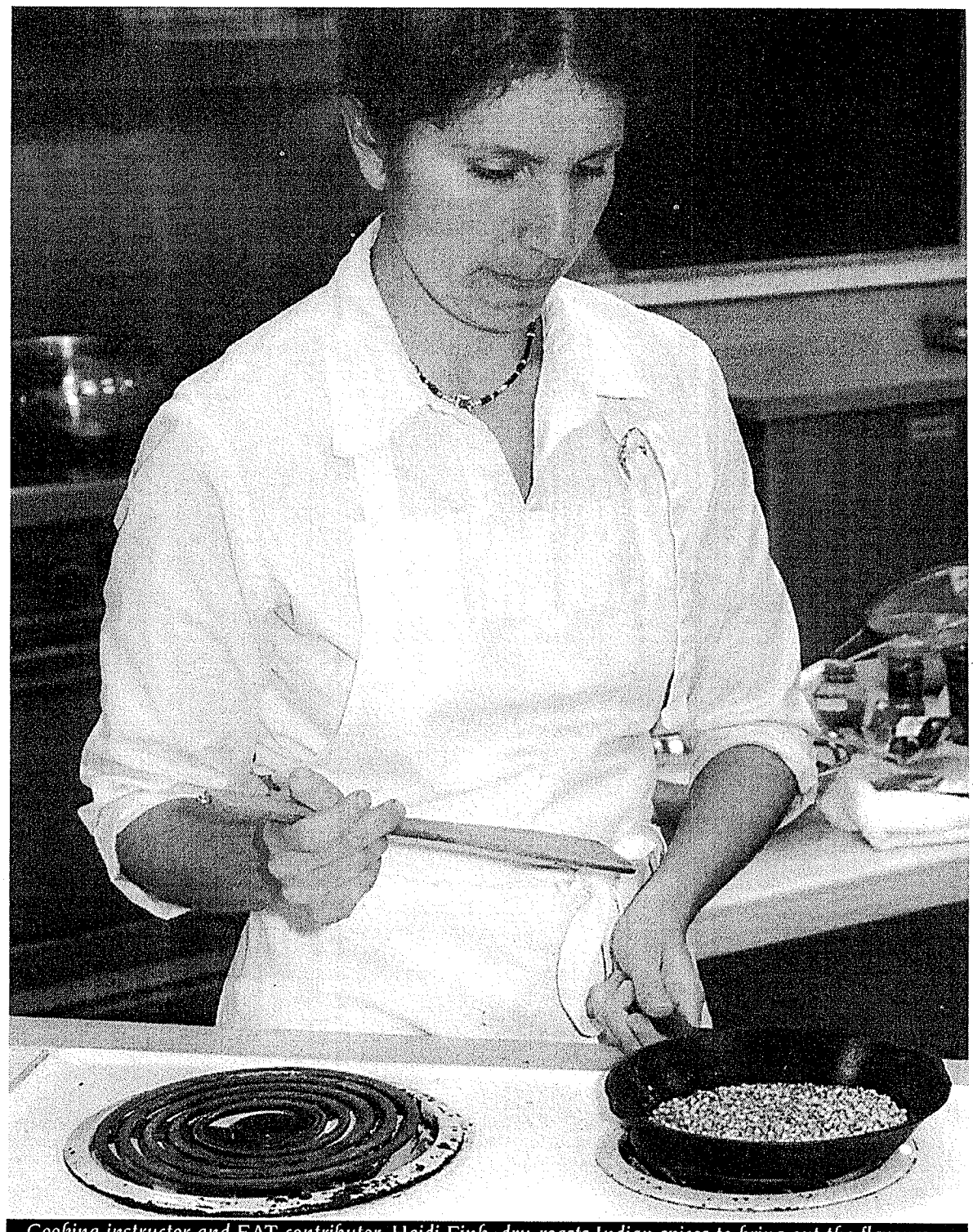
How to Curry Flavour

by Heidi Fink

Supermarket curry powders are about as far away from the freshly ground spice concoctions of true Indian cooking as Victoria is from Delhi. But by embracing the rich variety of spice cuisine, your next sublime curry experience can be in your own kitchen.



