

साधनी

## KITCHENS, EQUIPMENT, AND THE BASICS

**K**itchens in India have changed a lot since my grandparents' generation, when they were smoky places ruled over by the family cook. Even now, the average Indian kitchen would look primitive to American eyes. Yet the quality of the food that comes out of these kitchens on a daily basis is nothing short of astounding. It really doesn't take more than three bricks and a fire to cook a meal, a sobering reminder that it's the individual who makes the food, not the equipment. Indian family cooks I've known have been ingenious in finding ways to meet their needs. Faced with my aunt's shrinking appetite, her cook devised a method for making tiny amounts of food: he used an empty sardine tin with a coat-hanger wire wrapped around it to make a handle. As a spatula and mini-whisk, he used a chicken's wing feather. Young Dharamraj Madai, who watches over my friend Mehlli Gobhai, has the best garlic crusher imaginable, a beautiful rough beach pebble that fits his hand exactly.

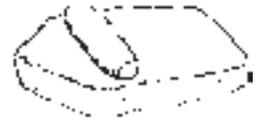
That being said, it's not as though well-run households didn't have their kitchen essentials. It's interesting to look at what my grandmother in her day and my mother in hers thought essential for getting food onto the table. For both of them, the key elements were a well-trained kitchen and table staff. They themselves did not go into the kitchen and took care to keep children out of it. Today's kitchens in the United States are well-equipped playpens for friends and family, not places far removed from the goings-on of family life as the kitchens of my childhood used to be.

### *Three Generations of Kitchen Equipment*

This is an approximation of what my grandmother needed to feed her family of five daughters, plus her sister and her three children, not to mention a large household staff.

- A cook, known and addressed as *mistri* (cooks in Parsi households were mostly Goan).
- A cook's helper, sometimes known as the matey, a British nautical term.
- A bearer or butler in a starched white uniform for serving. Extra bearers for large parties.
- A wood- or charcoal-burning cast-iron range with an oven and, later, a gas stove, the gas piped in by the city.
- A *sigri*, a portable cylindrical grill about 18 inches high, for grilling or for an extra heat source.
- A kerosene stove (for emergencies or an extra heat source).
- Tinned copper vessels, deep, with lids like dinner plates to hold water or coals. Tinning was and still is done by wandering *kalai wallas*, tinsmiths, who can set up shop in a three-foot-square space with a fire, bellows, and some tin.
- Straight-sided shallow tinned copper vessels with flat lids, no handles.
- *Khumchas*, circular trays with straight sides for working dough and other uses. Made of tinned copper or German silver.
- Various tongs for lifting lids or turning chapatis; perforated spoons, usually metal.
- A cast-iron *lobri* or *tava*, a lens-shaped griddle about a foot across, for cooking chapatis or dry-roasting anything.
- Frying pans like woks, *karhais*, in sizes geared to the household (made of cast iron, tinned copper, or possibly aluminum, in diameters ranging from 8 to 16 inches).

- A grinding stone, *masala no patthar*—slab and roller, the surface to be roughened from time to time by an itinerant worker, the *tankiwali*, who would go from house to house announcing her presence.
- A large domed aluminum steamer (on the bottom, Queen Mary in profile) for a sweet called *sandhna*.
- A mortar and pestle, made of heavy brass.
- Knives to suit the cooks.
- A rotary eggbeater (although egg whites and cream could be whipped up with a fork in a soup plate, too).
- Miscellaneous work bowls and plates, molds for desserts, baking dishes.
- Large Chinese storage urns for grains; brass canisters, and boxes for storing other staples.
- An icebox, later a refrigerator.
- A perforated vessel for cheesemaking.
- Strainers and colanders of various sizes.
- A dal masher made of wood.
- A slender wooden rolling pin and circular board for rolling out chapatis and puris.
- A hand-cranked meat grinder.
- A household balance and various weights and measures for grains and liquids; these would be in various systems, Indian and imperial.



