

# Mangoland Cooks! :: A Visit to South India

SEPTEMBER 9<sup>TH</sup>, 2008

Good morning. Welcome to the Matrix. What is the *secret* in cooking?

You Need	Dosa	Sambar	Uppedi	Payasam	Chutney
<b>Equipment</b>	Griddler	Big Pot	Fry Pan	Big Pot	Fry Pan
	Dolloper	Mortar	Mortar	Mortar	Robot
	Spreader	Knife	Knife	Fry Pan	Grater
	Blender				
<b>Ingredients</b>	Coconut Oil	Chana Dal	Green Beans	Mung	Base
	Batter	Vegetables	Onion	Raisins	Spices
		Onion	Garlic	Milk	Curry Leaves
		Garlic	Ginger	Sugar	
		Spices	Coconut	Spices	
		Tamarind	Spices		

*Is it the spices? Are they the spices?*

Ok. You have the Matrix. It's like a cheat sheet. Study guide. Now, to the details.

## Dosa

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Start 36 hours ahead of time. To make the batter, soak together:

*1 part urad dal (split urad beans, they will be white in color)*

*3 parts short grain rice*

*a couple of teaspoons of fenugreek seeds*

Change the water three times over the course of the soaking. Anywhere from 4-12 hours. Then drain the mixture and blend, adding water slowly until the blender works. Blend well, at least 20-30 seconds per batch, until the batter is creamy and fine. It won't be perfect, but neither should it be course.

The next step takes time and faith. Fermentation. It happens quickly and easily in India, and requires more intention and perseverance here. Yet, it can be done. Cover the bowlful of batter and let it ferment in a warm place. Maybe that's the shelf in your water-heater-closet. Maybe it's your oven, preheated to 100 and then turned off. Maybe, in the hottest days of summer, it's on the deck. Give it time. After a day or so, it should have doubled (!) in volume and smell sour. Let it rise until it smells sour.

When the batter is ready you can make your dosas, idlis, or uttapams following the techniques described.

## Sambar

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Sambar is the full-bodied south Indian soup had on a daily basis in the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnatka. Maybe Andhra Pradesh too, but I've never been there and it's hard to trust what you read these days. It's basically a combination of three elements: cooked lentils, vegetables, and a really incredible spice paste.

The spice paste is what's key about the sambar and it differs from house to house, microclimate to hillside, income bracket to personal disposition. Ours will be unique, yet share certain inalienable characteristics all sambar spice mixtures share.

To cook the *lentils*, soak them for a hours (up to a day), changing the water a few times, then cook them in over twice as much water as lentils. When the pot boils, turn down and let simmer until tender. Keep cooking past tender to mush. Indians love the mush.

To cook the *vegetables*, cut what you have – generally harder specimens of the vegetable kindgdom – pieces as long as your pinky and thick as your thumb. It's one of the few Indian dishes that doesn't require horrendously detailed chopping. Give thanks. Generally they use bottle gourd, eggplant, beetroot, carrot, and moringa (a stringy tree-vegetable with strong medicinal properties). Here it's more appropriate to use zucchini, carrots, beets, kohlrabi, potato, etc. Also, try cucumber. It's good – but don't cook it as long as its friends.

Now, we want to roast some *spices*: predominantly coriander, with added chile pepper, turmeric, cardamom, clove, ginger, cinnamon, black pepper, bay leaves, curry leaves, and coconut. We can roast them in an oiled pan on medium heat until they change color and let off their deep and pleasing aroma. After that, to the mortar and pestle, as you know.

We want, next, to fry some onions on typically Indian high heat (think of the Deccan plateau in sweltering summer), add garlic and chiles (if we need them), and then our spice mixture. Open the windows and cleanse the house of evil spirits. Now we can add our vegetables and lentils, already cooked, and mix together to infuse.

Lastly, sambar is known for having an accent of tamarind to a special kind of sourness at the end. As much I want to keep things local while tasting global, imported tamarind is a must. The same goes for oil: coconut oil is best if you want that loving flavor.

## Uppedi

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Uppedi is a wonderful technique for giving a Keralan vibration to any vegetable you want. It's typically done with beans (*pyar*) and the beans must be chopped quite small.

Make a spice paste by grinding or mortar-ing together:

- 1 onion*
- 2 cloves of garlic*
- 2 green chiles (medium hot)*
- 1 centimeter of ginger*
- a little turmeric*

Fry the spice paste in coconut oil. When brown, add dried coconut that has been soaked and drained. When that loses its water and begins to waft aromatically, add the already steamed or stir-fired beans. Cook only briefly, salt and serve. Gracious mothers drizzle more coconut oil over the top.

## Payasam

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I came to know payasam as the south Indian version of “kheer”, the delicious rice pudding I grew up with. South Indians are good at combinatorics and math in general, and there are a dizzying number of payasam variations. They will use either rice or mung beans for the base, either milk or coconut milk for the fat, either sugar or jaggery for the sweet, and either cardamom or cumin for the spice. We will use:

- 1 cup mung beans
- 1 cup jaggery and 1 cup of water
- 3-4 cups of milk
- a bit of crushed cardamom
- a bit of cumin

## raisins in coconut oil

We soak cook the mung beans as we did the chana dal for the sambar (above). Afterwards we can work our love into the food by stirring and mashing it into a textured puree. Meanwhile, we can boil together the jaggery and water to make a thick syrup. We will strain out any impurities in the syrup, and combine the milk, syrup, beans, and spices.

While the pudding melds and thickens, fry the raisins in coconut oil, over medium-high heat, until they balloon. The balloon is critical. Top the pudding with raisins and serve. Sing “happy birthday” if you can.

## Chutney

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The most famous dish in my memory of south India is coconut chutney. I probably made it everyday for breakfast, going out back behind the Monsoon Hotel to crack the coconut, and borrowing *chechi's* “mixie” (read: robot) every morning to blend it. Since we don't have coconuts native to this clime, and since we do have so many other wonderful treats, I thought we could try the same spice pattern with a different material.

Heat and fry:

- 2 tsp of coconut oil
- 2 dried red chiles
- A few curry leaves
- 1 tsp of mustard seeds

Work the measurements so the oil covers the mustard seeds, or they will pop and escape the pan. Use a small frypan, perhaps tilted, if you can.

Stir the mixture into whatever you want to curry – shredded coconut, fennel, carrot, beetroot. Whatever strikes your fancy. Add salt. Taste. Determine whether it needs more fat (coconut oil), spice (mustard and chile), or vegetable. Adjust. Taste. Salt? Eat with dosa and everything else.