

South Asian Cooking

by Jonathan Mark Kenoyer



Deep-fried vegetable *pakor*as, or fritters, are served as a snack or with the meal. Photos by Jonathan Mark Kenoyer

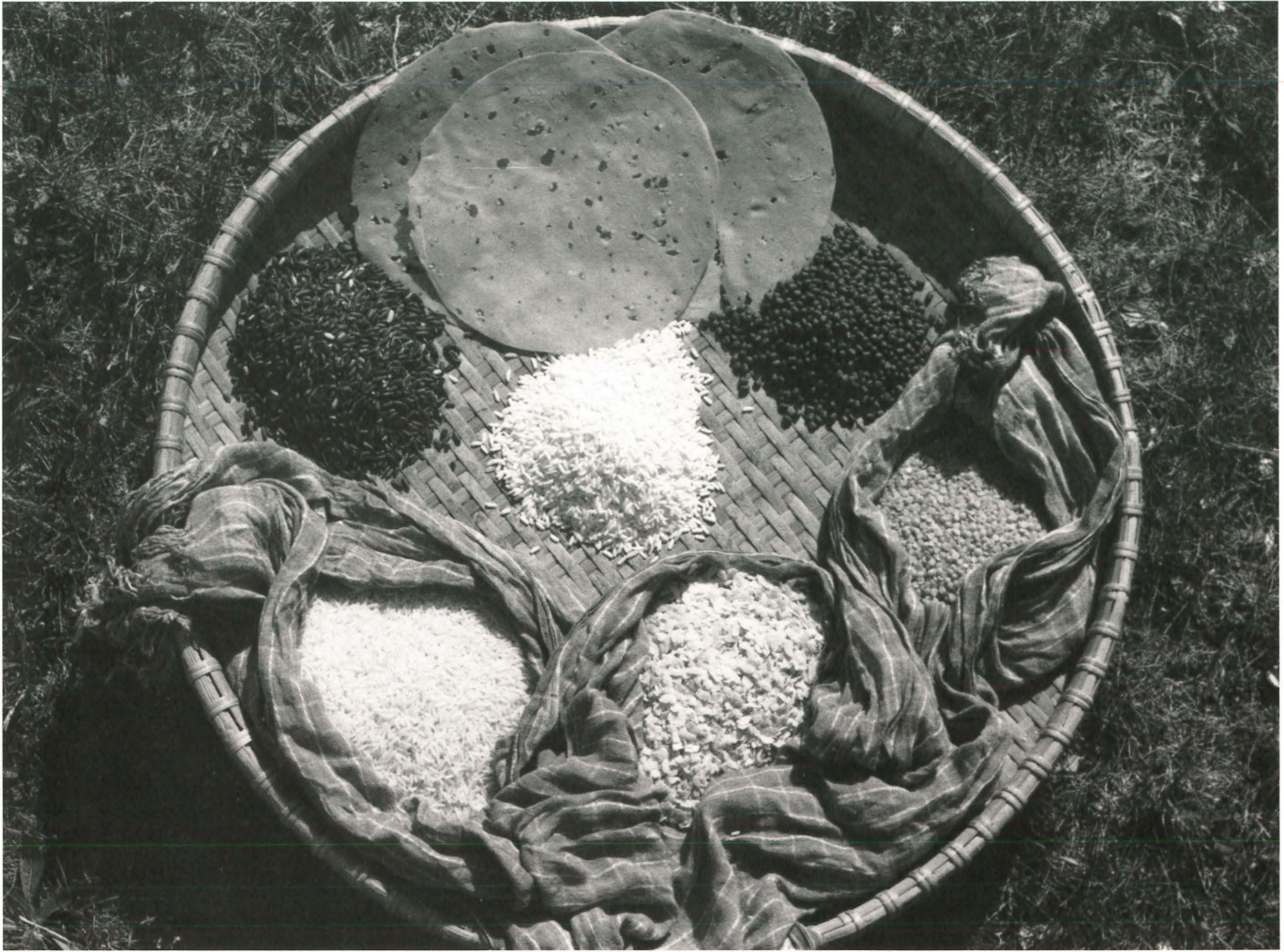
Jonathan Mark Kenoyer is presently with the Office of Folklife Programs as Assistant Program Coordinator for the Aditi Exhibition. He received his Ph.D. in South Asian Archaeology from the University of California, Berkeley, and is actively involved in archaeological and ethnographic research in South Asia. His interest in food stems from his long experience as a professional chef and active research on foodways in both ancient and modern India.