GRANITE SLAB AND  
ROLLER FOR  
GRINDING MASALA

What my mother thought essential for her household of three was most of the above, especially the *tava*, the masala stone, the mortar and pestle, and the rolling pin. In addition to the old tinned copper vessels, there were aluminum and stainless steel pots made in traditional Parsi shapes. The big change came in the 1950s with the pressure cooker, which was supposed to change life completely by saving time and fuel. I don't know a single Indian urban household now that doesn't have a pressure cooker put to constant use. About thirty years ago, the demand for natural gas outstripped the supply, so the city stopped piping it in. Everyone now cooks with propane, the procuring and changing of cylinders a constant bother. Under these circumstances, a pressure cooker makes great sense.

My mother's generation ushered in an era of electrical appliances—refrigerators were a must, as were toasters, mixers, and blenders, most of which were kept off-limits to the kitchen staff and as a result often rusted from disuse. In the sixties, a new kitchen

essential came to the fore, the mixer-grinder, which could do the job of a masala stone, something the Western blender failed to do. The first and best of these was invented by a devoted engineering genius so that his wife could continue making first-rate Indian food in Germany, where they happened to be posted. Known as mixies, these grinders have now become standard equipment in urban Indian kitchens, where the roar of electric motors is now replacing the music of the masala stone.

What do I consider essential for Parsi food and Indian food in general? Kitchen supply stores make fortunes on our current love for specialized equipment, but you can open your Bombay kitchen with pretty much what you have on hand plus a visit to a supermarket, an Indian grocery, or the Internet.

For the recipes that require the prepared pastes known as masalas, it helps to have a food processor or, even better, an electric wet-dry grinder such as the Sumeet Multi-grinder (see Sources). Before the Sumeet I used a food processor, but the results were not the same. Blenders and food processors cut food up into ever-smaller pieces suspended in liquid, and hard ingredients like coconut can never be ground to a fine paste. The Sumeet and its equivalents have blades designed to grind wet and dry ingredients together as would happen on a stone. This was its test: I made a coconut-based green chutney (*lili chatni*, page 227) in the newly unpacked Sumeet and presented it to my mother in a perfect ball on a plate. She looked admiringly at it, tasted it, and asked when I'd become so handy with a masala stone. A food-processor coconut chutney can't be formed into a ball because too much water needs to be added to keep the mixture moving.

I love my Parsi utensils, the tinned vessels, the trays, tongs, slabs, and rollers, most of them from my grandmother's kitchen, and I enjoy their beauty and the sense of continuity; but cast-iron skillets and heavy stainless steel-lined pans such as All-Clad are my kitchen mainstays. For frying, I have a range of *karhais*, the round-bottomed Indian frying pans, but I also use a wok. I use an electric coffee mill to grind dry whole spices and nothing else, and I have many more devices for grating coconut than I need.

## *Before You Begin*

The recipes in this book have been tested in a variety of kitchens by a variety of cooks, some with a lot of experience, some with none. Our own kitchen is bursting with ingredients, but the stove and refrigerator are at least twenty years old and nothing ex-

traordinary. Most important in cooking is reliance on one's senses, all seven—touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing, sixth, and common. Granted, some of that comes with time and practice. For that reason, experienced cooks might think there's too much elementary detail in the recipes here, while neophytes might feel there's not enough. Since the intention of this book is to open up a different perspective on food rather than to instruct in basic kitchen tactics, I'm assuming that most readers already have a general cookbook to rely on.

#### NUMBER OF SERVINGS

These are given with the proviso that how many people a dish serves depends on the appetite of the eaters and what else gets offered at the same time. Two enthusiastic people can demolish a pound of cashews in five minutes or less; at other times, one has leftovers after eight people have helped themselves. The same is true with Mother's "Italian" Eggs (page 58). Some things beget wild greed. Plan accordingly. As a Parsi, I tend to overprovide.