Cooking instructor and EAT *contributor, Heidi Fink, dry-roasts Indian spices to bring out the flavours*

***THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS CURRY* POWDER.** It's true that you can pull a bottle of yellow mix off the supermarket shelf, but when you buy this kind of powder, you are buying an illusion. Store-bought curry powders will rarely provide a sublime curry experience, and never bring you close to the food-induced nirvana I enjoyed while eating my way through India nine years ago.

If the Indian food you have eaten so far would be better classified as heavy and overpowering rather than sublime, imagine this: succulent pieces of bone-in chicken braised with pungent black mustard seeds, sweet fennel seeds and shavings of fresh coconut, all first heated in oil to release their perfect aromas. Or how about a masala dosa, my favourite Indian breakfast, a vibrant balance of spicy, sour, savoury, crunchy and soft, bundled into one crispy stuffed crepe. These and thousands of other home-style dishes deliver tastes both exotic and familiar, deliciously inspired by a mastery of spice cookery and not an overuse of powdery mishmash.

"True Indian cooking is not just throwing a bunch of things together and calling that curry powder," says Daksha Narsing, the passionate cook behind Daksha's Gourmet Spices, a line of Indian spices and sauces available online. "For fine eating in India, a lot of care is used in choosing spices for each dish and blending them properly."

Whether this means choosing one spice or 30 for a single dish, a good Indian cook will know how to build richly layered meals from the seasonings in her kitchen. She would never use the same mixture of spices, in the same proportions, to flavour every meal of every day. When we buy curry powder at the supermarket, only one possible curry is available at our table. But if we separate curry powder into its component spices, to be used in endless combinations of ingredients and styles, we have at our fingertips a superb range of flavours to cook with. Many of these tastes would amaze Westerners used to standard restaurant renditions of butter chicken and tandoori naan.

"Indo-Canadians need to talk about Indian spices, to show how they are used in Indian homes," declares Vickram Vij, owner of the acclaimed Vancouver restaurant Vij's, one of the few places that satisfy my craving for real curry. Vij has no patience for western curry powder. The spices used in his restaurant are freshly ground and blended each day, ready for inventive pairing with local ingredients. If the dishes on his menu, such as beef short ribs braised with cinnamon-red wine curry, seem inauthentic, Vij retorts, "All my recipes are Indian, they are just home-style cooking."

The food served and eaten in the homes of Indian families is a world away from curry powder. My first disillusionment with this mixture came soon after my return to Vancouver from the East. I wanted to reproduce the spectrum of bright, pungent, fresh tastes that I had experienced in India, and I found curry powder to be of no help. Out, too, went my bottles of ground cumin and ground coriander, two spices that form the bulk of most commercial curry powders, and with which I had been trying to create authentic flavours. And so long to the Indian recipes in my trusted vegetarian cookbook, which produced very muddy and cinnamon-heavy "curries," tasting nothing like the vibrant and exciting food I yearned for.

Soon, I was enveloped in the bustle of an Indian market on Main Street in Vancouver, trying to make sense of the ingredients around me by consulting the glossary of my new cookbook, *A Taste of India* by Madhur Jaffrey. I managed to purchase large bags of whole cumin and coriander seeds, along with curry leaves (the English name for a musky green herb, unrelated in every way to yellow curry powder); black mustard seeds, fenugreek and tamarind (a dried sour fruit); exotic selections of lentils (which are toasted and ground to use as a seasoning, particularly in southern India); turmeric, green mango powder and asafetida (a ground yellow resin with a stinky garlic aroma); and, of course, plenty of fresh and dried chiles.

Dizzy with possibility, I lugged my purchases home, where I was finally successful in achieving genuine Indian taste. I made a mixed lentil dahl that did not contain a single westernized "curry" spice. Flavoured only with grated ginger, tamarind paste and a few whole seasonings fried in oil, this dahl was deliciously complex, with both tart and earthy notes. My boyfriend and I ate until our sides ached. We missed real Indian food that much.