Although many South Asian restaurants advertise a wide variety of “curries,” in traditional Indian cooking no one dish is referred to by this word. Curry is the anglicization of the common Hindustani word *tarkāri*, meaning “green vegetable.” Cooked vegetables (and sometimes even meat) are occasionally called *tarkāri*, but this word never appears on an Indian menu. Rather you will find an array of terms that indicate the types of vegetable or meat used and the method of their preparation, such as *gobi bhāji* (sautéed cauliflower), *subzī kā sālān* (vegetable stew), *makhnī murgh* (buttery chicken), *tanduri rān* (roast leg of lamb), or *baingan bartā* (mashed eggplant).

The subcontinent of South Asia includes several countries — India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan; thus it is characterized by an immense diversity of geographical regions and corresponding cooking traditions. These regions range from dense tropical forests and fertile river valleys, where rice and a wide range of vegetables and fruits are available, to arid deserts and forested hills, where wheat, lentils and vegetables are commonly eaten. Other grains, such as barley, millet and corn, also serve as important staples in the diets of regional groups.

While the milk of cattle and water buffalo — also an important part of the diet — is prepared in numerous ways, such as yoghurt, butter-milk, fresh pressed cheese and condensed milk sweets, the consumption of meat is generally restricted by religious proscription. Certain Hindu groups, Jains, Buddhists and some Sikhs are strict vegetarians, yet even among these religious groups are some who will eat fish, eggs, chicken and even lamb or goat. Muslims eat only those meats that are slaughtered according to Islamic dietary laws and are then considered *halāl*, or the equivalent of kosher. This strictly excludes pork, reptiles and certain shell fish. Christians and many of the non-Hindu tribal communities are not governed by such dietary laws and prepare pork and beef as well as other meats. Though they are not usually considered a part of the Greater Indian Tradition, the many tribal groups in India that have until recently subsisted by hunting and gathering are still quite fond of wild game and continue their special dishes of monitor lizard, python, monkey and even elephant. These wild game can be extremely delicious when prepared with appropriately pungent herbs, chilies and spices.

In the face of this diversity, no single cooking tradition can be claimed characteristic of South Asia in general; rather the various traditions should be discussed in terms of regions and ethnic communities. Although the major cultural and religious traditions that have influenced the development of these regional styles are usually traceable only to the Hindu/Vedic Period (600 B.C. to 1300 A.D.), it should not be forgotten that it was the Neolithic peoples in India who orig-



inally domesticated livestock animals and the staple grains still used today. The similarity in the shapes of cooking vessels from the Indus Civilization (2500-1700 B.C.) to those used in traditional Indian kitchens today suggests that wheat and rice dishes as well as stews and vegetables may have been prepared in much the same manner as they are now. Also, the array of pottery serving dishes from the Painted Grey Ware cultures of northern India (1200-800 B.C.) are so similar to the *thāli* (plate) and serving dishes still made in brass and stainless steel that the custom of eating several varieties of vegetables, meats and condiments with a main rice or wheat dish may even have begun at this early date.

Strong evidence for the antiquity of certain Hindu dishes comes from ancient Sanskrit texts dating from the mid-second and first millennia B.C. Some of these special dishes still offered to the gods and eaten at holy festivals are often uncooked or lightly boiled and consist of rice or wheat flour mixed with sugar, milk, *ghī* (clarified butter) and fruits. None of the more commonly known spices are used because spices and pungent ingredients such as, garlic and onion, are not suitable in the offerings to the gods. In fact, many of the stricter sects of Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains avoid the use of such ingredients in their food. It is, however, equally evident from the texts that spicy foods and most meats, including beef, were consumed by the early Indo-Aryan and Vedic communities. The word *sālan*, the common term for any stew made with spices and herbs, is derived from the Sanskrit word meaning "to pierce," which in this context refers to flavors.

Rice and lentils are important staples in all regions of the subcontinent. Clockwise from top: *papadam* wafers made from peas and lentils; arad lentils; red lentils; pounded rice flakes; *basmati* long-grain aromatic rice; black rice. Center: glutenous rice.

