



DEE HOBSAWN-SMITH

THE CURIOUS COOK

Curry powder is a gimmick

In a nation of more than a billion people, the notion of one spice blend to suit all needs is ludicrous, says Jassie Bakhshi, chef and owner of Calgary's Glory of India.

Bakhshi describes the food of his home town, New Delhi, as a melting pot similar to New York City. Cooks from across the Indian subcontinent rely on the same spices, but develop personal preferences along the way.

Curry powder, a ubiquitous North American approach to unfamiliar spices, is not a common sight in India, where every home cook mixes spices individually and for each dish, and the food changes every 60 kilometres, along with the dialect.

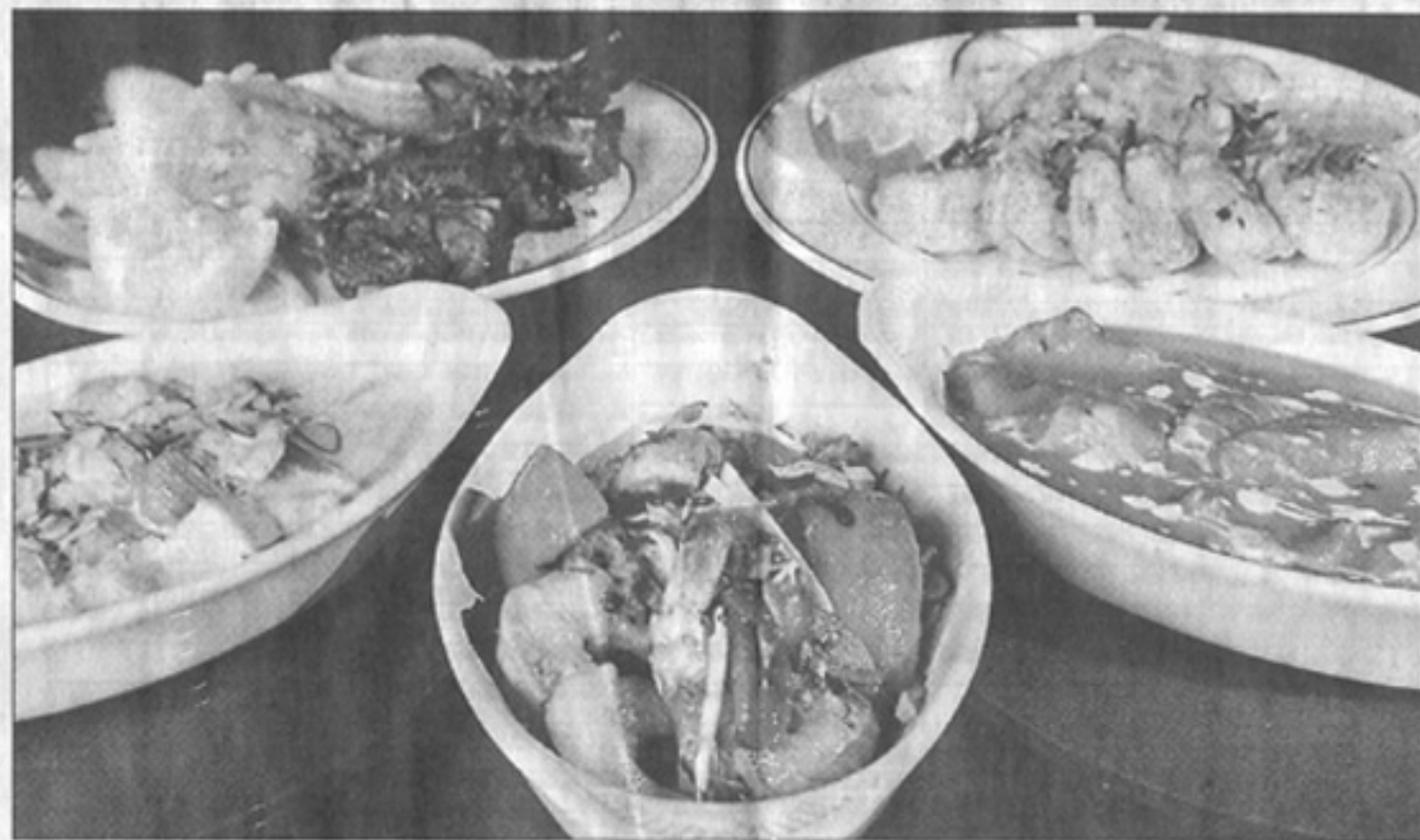
"Cooking is an art. Everyone has the same 12 colours. But not everything is a masterpiece," Bakhshi says.

This food lover believes that a cook learns to cook at the table. Eat! Learn what you enjoy, ask what is in the dishes you love, and go into the kitchen armed with those ingredients and flavours, recipes optional.

Timing and temperature are more critical. Bakhshi insists, "Control your stove's heat and when you add your seasoning. There is no general rule — spices can go in at the beginning, at the ending or both."

Smart cooks learn to add water (called "Chateau Sink" by famed French chef and educator Jacques Pepin) to prevent burning and minimize sticking.

Bakhshi compares food to the ocean. At home in its waves of



Colleen Kidd, Calgary Herald

Some mainstay dishes in Indian cuisine include, clockwise from top left, tandoori lamb chops, tandoori prawns, butter chicken, prawn jalfrezi and navratan korma.

flavour, he says, there are always new shorelines to explore and plenty of room for all the differing styles of the world's individual cooks.

And while he has learned to prefer mildly seasoned foods, his restaurant

continues to serve dishes that rely on the high C's of Indian flavour.

Cumin, for example, wears many faces. Most North Americans who are familiar with its pungent nature know cumin as a major component

in curry powder and garam masala, the spice blend that seasons many Mogul dishes of northern India.

In India, Bakhshi explains, cumin may be used whole as a seed — dry-roasted, fried in oil, broiled — or

ground — raw, oil-fried or dry-roasted. Six flavours result, and the cook can mix, match, and marry them at will.

Bakhshi says the most flavour emerges when the seed is fried, and a smoky note is added with broiling, but it all depends on the cook's imagination, sense and palate.

Coriander, the seed of the coriander plant, is equally versatile. Fry it whole, grind it, add it to blends, then add the chopped leaf form of the same plant, called cilantro in herb form, for a jolt of green. But not everyone likes cilantro; its detractors decry cilantro as "soapy" or metallic in taste. Use mint or parsley in its place.

Cardamom is a suave flavour unfamiliar to most North American palates. More adaptable than the familiar cloves, cardamom can scent anything from chai, the soothing spicy tea, to basmati rice pilaf. Buy the pods, green or black, and crack them in a mortar to remove the husk, then use the small black seeds within for a distinctive and smooth scent.

Cloves are mostly equated with dessert in North American meals. In India, this strong and pungent spice makes an appearance in most masalas, in Mogul dishes, in pilafs, as a perfume for oil-fried vegetables, and in richly flavoured onion-tomato based dishes. Use it sparingly.

Cinnamon, too, is considered a "sweet" spice in the West. In India, whole sticks are used in garam masala, and in southern dishes such as dal, vegetables and rice pilaf.

Cooks and diners need to learn the difference between "hot" and "spicy." One does not automatically include the other, Bakhshi says.

Spicy Indian food may include cumin, cloves, coriander, cinnamon and cardamom, but not hot chillies. Hot dishes might be only mildly flavoured, relying on the kick and pungency of fresh or dried chillies.

In either case, cooks should let the predominant ingredient lead the charge — neither too spicy nor too hot, lest the sauce mask the main flavour.