

Cooking through the Collection Ep2 – Aromas of Sindh

Melissa: [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to Cooking Through the Collection. My name is Melissa and I'm a librarian and a home cook. I do a lot of research when wanting to expand my repertoire for cooking, and so I've challenged myself to walk through the stacks of my library's cookbook collection to grab things I've never tried before. So let's see what I've selected this week.

I grew up in a rural community in Southern New Jersey, and one of the cuisines that I don't have a lot of experience with is actually Indian food. There were no restaurants in the area. I didn't really go to any of them while I was in Philadelphia in high school. I didn't really learn about Indian food until I was working in Philadelphia after college where I had colleagues who were [00:01:00] Indian and started to bring food in.

I then met other people who had friends who introduced me to food, and I really enjoy it. I'm still a little bit wary of trying some things, but I thought this might be a good challenge for me for cooking. I've never cooked Indian food before and after meeting a local author at my library, I thought, let's give it a shot.

So the cookbook I've chosen for this episode is Aromas of Sindh, 100 Recipes from the Heart by Geeta Gwalani. It is a personal narrative from Geeta about the Sindh region of India and its history, and she wrote out some of her favorite recipes from her family. And it's a beautiful book. It has pictures almost every other page showing the dishes, talking about the recipes a little bit, and then the ingredients and instructions even the time it'll take to cook how complicated or easy it is, which [00:02:00] is always a good thing cuz as we know, sometimes more complicated recipes aren't the most fun. They're broken down by breakfast, main sides, sweet. So I've decided on doing three different recipes. During her author talk, she recommended starting with one of the dal recipes as they are a little bit more straightforward. So I've chosen the Moong Dal on page 37.

I'm choosing to do as she had recommended and as I love, I'm going to do some Bhuga Chanwar, which is sauteed rice, and because my husband and I always love a snack and I feel like I need to challenge myself a little bit more cuz you know, why not? I'm going to do the aloo tiki, which are the potato patties. So yeah, let's go into the kitchen and start cooking.

Okay, so today I'm actually gonna be finally [00:03:00] making the dal and making the rice that goes with it. Of course, I wanna start with cleaning the hands as again Ina Garten says "impeccably clean hands," always an important thing.

And so I did read ahead, as I said, read your recipe before you get started so you don't make mistakes with your evening supper. I almost did.

So for the Bhuga Chanwar, which is the rice, it says wash and soak the rice for at least 30 minutes. I luckily did read that, and so I washed the rice. What I do is I pour the measured rice into a bowl, and it's gonna be one cup of rice. In this recipe, I run water over it, and I solely drain it out between my fingers to make sure the rice doesn't fall out of the bowl.

This was basmati rice, and I ended up doing it five times [00:04:00] until the water stopped being less milky, and then I let it soak in a bowl. And then also what I noticed with the other recipe, the Moong Dal, it also needed to be washed and soaked for at least 30 minutes. What I find interesting about this is whenever I've cooked lentils before, these are kind of like yellow lentil.

I haven't cooked these particular ones. You have had to pick through them to find stones and maybe rinse them, but I've never had them really soaking before. But it makes sense. We wanna speed up the cooking time. I think a lot of this cookbook is trying to have these be more approachable evening recipes, I also washed and soak that.

Okay. so what I'm going to do is work on the Bhuga Chanwar the rice. So I wash and soak the one cup of rice for at least 30 minutes. That's done. The next step is onions, two medium sized, finely sliced. It's very hard to find onions these days that actually are medium.[00:05:00]

So what I have is a jumbo white onion, which I feel like is what's had the best quality during the pandemic and it's consistent. Been able to get it, so I've actually switched over. I used to never use them. I'm gonna peel and clean this up a little bit. I was actually cutting an onion yesterday and I had to stop for like 10 minutes before I could use the knife again cuz the onion was so fragrant. Let's try to avoid that today. The recipe does say finally sliced. Luckily that is relatively easy to do. But yeah, due to household illness, there had been a little bit of a pause on cooking, so things [00:06:00] are definitely on the, "we need to use them side of things," if you know what I mean. But everyone's okay now and I'm back to cooking again, which makes me very happy.

