



Looking beyond curry to kootu and korma



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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

APR 1, 2021

4:00 AM

Curry has become a catchall word for any Indian meat, vegetable or legume dish in a sauce. But that's a distortion. In fact, it's plain wrong.

It is not a monolithic dish. Nor does it fall in the predefined or standard category. It can be saucy or bone-dry. It can be sassy and fiery hot or heady with cardamom and cinnamon or mild when seasoned with only salt and pepper.

All that comes through clearly in “Vegetarian Flavors With Alamelu” (Hippocrene Books; November 2020) by Alamelu Vairavan.

“Curry is a generic term used in the context of Indian dishes,” the cookbook author and PBS TV host says. “But not all Indian dishes should be labeled as curries.”

To me, a curry always has a specific context and doubles down on flavor.

So when someone makes a blanket statement of either loving or hating curry, it leaves me befuddled as to which curry the person is referring to. Is it the creamy Mughlai-style chicken with almonds and raisins, or is it the dry pepper chicken fry? Is it the tomato sauce-based egg curry or the drier egg curry with green bell peppers and garam masala? Is it the stir-fried carrot curry flecked with mustard seeds and lentils or the sauteed green beans seasoned with cumin seeds and garnished with coconut? Or is it the korma, vindaloo or gosht?

It is akin to saying, “I love” or “I hate” flatbread. The context gets lost if the flatbread is not specified as to whether it is a tortilla, naan, lavash, pita or roti.

The word, whose roots can be traced to Southern India, has traveled far and wide, turning up in Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Kenya, South Africa and the Caribbean. During the colonization of India, the British appropriated curry from the Tamil word kari, which means a dry vegetable dish or meat in a sauce flavored with spices. It also could have been a reference to the curry leaf, which comes from the *murraya koenigii* plant and is used as a flavor enhancer.

But that seems to have gotten lost in translation.

In some instances, even when meat, vegetable and legume dishes have been given names they are designated as curries simply because of their origin. So names like chana masala (chickpeas with spices), keema (spiced ground meat) and sodhi (vegetables cooked in coconut milk with spices and chilies) simply fall by the wayside.

Ms. Vairavan showcases why specific names matter when a cuisine offers a wide variety of choices like kootu, korma and poriyal in this, her seventh cookbook.

The lentil-based sauce is what defines the homey kootu. Masoor dal (red lentils) or moong dal (split yellow lentils) are cooked and then combined with vegetables like cabbage, cauliflower and green beans.

Perfumed with cinnamon, fennel seeds, garlic and ginger, a lot more ingredients go into kormas. The author calls for almonds or cashews to be blended with unsweetened coconut and added to vegetables like potatoes and mushrooms.

Poriyal is basically any stir-fried vegetable cooked with a small amount of oil. Her kale, cabbage and sweet potato poriyals all are tossed with unsweetened shredded coconut just before the heat is turned off.

When it is one of her creations, the vegetable gets no suffix and is called by what it features. Asparagus with shallots and garlic is flavored with chutney powder and shredded coconut. Black-eyed peas masala is cooked with mustard seeds, urad dal (white lentils) and sambhar powder.

Ms. Vairavan was born in Chettinad, a region in Southern India known for its piquant cuisine. When she moved to Milwaukee after getting married, she didn't know a thing about cooking. So she went to stay with her aunt and uncle in New York to learn the basics like cutting vegetables and cooking rice from their cook, Natesan, who also hailed from Chettinad.

One of his key instructions was about seasoning dishes with mustard seeds and urad dal. The oil had to be hot but not smoking hot before they were added. And it is a line she repeats throughout the book.

Her recipes are easy to follow and short, and she did it to erase another distortion.

"Indian cooking is not all laborious or difficult," she says.

Potato and Peas Korma

PG tested

Cooked in an almond-coconut sauce with cumin and fennel seeds, the potatoes and peas don't require much time to embrace the wonderful fragrance. Serve with flatbreads like roti or naan.

16 whole almonds, soaked in hot water for 10 minutes

1/2 cup unsweetened shredded coconut

2 fresh green chili peppers

2 teaspoons cumin seeds, divided

1 teaspoon fennel seeds, divided

2 thick slices fresh ginger

1 tablespoon oil

1 tablespoon unsalted butter

2 to 4 curry leaves, optional

1 bay leaf

2 to 4 (1/2-inch-long) slivers cinnamon sticks

1 cup coarsely chopped onions

2 cups chopped tomatoes, divided

2 cups peeled and cubed Idaho potatoes (about 1-inch cubes)

1/2 teaspoon ground turmeric

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 1/2 teaspoons salt

1 cup frozen peas, thawed

1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro leaves

In a cup, soak whole almonds in hot water for 10 minutes. Remove their skin.