#### INGREDIENT QUANTITIES

With the exception of cake and cookie ingredients, you should see these as approximations geared to the taste of one household. Most of the dishes in this book are forgiving: it really doesn't matter if there's a little more or a little less. Fresh coriander (cilantro), for instance, is very much a matter of personal taste. Some people love it; others don't. Half a cup of chopped fresh coriander is an uncompressed handful.

#### TIMING AND TEMPERATURE

How long things take to prepare or to cook is again a matter of approximation. I'm a fast worker and cook on a natural-gas stove. Some of the variables are type of stove—gas, electric, or other; type of gas—propane or regular; material and gauge of pots and pans; distance from the flame; ambient temperature; temperature and moisture content of the food itself; type of oil used in frying; variable ovens and oven temperatures. My scientist husband says that it might be possible to work out a complex equation that takes care of the variables. My suggestion is that there's nothing like working out a harmonious connection between you and your stove and pans (which don't need to be expensive). I have a horror of electric stoves and always hate having to cook on one, but even there, you can manage. For instance, if you have to start a dish at high heat and then simmer it, have another burner set to low at the ready and switch the pan over to it.

## RESULTS

Get to know a dish, and yank it around to suit you. There will be times when things burn or scorch and you have to start again or salvage what's left. Remember, it's just dinner, not Judgment Day. If you burn something on the bottom of a pan, plunging the bottom into cold water at once allows you to rescue some of the contents before they get a scorched taste.

## Basic Techniques

There's nothing frighteningly unfamiliar about the basic methods of Parsi cooking. Except for the first technique—popping or sizzling of aromatics to start or finish a dish—those discussed below—browning onions or aromatics, and shallow-, deep-, and dry-frying—are all pretty standard approaches to transforming raw to cooked.

## FINAL SEASONING

*Vaghar* in Gujarati, *tadka* in Hindi: this is a technique often called tempering, in which a dish is seasoned at the last minute with spices or other aromatics sizzled briefly in hot oil or ghee in a very small pan. (Sometimes a savory dish will start with the sizzling of whole spices before the onions go into the pan.) I use our smallest cast-iron skillet or a small, battered aluminum frying pan bought at a garage sale in Madison, its handle repaired with a wooden spool.

## BROWNING ONIONS

*Kando ne lal karvanu* (literally “making the onion red”): When you work with the drier pink onions in India, the term makes more sense. Here, we brown onions. Most meat dishes of the wet type start with browning onions, sometimes sliced, sometimes chopped. To some cooks, like my epicurean friend Eddie Khambata, it makes a huge difference whether they're chopped or sliced to begin a dish; to other Parsi cooks, it might be a case of angels on a pin. Whether you're turning your onions red or brown, a chopped or sliced onion should have the merest tracery of brown on its edges. At times, you want the onion to soften without browning. This should never take more than a few minutes unless you're scaling up the quantities, and your sense of smell and the way the onion looks tell you the right time to stop.

Browning the onion is often followed by frying a masala paste for a few minutes. This takes care and attention because it can catch on the bottom, scorch, and ruin

your dish. Vigilance, stirring, and adding a splash of water as you go keep this from happening. In Hindi and Hinglish this is known as *bhunao-ing*. The pans I use for this kind of cooking are usually aluminum or copper, lined with stainless steel. My mother and grandmother managed very well with tinned copper and, later, aluminum, not particularly heavy. I often start the browning in a cast-iron skillet and transfer the contents to a deeper pot if necessary.

## FRYING

There is one rule for all frying: don't wander off. A thermometer may be handy but in most cases it is not essential. Again, sight and smell and testing a small piece can give you the answer. Use the oil you like best for frying. I use peanut or grapeseed oil. For shallow- and deep-frying, please let me be nannyish once in this book and ask you not to use wads of paper towels for draining, but to line a baking sheet or tray with layers of brown paper (supermarket bags, for instance) and put a layer or two of paper towels right on top. It's absolutely true that we shall never see a poem lovely as a tree.

*Dry-frying.* Here you use the merest film of oil on a heavy skillet or griddle, preferably cast iron like the Indian *tava* or the classic skillet, but not nonstick. I use both *tavas* and skillets, depending on what's closest at hand.

