Chicken Chaap

This is a unique dish from Bengal, a korma infused with mace and nutmeg that is quite different from the super-sweet, raisin-and-nut-filled kormas served in many restaurants. I avoid using food colouring in my recipes, preferring saffron, which means this korma will not have the bright orange colour usually associated with this dish. If you have a good-quality, food-safe colouring, you may use it if you prefer.

SERVES 6

¼ tsp good-quality saffron strands or a few drops of orange food colouring
10 tbsp sunflower oil or other neutral oil
5 onions, thinly sliced into half moons
1.2 litres/40 fl oz/5 cups thick Turkish or Greek yogurt
2 tbsp chopped garlic
2 tbsp chopped fresh ginger
6 skinless, bone-in chicken thighs
1 tbsp ground coriander
2 tsp mild chilli powder (preferably Kashmiri)
4 tsp salt
4 tsp sugar
2 tsp flaked almonds, to garnish

For the garam masala

2 tsp cloves
4 black cardamom pods
1 nutmeg
2 large pieces mace
6 Indian bay leaves

To make the garam masala, in a dry frying pan (skillet), roast all the ingredients over a medium heat, stirring continuously to prevent them burning. The spices are ready when the cloves swell, turn grey, and pop.

Allow the spices to cool, then grind to a fine powder in a spice or coffee grinder. Grate the nutmeg, before adding it to the spice grinder. Any unused garam masala can be kept in an airtight container for a few weeks.

If using saffron to colour the dish, in a small bowl, infuse the saffron strands in 4 tbsp tepid water.

In a frying pan (skillet), heat 6 tbsp of the oil over a medium–high heat.

Add the sliced onions to the pan and fry gently, stirring occasionally, until golden brown and caramelized. Using a slotted spoon, remove the onions from the oil, leaving as much of the oil in the pan as possible to use later, and place on a plate to drain. Spread the onions across the plate so they crisp as they cool.

In a large bowl, mix the yogurt with the garlic, ginger, 1 tbsp of the garam masala and the oil retained from the caramelized onions. If using orange food colouring, add this directly to the yogurt.

In a pan that has a lid, heat the remaining 4 tbsp oil over a medium–high heat. Add the chicken and seal on all sides. Lower the heat to medium and pour the yogurt mixture over the chicken. Keep the heat at medium so the contents of the pan do not boil. Add the caramelized onions and ground coriander and cook, stirring continuously, for 10 minutes.

When the oil rises to the surface and the yogurt splits, add the chilli powder and salt. Bring the sauce to a boil, then reduce the heat. Add the infused saffron at this point, if using. Cover and cook the chicken for a further 10 minutes. Add the sugar and stir to mix thoroughly.

Before serving, taste to check the seasoning and adjust as necessary.

To serve, garnish with flaked almonds.

Adrak Masala Chai-spiced ginger tea

Use strong black tea when making this beverage, such as Kenyan or Assam Orthodox. Loose-leaf tea is best, but otherwise use any strong black teabag.

SERVES 2

250 ml/8½fl oz/1 cup whole milk
5-mm/¼-inch piece fresh ginger, cut into small pieces
50 g/1¾ oz/¼ cup soft light brown sugar
1 piece cassia bark, 2.5 cm/1 inch long
6 green cardamom pods
6 cloves
2 tbsp loose-leaf strong black tea

Pour the milk and 1.5 litres/2 ¾ pints/6 ¼ cups water into a large pan and bring to the boil over a high heat. Once boiling, add the ginger, sugar and all the spices. Lower the heat to a low boil then leave, uncovered, for 20 minutes.

After 20 minutes, add the loose-leaf tea. Increase the heat until the liquid is boiling vigorously. After 1 minute, lower the heat and allow the tea to simmer for 2 minutes. For the final minute, increase the heat to high and boil the tea on full.

Take the pan off the heat, strain the tea and serve while hot.

Aloo Dum Spicy potatoes

A brief note about spices. Panchporan is a spice mix used in eastern India from Bengal, Assam, and Orissa all the way up to the foothills of the Himalayas. It is a mixture of five seed spices: mustard seeds, cumin seeds, nigella seeds, fennel seeds and fenugreek seeds. While it is perfectly easy to make at home, panchporan is available in most Indian spice shops, online, and in some larger supermarkets.

One seed spice in panchporan worth mentioning is fenugreek. Cultivated by the Assyrians around 3,000 years ago, fenugreek is considered by ancient Ayurvedic traditions to contain beneficial properties, helping to lower blood sugar and stimulate the production of insulin. As part of the five-seed spice mix, the bitterness of fenugreek is balanced by the flavours of the other four spices.

SERVES 6–8

1 kg/2 lb 4 oz potatoes (any variety, though ordinary white waxy potatoes work best), unpeeled
1½ tsp salt
6 garlic cloves, ground to a paste
2 tbsp tomato purée (tomato paste)
½ tsp chilli powder
2 tbsp vegetable, sunflower or groundnut oil
½ tsp panchporan
A handful of coriander (cilantro) leaves, picked or chopped, to garnish

Place the potatoes in a large pan that has a lid and fill with water. Add 1 tsp of the salt. Place the pan over a high heat and bring to the boil. The cooking time for the potatoes will vary according to their variety, size and quality.