Cooking has always been a very important part of my life and when I am not able to do so, cuz of illness, it's kind of one depressing, and two also, then I make, I make very bad choices when I'm unable to cook and I'm not feeling well and I don't have necessarily anyone to access helping me make something that's a little healthier.

So I've taken half this jumbo onion's now cut and woo. Yep. This onion is also fragrant, so we're gonna just, we're gonna power through, right? Without cutting our fingers. And I'm cutting it not from root to top. I'm cutting it across, so kind of across the sequator. So [00:07:00] then there's no part of the root holding it together. So we're getting nice, thin slices.

So that is now prepped. So let's, let's work on our next steps. Let's clear the decks. I have a lot, it's not a ton of ingredients, but it's definitely not a small amount either. In a heavy bottom pan, heat the oil, so the amount of oil. So we had one cup of rice, two medium sized

onions, finely sliced, three to four peppercorns, a bay leaf. I'll let you know about these optional spices when we get there. Salt as per taste, which I've said before it, it makes me nervous. I prefer having more measurements for first times on recipes, but, we'll, we'll make it work. Oil.

I'm guessing it's gonna be a neutral oil. I have canola and two cups of water. So what temperature does it say? Heat the oil. Add the bay leaf. Doesn't [00:08:00] say what temperature, which concerns me a little bit. What I'm going to guess is that it's gonna be medium heat, cuz we're doing spices First, medium to medium high.

I, I know it's not high. So it says heat the oil. So I'm gonna say two tablespoons of oil. One, two. And this is my front burner, so I'm gonna heat that on six. Because on my stove I have a ceramic flat top stove tends to run a little bit higher than you think it will. So let's see. We have the oil, I have a bay leaf.

Bay leaf. Our dried leaves from the laurel tree. They're one of these ingredients that you can tell when it's not there, it adds something, but I can't describe what that added thing is. Let me know if you do, leave a comment or, "at" me on social media and let me know if you can explain it better or have a great resource.

And then it says the sliced onions and the peppercorns. I'm using regular black peppercorns. That's what it said to use. There's so many types of peppercorns, [00:09:00] which is hard to believe. We always think of the standard ones, but I've learned there's so many different kinds, and they're from different regions, like tellicherry.

So you're gonna add them. Now saute, take the onions on medium low heat until they turn brown. Okay, so now it says on medium to low heat later in the recipe. So I'm gonna down it to like five So let's get this preheated and we'll be back. Okay, so I am adding the bay leaf.

The peppercorns, and then here's some of the other spices the author says, you can also add three to four cloves, so I did that. They're whole clothes, a small piece of cinnamon stick. So I have this big gigantic one and I . Well, that actually wasn't as hard as I thought it would be, so I was just putting a half a cinnamon stick in and it says one to two green cardamom.

I'm guessing they mean the pods. I don't seem to have any, and I don't wanna try ground spices in there cuz I have a feeling that is not gonna work for me, though we're just gonna have to omit it this time. And then it says add the onions and [00:10:00] saute. This seems somewhat warm. It's medium to low, and I'm not, I'm hearing no sound on this. Let me get a wooden spoon. Maybe I can give it some encouragement.

So I think what happened is that I'm using my front small burner, cause I'm going to be using two burners simultaneously. And I have a really small kitchen with not a lot of countertop. And I made the decision to use a smaller burner. I forgot that the smaller burner doesn't have quite as much of a kick to it.

So I had to turn it up to six and a half and now we're finally getting some sizzling. It says saute the rice with the onions for at least a few minutes until they get some of this color. So I had to take a photo of the page because I had to return the book cuz it was late yeah, I have a picture of the doll. Okay. Aha. Bhuga Chanwar. Saved it. [00:11:00] Good job, Melissa. It appears to be kind of a light. It's not that much color. No, we're gonna, we're gonna work with what we got. We'll get it lightly brown. How about that? Golden.