Memories of this, my first well-made curry, had me excited to try cooking more complicated dishes. Stocking my kitchen with the right ingredients was only the first step to unravelling the complexity of Indian cuisine. It took some time to figure out which spice was responsible for which one of the nutty, pungent, flowery, sour, bitter or sweet flavours in my mouth. My attempts were complicated by the different techniques used to draw multiple characters from a single spice. Even the way spices interact within a masala (a mix of dry or wet spices) has an impact on balance and taste. Now, after many years of happy experimentation, I can separate Indian spices into their different categories of flavour.

Cumin and black mustard seeds, two of my very favourites, fit into the earthy-nutty or pungent category, depending on how they are used. Black mustard seeds are most commonly "popped" in hot oil to subdue their sharpness, while cumin is usually dry-roasted to highlight its nutty undertones. Cumin is also widely used in all aspects of Indian cooking and is included in most masala preparations. (Incidentally, cumin on its own tastes quite like our commercial curry powders and is handy to use if you want a curry taste without any spicy, acrid flavour).

Green chiles are bitter and hot. Tamarind paste and green mango powder are both deliciously sour and bright. Asafetida and curry leaves are pungent-earthy, with rounded flavours. Coriander is flowery; turmeric is astringent and earthy; cardamom is sweet and bright. Cilantro, mint and other green herbs are used for their bright, sharp, freshness.

If these classifications seem intimidating, Vij offers this tip to Western cooks wanting to move beyond curry powder: "Do not be afraid of spices. Just play with the spices and have fun with them." He's right. While North Americans may need a little direction to start with, cooking real curry in our homes is not about rigorous authenticity.

You can capture the spirit of Indian styles and flavours by choosing a few favourite spices and using them with your own ingredients.

The most effective way to begin is to grab at a few corners of taste and make them work together in your meal. So with earthy and sweet cauliflower, you could add pungent mustard seeds, sweet-sour tomatoes, garlic and salt. With savoury chicken might go sweet and nutty coconut, bitter-hot chiles, pungent fenugreek and earthy cumin. The possibilities are exciting when we have so many flavours to work with.

Probably the most important thing to consider when trying to cook with spices is the proper use of heat to attain maximum flavour. Spices are never just boiled in a sauce. Indian cooks squeeze different flavours from the same spice by dry-roasting it, grinding it or frying it in hot oil. Dry roasting and then grinding, to bring out nutty and toasty aromas, is used for spices that will be sprinkled on foods near the end of cooking. Grinding a variety of spices together and then sautéing them, a method mostly used at the start of a recipe, gives the richest flavour to sauces and stews. Frying whole spices in hot oil (known as *baghar*) adds spectacular dimensions of taste and can be done either at the end or beginning of cooking. In every case, the idea is to release the essential oils of a spice by exposing it to high, but not burning, heat. The comparatively low heat of boiling liquid can never extract the full flavour of a seasoning.

"Once my customers taste the real spices, they always come back," laughs Narsing. After you experience the mouth-watering aroma of perfectly spiced Indian food wafting through your kitchen, you too will come back for more. I have a Punjabi friend who says her most profound curry experiences have always happened in private homes. Toss your curry powder (or save it for tuna salad), embrace the rich variety of spice cuisine and I guarantee the next sublime curry you experience will be in your own home.

Heidi Fink is a food writer, private chef and cooking class instructor, specializing in ethnic and vegetarian cuisine.

South Indian Dry Masala

(This superb mixture blows store-bought curry powder out of the water!)