While the potatoes are cooking, in a small bowl, mix together the garlic paste, tomato pur.e, chilli powder and the remaining ½ tsp salt. Set aside.

Test the potatoes to check that they are cooked. Using the point of a sharp knife or skewer, pierce the middle of the largest potato. The potatoes should be tender but not falling apart. Once the potatoes are cooked, drain them in a colander and leave to cool. When they are cool enough to handle, remove the skins from the potatoes, then cut them into 2.5-cm/1-inch cubes and set aside.

Heat the oil in a large pan over a medium heat. Add the panchporan to the pan. Wait for the spice seeds to pop before adding the garlic, tomato and chilli mixture. Cook, stirring, for a few minutes until the oil separates and the mixture has darkened.

Add the diced potatoes to the pan and coat them well with the garlic, tomato and spice mixture. Turn the heat to low, cover the pan and cook for 5 minutes.

To serve, garnish with coriander leaves.

Fruit Chaat

This fresh fruit dessert is a colourful way to end a meal. Fruit Chaat is very popular in India and is sold on the streets as well as being made at home. There are many versions of this chaat recipe; there are no hard-and-fast rules on what goes into a Fruit Chaat. I have one rule: always add pineapples! In Calcutta, diced pineapples are served with a sprinkling of kala namak (Himalayan rock salt) – a flavouring that I love. Since living in England, I have experimented and added brown sugar and lime juice to the fruits, which gives a tangy and sweet flavouring to the chaat. Be careful with the Himalayan rock salt though; the pink version sold in some supermarkets is not as pungent as the salt bought in Indian grocery stores.

SERVES 2

1 punnet strawberries, raspberries or blueberries
1 kiwi fruit, apple or pear
1 small bunch grapes
1 orange
1 small pineapple (buy ready-peeled for ease)
1 tbsp pomegranate seeds (optional)
1 tbsp brown sugar
2 tbsp lime juice
A generous pinch of Himalayan rock salt (adjust to taste)

Slice the strawberries and kiwis. Slice any other berries and grapes in half. Peel the orange and cut into segments. Cut all the other fruits into even 2.5-cm/1-inch cubes. Place all the fruit along with the pomegranate seeds in a bowl.

In a small pan, dissolve the sugar in the lime juice over a low heat. Pour over the prepared fruits in the bowl. Cautiously add the Himalayan rock salt to the fruit.

Before serving, taste to check the seasoning and adjust as necessary.

Hyderabadi Dalcha
Tangy meat with lentils

The quantity of meat needed for this recipe is very small, making it perfect for entertaining on a budget. Plus, it can be made using a cheap cut, such as a shank, neck or shoulder. Meat that takes longer to cook – which often means it is cheaper – has a lot more flavour than expensive joints of meat.

SERVES 6

225 g/8 oz/11/3 cups masoor dal (red lentils)
½ tsp ground turmeric
4 tsp salt
4 tbsp ghee or vegetable oil
1 Indian bay leaf
1 piece cassia bark, 2.5 cm/1 inch long
6 green cardamom pods
1 medium onion, thinly sliced into half moons
225 g/8 oz lamb shoulder, neck chops or shanks, cut into small chunks
1 tbsp crushed garlic
1 tbsp ground ginger
1 tsp chilli powder
2 tbsp tomato purée (tomato paste)
1 tbsp tamarind pulp (or 2 tbsp lemon juice)

For the tempering

60 m½ fl oz/4 tbsp melted ghee or vegetable oil
2 garlic cloves, cut into slivers
½ tsp cumin seeds
2 dried red chillis
8–10 fresh curry leaves

Wash the lentils in cold running water, then place in a bowl and soak for 20 minutes in more fresh cold water.

Drain the lentils and place in a heavy-based pan that has a lid. Add the ground turmeric and 1 tsp of the salt. Pour in enough water to cover the lentils by 7.5 cm/3 inches. Place over a medium heat and bring to a simmer. Cover with a lid and simmer gently for 30 minutes or until the lentils are tender. Leave the lentils to cool a little and then grind to a purée using a whisk or food processor.

While the lentils are cooking, prepare the meat. In a wide-based pan, heat the ghee or oil over a medium–high heat. Add the bay leaf, cassia bark and cardamom pods. Stir for a few seconds, then add the onion and fry gently until caramelized.

Now, add the meat and seal on all sides. Next, add the garlic, ginger, chilli powder and remaining 3 tsp of the salt. Stir for 1 minute to allow the spices to brown. Now pour in 250 ml/81⁄2 fl oz/1 cup cold water, bring to a simmer and cook very gently for 1–11⁄4 hours, or until the meat is tender.

Remove the lid and allow any excess liquid to evaporate and the oil to seep to the edges of the pan. Add the lentil purée to the meat, stir to mix and taste for seasoning. Add the tomato purée and the tamarind pulp (or lemon juice) and stir.