While that's started, let's start looking at the other. Yes, my assistant is here right now. Samin, you wanna say hi? Well, you said hi before now. You're heading out. Okay. I'll see you later. Bye. While this is simmering, let's look at the other recipe. The Moong Dal. In a vessel on medium flame, we're gonna boil the lentils with the water, turmeric, tomatoes, and salt.

Add more water and we're gonna whisk heating oil. Oh no, there's gonna be a third pan. Okay, this, this is gonna be interesting. I want to give that its full attention. So wait, let's get this to simmer and then we'll be right back.[00:12:00]

Okay. We're back. This took a really long time, like, and it's just trying to change. I don't know if you've ever tried to caramelize onions before. Definitely seem like this. I understand why the recipe says to keep it on low. When you're cooking rice, you wanna keep it on low. That makes sense. But that took way too long.

But now we're onto step three. Drain all the water from the rice and add the rice to the caramelized onions. Okay, here we go. I'm going to very carefully drain and not spill all this rice down the sink. Not that I've ever done that before. Okay, it's drained. Now I'm expecting a bit a kickback cuz there is moisture on here.

Do my best to get all of the rice out of the bowl it was soaking in. Don't wanna waste it or put it down the drain. [00:13:00] I don't have a garbage disposal. Saute the rice for a few minutes until there's also more color. Oh, there's more color. I think I know what's happening in French Rice Pilaf recipes, and even in things like risotto, you do toast the rice with some sort of allium or seasoning to kind of give it its own coating to make the rice a different texture.

So we're gonna keep stirring this to kind of let it toast a little bit. There's so much onion. Maybe I should have used a more shallow pan, but I know I was gonna put moisture in it. I think what part of my discomfort is I've never cooked Indian food before other than something that's been pre-made and I've reheated it.

So that may be some of my fear. I am gonna have to get over it. The series is challenging me to cook through the stacks of my library's collection and try something I haven't tried before. Right?

[00:14:00] How much water? Two cups of water. Now add the water. Water is always double the quantity of rice and salt. Increase the flame to high, but then it said keep it at low.

I'm confused, but what we're gonna make it work. When I was raised, I was taught two parts water, one part rice. I learned that that's not true with every type of rice, especially like Japanese, short grain, sticky rice. And I always try to just read the instructions on the type of rice to make sure I don't make a mistake. So we're gonna add two cups of water and salt, but it says salt to taste.

I would probably put about a teaspoon of salt in if I was cooking rice and just plain water. So I'm gonna put the same amount I'm putting in little bit shy of a teaspoon into the water. I'm gonna stir it to make sure there's no rice stuck on the [00:15:00] side. Make sure there's as much distribution as possible. Okay, we are at a boil, so I'm putting a lid on it and I know my stove.

I need to turn way down, way, way, way, way down. It says reduce the flame. Yes. Simmer, cover, and cook until the water is absorbed and the rice is cooked. I've cooked this kind of rice before. It was like 15 minutes of simmering. and then 10 minutes of it just sitting. I'm frustrated because the soaking may have sped it up too. So what I'm going to do is I'm gonna set a timer for 10 minutes and we're gonna come back and we're gonna look at it.

But let's get started on this other recipe cuz it is getting late.

I think one of my fears about making Indian cuisine at home was that there are a lot of herbs and spices that I don't know much about, and I wasn't [00:16:00] sure you know where to go. So there's two things in the dal that I've never used before, and so I had to do a little bit of research. The first ingredient are curry leaves, shout out to my colleague Swarna, who actually dropped them off on her way past my house a few days back.

Curry leaves are a distinct flavored Indian cuisine. They kind of look like really narrow basil. I didn't taste them straight up. They are, they do have a pungent smell, but I can't quite describe them. So again, that's one of the reasons I've been afraid of this cuisine. And then the other one was asafoetida.

And I found an article written by Priya Krishna in Bon Appetit, and she says, "Asafoetida, pronounced phonetically found online or Indian grocery stores is the most simultaneously misunderstood and sublime ingredient in Indian cuisine. It is essentially a gum extracted from a ferula, an herb in the celery family.