*Shallow-frying.* How much oil you use depends on how wide and deep the pan is. Here's where you can use an ordinary frying pan, cast iron or your preferred metal, because the oil needs to be about one inch deep. Pans with curved bottoms give you greater depth with less oil, but please make sure they don't wobble on the stove. A skillet is fine for shallow-frying.

*Deep-frying.* Again, the size of the pan determines the amount of oil you'll need. The oil should be hot but not smoking—about 360 to 370 degrees Fahrenheit if you want a measurement, but the best test is the ingredient you're frying. It should cook through and get golden brown at the same time. My grandmother's emphatic rule for deep-frying was that things always look paler in the oil than they do out of it. For deep-frying, I use a large wok when I'm frying for a crowd; otherwise, for six or eight people, any pan that allows you to pour in oil to a minimum depth of three inches will do the trick. A pan that's about eight to ten inches across will allow you to handle four to six pieces of fried food, depending on their size. That's why I like the Indian *karhai*; you get maximum depth with minimum oil.



FRYING PAN

## Basic Ingredients

### SALT

Everything depends on salt. With Indian food particularly, judicious salting can make the dish, giving it its meaning and its anchor. Without the right amount of salt, spices float around in search of a leader. To ensure depth of flavor and seasoning, we add a small amount of salt at the start of a dish as well as at the end, tasting as we go.

For cooking, my mother and grandmother used coarse salt from the salt pans around Bombay or from the coastal areas of Maharashtra and Gujarat. This is a wet, gray salt sold in gunnysacks at traditional groceries. For the table, there was a saltcellar or a shaker with fine salt that never poured because of Bombay's humidity. I use coarse sea salt for most cooking, but play with many other salts for finishing a dish. When we travel, I always look for the local salt. It's the basic *goût de terroir*. We all need to do this to keep these small saltworks from being squeezed out of existence by commercial salt conglomerates trying to make cooks in the developing world feel that their indigenous salt is inferior.

### SUGAR

Parsi cooking uses white sugar and *gor*, or jaggery—solid unrefined cane or palm sugar—depending on the dish. One of the characteristics of Parsi cooking is a touch of sweetness in savory dishes, a taste that must have come with us from Persia.

Indian white sugar has large crystals and a pronounced taste of sugarcane. American standard white sugar is excellent for baking, but unwashed and turbinado sugars have much more of the good taste of cane and are now easy to find, even in supermarkets.

### GHEE AND OIL

Ghee is usually described as clarified butter, but it goes a step beyond. In clarified butter, the milk solids have separated but they're still white. Given more cooking time, they turn a toasty brown and sink to the bottom of the pan. The golden liquid floating on top is ghee. It's as different from clarified butter as a freshly cut slice of bread is from a piece of toast. You absolutely must have ghee to make the taste of some of the dishes in this book ring true. Most Indian groceries sell ghee, but I really want you to make your own for three reasons: it's not much bother, you don't have to buy more than you can use, and your house will smell heavenly.

To my grandmother's generation of cooks, ghee was the all-purpose cooking fat. A prodigal use of ghee indicated prosperity and generosity. Times changed, and by the

middle of the twentieth century, Parsi kitchens used both ghee and a modern newcomer, hydrogenated oil, often represented as vegetable ghee. By the 1960s, hard fats were under attack and all over India these shortenings were edged out by polyunsaturated oils such as peanut, sesame, safflower, and corn. Ghee, however, held on to its ancient place in Indian life and cooking. Most Parsi kitchens today use vegetable oil for most things, and ghee where nothing else will do. Lard, suet, chicken fat, bacon grease, and the like don't figure at all in Parsi cooking.

