

dr. eatgood

Shanta Sacharoff: India Cuisine

The story is still told in India of Gandhi who, as a young man going to England to study law, was made to promise his mother never to touch wine, women or meat.

To many Americans, vegetarianism represents another weirdo protest of the head generation against Mom-and-apple-pie-ism. But to hundreds of millions of non-meat eating people in the world, vegetarianism is the physical manifestation of religious belief and economic reality.

In India, where such non-meat eating religions as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism predominate, vegetarianism has evolved over the centuries into a definitive expression of temporal and spiritual life. Hinduism, the religion most practiced by Indians, teaches its followers to love and respect animal life, particularly the cow which is a symbolic mother earth figure.

The mother earth emphasis is carried over into the national economy. India is an agrarian nation where most of the farming is done with bullock labor. So, naturally, cows became more important as milk-producing and bull-birthing living animals than as a dietary staple.

In the United States many vegetarians are into the Indian food trip,

but unfortunately the Indian restaurants here tend to pamper American tastes by over-spicing. Hindu epics classify foods too heavily spiced as "Tamasi," undesirable because they are thought to promote aggressive behavior. Properly spiced foods are called "Satvik," designating nutritious foods supposed to lead one towards calmness and good health.

Since in India a young girl is not considered a woman until she masters the art of preparing rice at least fifteen different ways, Indian women pride themselves on creating a tasty and nutritious vegetarian diet.

As easily as they can pick from their own larders or their local health store, American vegetarians can adopt the dishes of their Indian brothers.

For those of you who want to do a whole cooking number, I would suggest stocking in basic Indian spices like turmeric, black mustard seed, coriander powder, cumin seeds and fresh garlic and ginger. Curry powder is strictly a packaged item for Western women unfamiliar with the varying subtleties of Indian spices. As a mixture, it serves as a poor substitute for individual ingredients.

The following dishes have innumerable virtues—mainly they are nutritious, cheap and delicious. Which is

where it's at for vegetarians.

Upma is excellent served for breakfast, or as a side dish in place of rice or potatoes. It's got all the nutritional value needed for a balanced meal.

Upma

- 1 c. regular Cream of Wheat
- 1 tsp. udud dal (optional)
- 1/8 tsp., black mustard seed
- 2 tbs. mixed nuts
- 1 lemon
- 1/2 tsp. brown sugar or honey
- 1 medium sized onion
- few pinches turmeric powder
- 2 tbs. butter
- 1 fresh tomato
- 1 c. water
- salt and pepper to taste

Soak udud dal in a little warm water and drain. Melt butter in heavy sauce pan over low heat. Add finely chopped onion, udud dal and mustard seed. When onion is browned and mustard seed stops popping, add Cream of Wheat. Brown thoroughly over low heat while stirring constantly. To reddish-brown mixture, add water slowly, stirring carefully to avoid forming lumps. Add turmeric, seasonings and brown sugar, continuing to stir. Mix in well the chopped tomato and juice of lemon. Top with chopped nuts and cover, allowing to stand a



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Feasts

few minutes before serving. Serves 4 to 6.

When split, the small round green pea known as mung, is called mung dal. An extremely high source of protein, mung is one of the oldest grains known to man.

Indian Buddhists, on missions to China, took this pea with them so that they could maintain a familiar vegetarian diet in China. Although Buddhism subsequently declined, the Chinese adopted the mung sprout as an important dietary staple.

Mung Dal

- 1½ tsp. peanut oil
- 1 c. mung dal
- 4 c. water
- 1 c. yogurt
- ½ tsp. cayenne pepper
- 4 cloves fresh garlic
- few pinches turmeric
- ⅛ tsp. mustard seed
- ⅛ tsp. coriander powder
- ⅛ tsp. cumin powder
- 1 fresh tomato
- 1 lime
- 1 small onion
- salt to taste

Wash thoroughly and drain mung dal. Boil for 20 to 25 minutes in 4 c. salted water until mung feels soft when pressed between two fingers. Using a rolling pin, grind together finely chopped garlic and cayenne until paste is formed. Add ¼ of paste to boiled mung dal, along with turmeric, coriander and cumin powder. Mix yogurt with a fork until milky in 1 c. water in small bowl. Add to mung dal and cook over very low heat for 10 minutes. (Intense heat will cause yogurt to separate from mung.) Remove from heat. Add lime juice, chopped tomato and cover. Heat oil in pot over low heat. Add chopped onion, mustard seed and stir until onions brown. Remove from heat and stir well into mung dal. Heat over low flame for a few minutes and serve as soup, or sauce over rice. Serves 4 to 6.

Indians are fond of feast days, which vary in ritual from one area to another. A favorite holiday is Ganesh Chaturthi, birthday of the elephant god Ganesh. According to tradition,



the popular Lord Ganesh was such a great admirer of good food that his lusty eating habits turned him into an elephant.

In celebration of this birthday, men and children decorate a mud Ganesh with colorful costumes and jewels. Singing and dancing, the people take Ganesh to the river where he "disappears" into eternity. Then the villagers return to their homes to eat of the feast prepared by their women-folk.

Each state has its traditional Ganesh Chaturthi dishes determined by plentitude of crops and milk at the season the celebration takes place. The holiday occurs during the monsoon in the state of Maharashtra. Grass and water are abundant during this period, so the local cows produce much milk. In token to their large dairy supply, the people of Maharashtra prepare Shrikhand, a sweet yogurt dish, for their feast.

Shrikhand

- 8 c. fresh yogurt
- 2 c. sugar (or ½ c. honey)
- 6 crushed cardamom seeds
- few flakes of saffron
- ½ c. pistachio nuts
- 1 tsp. nutmeg

Tie up yogurt in thin cheese cloth and drain over bowl until excess wa-

ter is removed. (Save water for other cooking). Soak saffron in 1 tbs. of warm milk. Place thickened yogurt in large bowl and add chopped nuts, saffron, crushed cardamom seeds and nutmeg. Mix well with sugar and cool in refrigerator. Serves 8 to 10.

Shrikhand is traditionally served with special holiday breads called puris.

Puris

- 3 c. whole wheat flour
- 1 tsp. salt
- water
- peanut oil for deep-frying

In a large bowl mix together with your hand flour, salt and three tsp. peanut oil. Slowly add water a few drops at a time while kneading dough. When slightly stiffer than bread dough, form into mound. Break off small pieces and roll into balls about an inch in diameter. With floured rolling pin roll out balls into thin circles, keeping them as even as possible. Fill large pot or wok with enough oil for deep-frying (a quart or less) and heat over medium flame until a piece of dough will bubble when dropped in the oil. Drop the puris into the oil one at a time. The puris should first drop to the bottom and then rise to the surface. As soon as it emerges, turn the puri over. It should inflate. Turn again and remove when both sides are golden brown. With a little practice, puris will turn out properly each time. (The uninflated thin ones are suitable to serve.) Drain oil from puri back into pot and place them on paper towels. Serve hot with cold Shrikhand, vegetables or plain yogurt. Makes about 35 puris.

Shanta Sacharoff came to the U.S. from India in 1964 on scholarship. Following graduation from Adelphi College in '69, she returned to India where she married her college boyfriend, Stanley Sacharoff. Shanta is preparing a cook book on Indian vegetarianism. 🍷