1 Tbsp raw basmati rice
2 Tbsp unsweetened shredded coconut
1 Tbsp whole coriander seeds
1 tsp whole cumin seeds
1 1/4 tsp whole black peppercorns
1/4 tsp fenugreek seeds
2 tsp paprika
1 tsp turmeric
1/8 tsp ground cinnamon
1/4 tsp cayenne, or more, to taste
1 tsp vegetable oil

Heat a small skillet over medium heat. Add the vegetable oil. When hot, add the raw rice. Stir to coat well with oil. Cook, stirring, until the rice turns opaque and light reddish-brown (this will take a few minutes). Now add the coconut, stirring until the coconut turns light brown (this only takes a few seconds). Immediately dump rice and coconut into a bowl and let cool. Wipe out the skillet and return to the heat. Add the coriander, cumin, peppercorns and fenugreek. Cook, stirring, until the seeds turn a shade darker and give off a toasty smell. Remove to a separate bowl and let cool.

Grind the toasted rice and coconut to a powder in a clean coffee grinder and return to its bowl. Now grind the toasted whole spices and place in the bowl with the rice and coconut. Mix in the remaining spices. Mix well. Store in a glass jar, away from light and heat, preferably in the fridge.

Gobi (Spiced Cauliflower)

3/4 tsp green mango powder (amchoor)
1/2 tsp freshly ground cumin
3/4 tsp turmeric
1/2 tsp garam masala
1 Tbsp water
1 large cauliflower (about 3 lbs), trimmed and cut into 1-inch florets
1 Tbsp vegetable oil
1 tsp black mustard seed
1 tsp whole cumin seed
8 fresh or dried curry leaves
1 Tbsp butter
2 cloves garlic, minced
1/2 cup canned, crushed tomatoes OR *1 cup chopped fresh tomatoes*
1/2 tsp salt
1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro

Combine the first five ingredients in a small bowl and mix to form a paste.In a saucepan, heat the vegetable oil and mustard seeds together over medium-high heat. When the mustard seeds pop and turn grey, add the cumin seeds and curry leaves and let cook for 10 seconds. Now add the spice paste you made, the butter and the garlic. Stir once or twice and then add the tomatoes and salt. Turn down the heat to medium or medium-low and cook, stirring frequently, until the tomatoes have broken down, given off most of their liquid and the oil floats on the surface of the sauce in tiny pools. (This last step, allowing the oil to pool on the surface, is the most important step in making any curry sauce). Add half a cup (or a bit more) of water and the cauliflower. Cover and let simmer for about 10 minutes, until cauliflower is tender and has absorbed most of the sauce. Fold in cilantro and serve.

Buying Spices in Victoria

These five stores are good places to buy spices in the city.

Seven Valleys Fine Food & Deli, 2506 *Douglas St.*, 250-382-9998
Seed of Life Natural Foods, 1316 *Government St.*, 250-382-4343
The Market on Yates, 903 *Yates St.*, 250-381-6000
Jan K Market, 555 *Fisgard St.*, 250-386-8888
B&V Market, 3198 *Quadra St.*, 250-380-1455

How to Clean a Coffee Grinder . . .

. . . so your coffee-drinking spouse doesn't kill you in the morning.

Clean out as much of the curry spice remnants as you can with a paper towel. Now put 2 Tbsp of raw rice, along with a small piece of cinnamon stick, in your grinder. Grind to a powder (the cinnamon may still be in chunks) and empty this powder into the garbage. Give another wipe with the paper towel, and voilà. This method works best if you do it as soon as possible after grinding the spices.

If you plan on making a lot of curry, buy a second coffee grinder.

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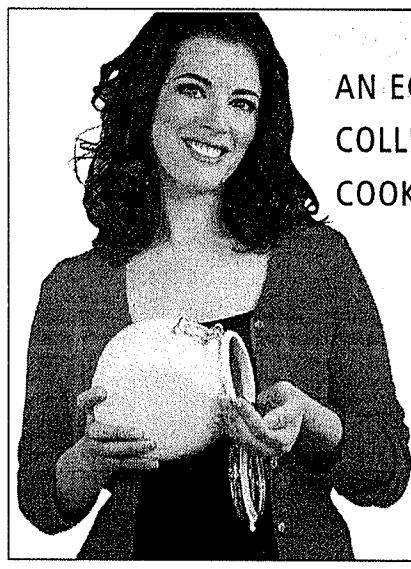

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