When my parents lived in Cochin, my mother often had ghee made from white buffalo's-milk butter, sold by wandering vendors and weighed out on their portable balances lined with dark green banana leaves. I still remember its slightly cheesy smell. Later, in Bombay, ghee was made from the accumulated cream skimmed off the daily milk that was brought to the door in enormous vessels carried around on their heads by the milkmen, *dudhwallas*, usually from the Parsi Dairy Farm, whose logo is a fat black buffalo. I use up ends of butter to make ghee, but often start with freshly bought unsalted butter. Cow's and buffalo's milk each make a distinctly flavored ghee. Many Indians have a strong preference for one or the other. I rather like buffalo's-milk ghee, but my husband prefers cow's-milk, which is lucky for him because we haven't got a choice.

The rule of thumb with ghee is that you end up with a little more than half the volume you start with, depending on how much water the butter contains. I like to use unsalted butter because a scoop of the toasty residue can then be stirred into rice or a scrambled egg. (This doesn't work with salted butter, because although the ghee turns out okay, the residue burns more easily and is intensely salty.)

*To make about 12 ounces of ghee:* Put 1 pound unsalted butter in a sturdy pan over moderate heat. Let it melt completely, then turn down the heat to very low. The ghee will be ready when the solids sink to the bottom and turn a toasty color. If they turn dark brown, the flavor, smell, and color of the ghee will be affected: You'll get something brownish-gray instead of a golden ivory. The timing depends on the thickness of the pan and your heat source. Until you're familiar with both, don't wander too far away. Set a timer to remind yourself to check every 15 minutes. This amount of butter should be done in about an hour at absolutely the lowest heat and about 45 minutes at a higher, but still low, setting.

Let the ghee cool a little before straining it into a heatproof jar. Tradition suggests straining the warm ghee through cheesecloth or muslin, but a very fine-meshed strainer does the job. Let the ghee cool completely before capping the jar. Discard the residue or save it to flavor other dishes.



GHEE  
CONTAINER

## Ginger-Garlic Paste | ADU LASAN

Every Parsi household must have its supply of this paste. In households where there is a grinding stone and a person to do the work, it is prepared every morning, along with the other pastes needed for the day's menus. The preparation of pastes is now more often done in an electric wet-dry grinder, which can almost duplicate the smooth texture produced on a stone. Fortunately, Ginger-Garlic Paste can also be easily prepared in a food processor. It keeps well for up to two weeks refrigerated, and even longer in a freezer. Or if you're in a rush, you can combine equal quantities of very finely chopped or grated peeled fresh ginger and garlic, just as much as you need for the recipe. *Makes about 1 cup.*

*About ½ cup roughly chopped peeled fresh ginger (about 4 ounces)*

*About ½ cup roughly chopped peeled cloves garlic*

*About ½ teaspoon salt (optional)*

*Vegetable oil*

- In a wet-dry grinder or food processor, grind the ginger and garlic to a smooth paste, using as little water as possible. Add the salt if you plan on storing the paste. Pack it into a small, tightly covered jar with a nonreactive lining to the lid. Pour a thin film of oil on top of the paste. Store in the refrigerator.

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*Note:* Ginger-garlic paste is now commercially available, both in India and in the United States. It's a good idea to look at the ingredients before you buy any. I like Poonjiaji's for emergencies because it is preserved with small amounts of vinegar and salt rather than additives with a metallic aftertaste. Of course, nothing is as good as a paste ground at home.

### THE BIG THREE SPICE MIXTURES

These are the spice mixtures, or masalas, you need to have for many Parsi recipes to taste correct. Not many urban Parsi households make their own dry spice mixtures anymore, since even with a grinding stone it would be hard to pound them by hand in the quantity generally needed. With an electric coffee grinder kept just for spices, making the big three isn't that hard, but if this seems like too much to take on, the Sources section offers some excellent, tested alternatives.

## Parsi Garam Masala

Of the big three, this is the simplest. *Garam masala* literally means “warm spices,” but the warmth here refers not to their taste but to their properties. The customary ingredients—cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and pepper—are regarded as “warming” to the body in those medical systems (Parsi, Hindu, Arab, Chinese) that divide edibles according to whether they cool or heat. Garam masala is usually added toward the end of cooking to finish a dish.