In a blender, add coconut, green chilies, almonds, 1 teaspoon cumin seeds, 1/2 teaspoon fennel seeds, ginger and 2 cups of hot water. Grind into a smooth paste.

Add oil and butter into a wide-bottomed saucepan over medium heat. When the oil is hot and butter melted, add curry leaves, bay leaf, cinnamon sticks, remaining 1 teaspoon of cumin seeds and remaining 1/2 teaspoon of fennel seeds. Stir-fry for a few minutes, until it is fragrant and seeds brown..

Add onions and 1 cup of tomatoes, and stir-fry for a few minutes.

Add potatoes and turmeric, and stir well for 1 minute. Add curry powder and stir well with the potatoes for a couple of minutes.

Add the coconut spice paste along with salt and 2 cups of warm water and mix thoroughly.

When the mixture begins to boil, add the remaining 1 cup of chopped tomatoes and peas. Cook over medium heat until the potatoes are tender.

Garnish with cilantro.

Serves 4.

— *“Vegetarian Flavors With Alamelu” by Alamelu Vairavan (Hippocrene Books; November 2020)*

Cabbage and Carrot Kootu

PG tested

It’s best to keep all the vegetables cut and ready to go before you begin cooking because things come together quickly once the mustard seeds pop and white lentils turn golden. Keep an eye on the whole red chili as it can blacken rather quickly. The kootu goes well with cooked plain rice.

¾ cup masoor dal (red lentils) or moong dal (split yellow lentils)

½ teaspoon ground turmeric, divided

2 tablespoons oil

½ teaspoon black mustard seeds

½ teaspoon urad dal

1 whole dried red chili

2 or 3 curry leaves, optional

½ cup chopped onions

1 medium green chili pepper, minced

1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger

2 cups coarsely shredded cabbage

1 cup diced carrots

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1¼ teaspoons salt

Bring 3 cups of water to a boil in a deep saucepan. Add masoor dal and ¼ teaspoon turmeric.

Reduce heat to medium and cook dal, uncovered, until it becomes soft and tender, about 20 minutes. (If most of the water evaporates before the dal becomes soft, add an additional cup.) Set aside.

Heat oil in a saucepan over medium heat. When oil is hot but not smoking, add the mustard seeds and urad dal.

Cover and cook until mustard seeds pop and urad dal is golden brown. Immediately add the whole chili and curry leaves,

Add onions, minced green chili and ginger. Stir well. Add cabbage and carrots, and stir-fry about 2 minutes.

Add remaining ¼ teaspoon turmeric, ground cumin and salt; stir well.

Immediately add cooked dal and about 1 cup of water. Cover and cook over medium heat for 7 to 10 minutes, stirring frequently, until the cabbage and carrots are cooked and tender. Taste and add more salt if desired.

Serves 4.

— *“Vegetarian Flavors With Alamelu” by Alamelu Vairavan (Hippocrene Books; November 2020)*

Asparagus With Shallots and Garlic

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Substitutions are the secret here. Don't fret if you don't have black mustard seeds and urad dal. They can be replaced with cumin seeds. Instead of chutney powder, you can use ½ teaspoon of ground cumin. And unsweetened shredded coconut can stand in for grated fresh coconut.

1 tablespoon oil

½ teaspoon black mustard seeds

1/2 teaspoon urad dal

2 shallots, peeled and sliced

2 garlic cloves, minced

1 pound asparagus, trimmed and diced (about 2 cups)

1/2 teaspoon chutney powder

3/4 teaspoon salt

1/2 tablespoon grated fresh coconut

Heat oil in a skillet over medium heat. When the oil is hot but not smoking, add mustard seeds and urad dal.

Don't stir until mustard seeds pop and urad dal turns golden.

Add chopped shallots and garlic. Stir and cook for 2 minutes. Add asparagus and stir, and cook for 4 minutes.

Add chutney powder, salt and coconut. Reduce heat to medium-low and stir for 5 more minutes.

Serves 4.

— *Adapted from "Vegetarian Flavors With Alamelu" by Alamelu Vairavan (Hippocrene Books; November 2020)*

First Published: April 1, 2021, 4:00 a.m.