It is usually available as a coarse yellow powder and smells like boiled eggs." I can [00:17:00] say it has a strong smell. "But don't be put off by the pungency. When used properly, a pinch of asafoetida, supercharges every other spice in the pan like salt, but in a funkier way and without any sodium. Those were the two ingredients that I had to go out of my way and purchase that I've never tried before.

Okay, let's get on with the Moong Dal. In a vessel on medium flame, boil the lentils with water, turmeric powder, tomatoes, and salt. Okay, how much water? One and a half cups. We can do that.

Okay. Medium flames. I'm gonna put six just cuz of my stove. I'm gonna add the water. Boil the lentils with the water, so I'm gonna drain the lentils. They don't look very different. There are these kind of golden yellow, almost [00:18:00] like little bit darker than butter. Lighter than egg, yolks. So I'm gonna just put them into the pot with the water.

They really wanna stick though. They're very, they really don't wanna come outta the container. Come on out. Okay. I'm gonna stir that up. Water, turmeric powder. So turmeric powder, a quarter teaspoon. It doesn't seem like a lot. So I'm adding the quarter of a teaspoon of turmeric powder, tomatoes, and salt.

Let, let's do the salt first. As per taste. Again. I'm gonna do two thirds of a teaspoon. Tomato, one medium, finely chopped. So finally chopped. I'm gonna go as small as I can, almost diced. I'm guessing this is going to possibly, other than just flavor, maybe color of the lentils a [00:19:00] little bit? I'm gonna do my best to make it as small as possible. Famous last words from Melissa.

You may be hearing bells ringing in the background. That means it is bell ring in time at the church nearby. It also means that I need to get this recipe done cuz my spouse is gonna be home soon. So, I did my best to make it small, and I'm scooping it into the thick bottom vessel. It's like a fat bottom girl? Anyway.

So the tomatoes, the turmeric and the salt are added. Add some more water if it dries up, boil the lentils. Okay. We're not at boiling yet, so I'm gonna turn it up a little bit. This is my bigger burner, so hopefully we'll be [00:20:00] in good spirits. Okay. How long's this cook? Once the lentils are cooked, I don't know. I've only cooked lentils once and they weren't soaked. Let me do some Googling and I'll be right back.

And I'm back. I found a recipe that said to do 15 to 20 minutes. We are now up to a boil. I'm gonna turn it down a little bit so we don't have anything boil over. It said also watch for moisture. So I just wanna make sure I have the lid on as tight as I can. Prepare the tempering oil by heating the oil in a smaller pan.

Okay. How much oil? So we've done the dal and the water and the tomatoes, cumin seeds, curry leaves, turmeric power, salt, coriander leaves. It doesn't say: Moong Dal, add water, tomatoes, red chili, cumin, and curry, hing, turmeric powder, salt, coriander leaves.

It doesn't says prepare the tempering heating oil. There's nothing in this recipe about how much oil. I, I feel like I'm, getting set up to, and the rice is almost done. So how [00:21:00] about we do that? We wait for the rice. Okay, it's saying reduce, simmer, cook until the water is absorbed and the rice is cooked. Okay, let's pull the lid off carefully. Oh, this is definitely not cooked yet.

Let's do another five minutes. Let's see how the lentils are doing. They are still, I'm glad I put it in a taller pot because they are trying to boil out of the pan.

Okay, so it's been another five minutes, so I'm gonna look at the rice. We got a lot of things going on now. This made a lot of rice. I should have known it's a cup of rice, two cups of water, but the onion just made it grow so much so it says until it's cooked. This is the thing though. Sometimes rice needs that last bit of steaming.

So let's see. It's still gotta chew to it, but what I'm gonna do is I am going to turn it off. I'm gonna keep a lid on it, and as I've [00:22:00] done before, I'm gonna allow it to do the last bit of steaming in the pot. So now we're just waiting on the lentils.