In addition to the Hindu influence, modern South Asian cooking has been greatly enriched through the patronage of Muslim rulers who brought with them traditions from Turkey, Arabia, Persia, Central Asia and Afghanistan. Although these dishes as prepared in India definitely acquired their own unique style, the terms applied to them give some indication of their distant origins. *Qormā* (from Turkish) is a heavily spiced meat stew generally cooked in yoghurt. *Qimā* (from Arabic) refers to various meat dishes made with minced or ground meat. *Koftā* (from Persian), originally the word for a meatball, may now even refer to vegetable balls or quenelles served with or without a sauce. *Kabāb* (from Arabic) is any form of roasted or barbecued meat, such as *sikh kabāb* cooked on a skewer, or *shami kabāb*—a meat patty that is grilled or fried (*shāmi*, from Arabic means “of or from Syria”).

The unique flavors that distinguish these dishes from the same preparations in Turkey, Arabia or Iran are due to the delicate blending of aromatic herbs, seasonings and spices. No other region in the world has access to such a wide variety of flavorings as does India. Herbs common to most regions include green coriander leaves (*dhaniyā*), mint (*pudinā*), sweet nīm leaves (*kari phuliā*), various species of basil (*tulsi*), bay leaf (*tez pattā*) and a variety of regional herbs, such as pungent moss, thyme, lemon grass and asoefetida (*hing*). Seasonings range from a wide variety of salts, such as sea salt or black rock salt; numerous sweeteners made from sugarcane, palm sap, honey and various fruits; and sour or bitter seasonings from tamarind, green mango, citrus fruits and an exotic array of jungle fruits.

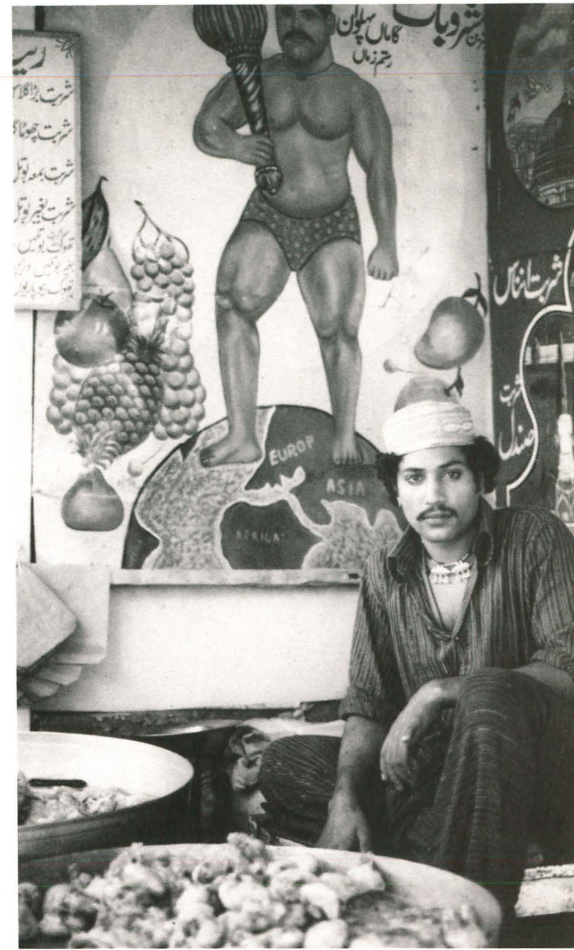
Spices are the most distinctive ingredients in Indian cooking and are often used singly or in various combinations to produce a wide range of flavors. Some authorities estimate the use of from 100 to as many as

Spices and aromatics: 1. cumin — *jirā*, 2. dried green mango, 3. dried pomegranate seeds, 4. ginger root — *adrak*, 5. turmeric — *baldi*, 6. mustard seed, 7. fenugreek — *methi*, 8. fennel — *sowā*, 9. lovage — *ajwān*, 10. anise — *saunf*, 11. black cumin — *shāb jirā*, 12. bay leaf, 13. coriander seed — *dhaniyā*, 14. cinnamon — *dāl chini*, 15. black cardamom — *kālā elai-chi*, 16. & 17. cardamom — *elai-chi*, 18. saffron — *kesar/zāfrān*, 19. black pepper — *gol mirch*, 20. clove — *long*, 21. nutmeg — *jāvitri*, 22. mace — *jaipbal*, 23. wild black onion seed — *kālōnjī*, 24. green chilies — *barī mirch*