In a small frying pan (skillet), heat the ghee or oil over a high heat. Working quickly so the tempering does not burn, add the garlic, cumin seeds, dried red chillis and curry leaves.

Cook for 1 minute, then pour the tempering oil, garlic and spices over the warm dal in the pan. Next, take a spoonful of the dal and place it in the frying pan to absorb any remaining oil – take care whilst doing this as the oil may splutter – then tip the spoonful of dal from the frying pan back into the main dal pan. Taste to check the seasoning and adjust as necessary.

Paneer Malai Korma
Indian cheese korma

This is one of my favourite ways to cook paneer. It needs very few ingredients and is quick to make, so this is the perfect dish for when you have guests. Paneer is now available in most supermarkets in the specialist Indian section; you can buy it either ready-cut in cubes or in a block and you can cut it yourself. However, paneer is extremely simple to make at home – I have perfected my recipe for this cheese over the years, which I am now sharing with you.

Serve this dish with rice or bread. If the latter, add a touch more hot water to the sauce so there is plenty to dunk the bread into.

SERVES 6

6 tbsp vegetable oil (not olive oil)
4 medium onions, thinly sliced
2 tbsp garlic paste
2 tbsp fresh ginger paste
2 tsp ground coriander
1 tsp red chilli powder (adjust to taste)
4 tbsp tomato purée (tomato paste)
2 tsp salt
½ tsp sugar
1 kg/2 lb 4 oz paneer, home-made or ready-made, broken or cut into 5-cm x 2.5-cm/2-inch x 1-inch pieces
2 x 400-ml/14-fl oz tins full-fat coconut milk
2 tbsp ground almonds
To garnish
A handful of flaked almonds (optional)
A few sprigs of coriander (cilantro) leaves (optional)

In a heavy-based pan that has a lid, heat the oil over a medium–high heat. Add the onions and cook, stirring, until they start to colour.

Continue stirring to prevent the onions from burning and sticking to the base of the pan.

Once the onions have started to brown, add the garlic and ginger pastes.

After 1 minute, add the ground coriander and chilli powder. Cook, stirring, until the 'raw' smell of the pastes and spices has disappeared – usually under 1 minute. If the mixture sticks to the base of the pan, add a splash of water.

Add 125 ml/4 fl oz/½ cup warm water, followed by the tomato puree, salt and sugar. Increase the heat, bring the liquid to the boil, then reduce the heat.

Cover with the lid and leave to simmer until the liquid has reduced and the oil has come to the surface.

Add the paneer to the pan and cook for 2–3 minutes. Then add the coconut milk along with the ground almonds and cook uncovered for a further 2–3 minutes.

If you make this dish in advance, reheat over a low heat but do not stir too much as the paneer may break up.

Before serving, garnish with flaked almonds and coriander leaves, if preferred.

Paneer Home-made Indian cheese

The quality of milk used to make paneer is paramount. Use the creamiest milk you can find. Rich Jersey cow's milk or buffalo milk are both great for making paneer, but if you cannot source either of those then use homogenized whole milk. Do not attempt to use skimmed or semi-skimmed milk – it is a waste of time and effort.

MAKES 500 G (1 LB 2 OZ)

4 litres/7 pints/1 gallon plus 1 cup whole milk
120 ml/8 tbsp fresh lemon juice, strained
250 ml/8½ fl oz/1 cup hot water (optional)

Using the right pan to boil the milk is important. One with a thick, heavy base is ideal as the milk must be boiled for a while and should not stick.

Pour the milk into a large heavy-based pan and place over a high heat until the milk comes to a rolling boil. Once the milk is boiling, reduce the heat and allow the bubbles to subside. Stirring gently in a clockwise circular motion, pour the lemon juice into the milk. After stirring for a few moments, take the pan off the heat. Continue to stir in the same direction. Within 1 minute the milk will separate and clumps of curd will form. If nothing happens, do not panic. Put the pan back over a low heat and stir. If nothing happens after another minute, add a further 2 tbsp lemon juice and continue to stir. By now, curds should have formed.

Once the curds have formed, leave the pan undisturbed for 10 minutes.

For very soft cheese, gently pour in the hot water from the side. Do not pour the water on top of the curds. As they form, the curds sink to the bottom of the pan. Once the curds have sunk, leaving only the whey at the top of the pan, the curds are ready to drain.

Line a colander with muslin, cheesecloth or Indian malmal (cotton) and place it over a bowl. Using a slotted spoon, scoop all the delicate curds out of the pan and place in the cloth-lined colander to drain. Discard the whey.

Lift the corners of the cloth and tie into a parcel around the curds. Place a heavy pan or other weight on top of the parcel to press any more whey from the curds. After 45 minutes, prod the cheese to check the texture, which should be soft and similar in feel to feta.

Once ready, unwrap the paneer from the cloth and, using paper towels, dab any moisture from the surface of the cheese. The paneer is ready to use straight away or store it in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.