And we're back. We're gonna see if this is 15 minutes of the dal cooking. It still looks pretty wet, this adding moisture thing. So cook until they're done. So I'm guessing till they're soft. They don't seem soft. I think they need another five minutes. So I'll be right back then. So hopefully it'll be done in the next few minutes. So let's do this. Prepare the tempering by heating oil in a smaller pan. This recipe does not have oil in it. So let me look back at this other recipe that I pulled up to figure out the lentil cooking time.

And let's see, it says two teaspoons. We're gonna go with what this other recipe says just cuz I'm not sure. Add the dried chili. I don't seem to have any Indian style dried chili. So what I'm gonna [00:23:00] do is I have these dried Calabria chili peppers.

I know that's Italian. But let's just throw that into the oil. One half teaspoon of whole cumin seeds. We have the cumin seeds. Curry leaves five to six. Let me open this package. I can't really smell them, but my nose still isn't quite at full speed, so 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Six. So I'm gonna do six cuz they're small. Asafoetida. One pinch, again, not scientific. So I was just gonna do a pinch. When the human seeds crackle, pour the tempering over the lentils.

So I guess we're gonna wait for this to crackle. I have it on medium heat, so hopefully we'll get some sort of noise. Now I understand this tempering spices though, and this actually is something I did know, that's something [00:24:00] about Indian cuisine, but it's true on other things too, warming up spices, usually in oil, they're more oil soluble, so you'll actually improve the flavor of them.

So it's also when you're toasting spices, even without oil, you boost up their flavor. So even if they're a little, on the older side, as some of us have in our pantries, You can give some life into them, but you shouldn't have Old Spice in your cabinet. I have a few, but I try to be a little bit more mindful. Giving one last stir and the lentils really hoping they're done.

They've soaked up a lot more moisture. So now we're just gonna wait for the crackle. I see some bubbling. Shake the pan a little bit. I can smell the chilies. Can you hear that? It's like a chirping noise.

So that's the additional five minutes. So I'm gonna pull the lid off, give it a stir. Seems a little bit more done. I'm gonna pull it off the heat until we get to this. These spices [00:25:00] making some noise.

I know not to rush the toasting of the spices because with my luck, everything's gonna burn and let's, not do that after putting all this time in this evening, and actually my spouse should be home soon. Hopefully I'll be done. I'm not good on a timer. There's a reason I dropped outta culinary school, but we're, we're gonna make it work.

So there's like actual smoke coming off the. Okay, that's crackling. I'm gonna say that's crackling. I'm worried cuz the leaves seem to be smoking. So it says to pour them over the lentils. Woo. Well that makes sense. I'm afraid to put my, the curry leaves seem to be getting color, but as soon as that started crackling, did that Okay. So I'm stirring it in, and what did it say?

Give it a nice stir, cover and let the dal simmer for a few more minutes before switching off the flame. I think this is done. I may have gone a little bit further, I'm gonna give it a good stir. We'll [00:26:00] let that and the rice finish steaming, and then we'll get to tasting.

Wait a minute. You might be thinking Melissa said something about a potato pattie dish. Well, here's a funny story. Before I got sick a few weeks ago, I tried to make the potato recipe, followed the instructions was recording, and I decided I'm gonna multitask. I'm gonna prep the food while I heat the oil cuz they were fried.

So I'm cooking along, talking to myself while I'm recording, which, you know, ends up being talking to you. So not weird, right? And I noticed some smoke and I looked to my left. And the pot of oil is smoking. It is almost on fire. Luckily, , I was connected to everything, so in the cable, so that was a mess. Got a lid on it. I got it outside. I had to turn on our exhaust fan, open the windows. It was a production. [00:27:00] So this is a lesson that everyone can have an accident in the kitchen. So maybe you don't multitask if you're not used to frying. I seem to be cursed when it comes to frying. You can ask people in my family. . But I can tell you I did eventually finish the recipe. They were pretty good. I did serve them with a spicy ketchup to kind of give them a boost, but they didn't have the best chance and I, I didn't wanna make them again.

Melissa: So I know I've never made Indian food before.

Chris: Right.