300 different spices in the subcontinent. Certain combinations of spices are more appropriate for fish or meat or vegetables, and experienced cooks often prepare their own mixtures to use whenever they cook specific dishes. The most commonly used mixture, called *garam masālā* (hot spices), includes hot and aromatic spices, such as black pepper, clove, cinnamon and cardamom, but omits the burning hot chillies. It is from this tradition of premixed spices that the modern curry powder developed for the convenience of cooks who do not have the time or expertise to blend flavors appropriate to each dish. In traditional Indian cooking, however, it is not how many spices are used to create a unique flavor or how hot the dish has been made, but the effect that the spiced foods have on one's physical being. This little known aspect of Indian cooking and eating is explained in the texts and oral traditions of Ayurvedic medicine, an ancient Hindu science. Rules explain the effects of different spices and foods and prescribe the appropriate seasons during which they should be eaten. Some foods are considered good for children, but not for the elderly; some should be eaten only by pregnant women, and others only in the context of a religious ceremony.

The traditional sciences of Muslim *bikmat* and *Yunānī tib* that have their origins in Arabic and Greek medicine have also contributed to this general approach to food. Both of these traditions define food by its humoral properties of "hot and cold, wet and dry." Certain foods are extremely hot and dry, such as eggplant, *gram* (garbanzo) and dates; others are hot and wet, like tomato; and still others are cold and wet, such as cauliflower and rice (Kurin 1983:286). In keeping with these precepts, in the summertime special preparations are made that help the body adapt to the heat. Drinks such as *lassī* (butter-milk) and



A vendor in Lahore selling sweets, salty snacks and fruit *sharbats* promotes his wares with a poster of a muscle man standing on the world.

Sweets: 1. *bālūshahī*, 2. *barfi*, 3. carrot *balwā*, 4. *patīsā*, 5. *gulāb jāmun*, 6. *ras gullā*, 7. *laddu*, 8. *jalebi*



sharbats made from fresh fruits and cream serve to cool the body, while hot and spicy dishes are eaten to stimulate the blood flow and help purify the body.

Beyond prescribed foods and ways of eating is the basic human tendency to enjoy exotic preparations, especially sweets. Indian sweets come in all forms and consistencies, from creamy rice pudding and semolina halva, to a variety of milk sweets drenched in syrup, to sweet pastries and spun sugar.

The greatest variety of foods, including sweets, is seen at *melās*, or festivals, where every season or commemorative event is ushered in or out with appropriate rituals and much celebration. As certain grains, vegetables and fruits ripen with the change of season, specific preparations become more common and are extravagantly prepared for the *melā*. During the celebration rich patrons distribute food and sweets to their dependents, and cooks prepare delicious meals for pilgrims and traders. Confectioners vie with each other to produce the most attractive sweets and stack them in towering arrangements covered with edible silver or gold leaf. No one passing by can resist such enticing displays or turn away from the aromas coming from the *tandur* ovens and barbeques, where breads and skewered meats are slowly cooking over aromatic charcoal. Presented with such a range of temptations it is not unusual for one to become uncomfortably full, but there is always a remedy available at the nearby *pān* (condiment) shop. Surrounded by jars of sweet-scented betel nut, tobacco and condiments, a *pān wālā* (vendor) will swiftly wrap individually specified mixtures in the astringent *pān* leaf. With this preparation tucked in the cheek, one can walk the traditional 40 steps that are said to help in digestion and enjoy a song or dance at the nearby stage before moving on to take in the other attractions of the *melā*.

Pan plate with assorted condiments: 1. whole areca (betel) nut, 2. aromatic mixture, 3. fennel seed, 4. sweet coconut, 5. cloves, 6. cardamom, 7. katechu (acacia gum), 8. lime (calcium oxide), 9. prepared areca with aromatics, 10. katechu with aromatics, 11. slivered areca (betel) nut.

Suggested reading

Aziz, Khalid. *Indian Cooking*. London: Perigee Books, 1983.

Kurin, Richard. "Indigenous Agronomics and Agricultural Development in the Indus Basin." *Human Organization* 42 (4) (1983): p. 286.

Singh, Dharamjit. *Indian Cookery*. New York: Penguin Books, 1970.