Melissa: So, This is a new territory for both of us, and we don't really eat a lot of Indian food either.

Chris: Right.

Melissa: But tonight's meal is Moong Dal, which are a yellow lentil, and we've had lentils before. We've been adding them into our, you know, more of our regular cuisine.

Chris: Right.

Chris: And Bhuga Chanwar, which is it's rice peel pilaf with onions and spices, so it's really hot. So you might wanna stir it up.

Chris: Okay. I, I can stir it up. Yeah, it does. Look, you can see the steam coming off of,

Melissa: have you ever had [00:28:00] anything like this before?

Chris: I think this is the first time I've ever had something like this with lentils and rice and,

Melissa: That's why I wanted to try something out.

Chris: It's good to expand your horizons and learn a little bit more, and that's how you become a better cook.

Melissa: You might come across a peppercorn, so just be careful on your bites. Ah, or some big pieces of chili. I don't, I know you wouldn't mind the big pieces of chili, but just be, you know, be careful when you bite. I try to get them all out, but as you know,

Chris: I have a spicier palate than Melissa does.

Melissa: But biting a peppercorn is a whole other thing. Right,

Chris: right. Yeah. Okay. I like this. There's a lot of different flavors here and it's, it's got a good texture.

Melissa: So you like the lentils? They're not mushy, but they're not like hard either, right?

Chris: Yeah, it's, it's the, the texture is good. I, I, I, I like the texture. Let me take another bite.

Melissa: Let me get some salt. Cause I think it needs salt too. This recipe just said salt to taste, and I'm worried that there isn't enough, so you can try it again. Yours, [00:29:00] and I'm gonna mix some salt into mine. Okay. So try yours again.

Chris: No, I, I, I did like my first bite.

Melissa: Mine seem a little bland and there's so many things in here that shouldn't be bland. There's like chili peppers and cumin and all these other things.

Chris: Yeah. I wouldn't mind if this was a little spicier, but then again, I have a high tolerance for, I mean, I guess on the, on the one to five scale that you sometimes get at various restaurants, I would say this is closer to a one. Personally, I could probably handle a three to a four at least.

Melissa: Yeah, I think it could use more chilis. Let me try it with some more salt and then I'll let you know what you think.

Oh, definitely better Try it with the salt.

Chris: Okay. The salt is definitely adding more flavor to the over bush, so maybe I'll put some more salt on mine. .

Melissa: Okay, so this is my first time doing anything like this. What do you think?

Chris: I like it. if this worked its way into our rotation, I think I would like that.

Melissa: So you said you would like more like chili heat?

Chris: Yeah. If you put a little more chilis in there, I certainly [00:30:00] wouldn't mind. I mean, we have to be cognizant of the fact that we are on different spice levels, you and I. So we have to make something that that's, good for both of us. But yeah, I think it's very tasty.

Melissa: Okay.

So here are my final thoughts on Aromas of Sindh by Geeta Gwalani. It's a beautiful cookbook. It has a great narrative storytelling nature. It has photos of all the recipes. Everything I made was delicious. I particularly liked the rice. I've never had rice in that manner with the spices and all the onions. I really played well with the dal so I highly recommend those two recipes.

I think what the major challenge in this cookbook for me was I've never made Indian food before. I'm also not as much of an intuitive cook. It takes me more time to learn a recipe and go through the technical things, temperature time, and then be more willing to kind of wing it and do things to taste or [00:31:00] until it's done, those instructions don't work well with me.

So I think that's a user thing, not a recipe thing. Whether I would borrow it or buy it, I think I would borrow it, but I am putting a huge qualifier on this since I have never made Indian food before, this cookbook might not have been the best first place to start. This might be a good cookbook that focuses on more regional cuisine for someone who's already interested and has tried to make Indian food before at home.

So while I might personally just borrow it, it might be the perfect fit for your cookbook collection. Thank you so much for joining me on this episode of Cooking Through the Collection podcast. Thank you to everyone who's left reviews, sent me emails, and gave me feedback on the first episode. It really means a lot to me.

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