It's commercially available, but anything you buy is likely to have a larger proportion of the cheaper spices like cumin or pepper, and just a whiff of the more expensive ones like cardamom. Black cumin seeds (*kala jira*) can be found at Indian groceries.

The recipe is for a small amount because that is all you should have on hand; the flavor gradually fades if kept for a long time. *Makes about ½ cup.*

- 2 tablespoons cardamom pods*
- 2 (2-inch-long) sticks cinnamon or cassia*
- 1 teaspoon black cumin seeds or regular cumin seeds*
- 1 teaspoon whole cloves*
- 1 teaspoon black peppercorns*
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg*

- Grind all ingredients together in a coffee mill reserved for grinding spices. Store tightly capped in a cool, dark place.

## Sambhar Masala

This recipe is a combination of Bhicoo Manekshaw's, from *Parsi Food and Customs*, and Sarla Sanghvi's, from the original 1959 edition of the Time and Talents Club cookbook. This is the only use of asafetida I know of in Parsi cooking. Use it in its natural resinous form if you can find it, in powder if you can't. Sesame oil, called *til* or gingelly oil, is available at Indian groceries and in many natural foods stores. The dark amber Chinese or Japanese variety made from toasted sesame seeds is not a substitute. *Makes about 2 cups.*

- ¾ cup cayenne pepper or Indian chilly powder*
- 2 tablespoons salt*
- 1 tablespoon ground turmeric*
- 1 ½ teaspoons crushed asafetida resin or 2 teaspoons powdered asafetida*

*½ cup fenugreek seeds*  
*2 tablespoons brown mustard seeds*  
*1 teaspoon black peppercorns*  
*1 teaspoon broken-up star anise pod*  
*1 teaspoon whole cloves*  
*1 (3-inch-long) stick cinnamon or cassia, broken up*  
*1 tablespoon untoasted sesame oil or peanut oil*

- Measure the cayenne, salt, turmeric, and asafetida into a bowl. Grind the fenugreek and mustard seeds, peppercorns, star anise, cloves, and cinnamon to a fine powder in a coffee mill reserved for grinding spices. You may need to do this in two batches. Add to the cayenne mixture.
- In a small pan, heat the oil until it starts to shimmer. Make a well in the middle of the spice mixture and pour in the hot oil. Keep mixing with a spoon until the oil is completely incorporated and the mixture loses its powdery look.
- Bottle and store in a cool, dark place.

### *Dhana Jiru or Dhansak Masala*

In essence, this is an elaborate garam masala. Literally translated, *dhana jiru* means “coriander and cumin,” but you can see that this is only the beginning. There’s also some terminological confusion. Some people see *dhansak masala* as synonymous with *dhana jiru*; others see the former as a combination of *dhana jiru* and *sambhar*. I prefer to keep them separate and combine them as necessary. Use this recipe when either *dhansak masala* or *dhana jiru* is called for.

Recipes for these mixtures often call for the most esoteric ingredients, such as *duggar ka phul*, a lichen, and for tiny amounts of hard-to-find spices like *nag kesar*, or snake saffron—often mistranslated as “saffron,” but a totally different thing, resembling a peppercorn with a tail. I have left them out here because they are not generally available in the United States. I’ve eaten great wads of lichen to determine what its effect is and still don’t know. Should you be determined, and should you be able to find them, add one teaspoon of the *duggar ka phul* and half a teaspoon of *nag kesar*. Your best strategy for making this masala is to shop where you can buy spices in small amounts. Refer to the Glossary and the Sources section for more details on identifying and locating these ingredients. To avoid fits of sneezing while you’re grinding, sifting, and bottling, wear an ordinary hardware store dust mask. *Makes more than 1 pint.*

*1 cup coriander seeds*  
*½ cup dried cassia leaves or ¼ cup Turkish bay leaves*  
*¼ cup cumin seeds*  
*¼ cup dried red chiles*  
*1 tablespoon white poppy seeds*  
*2 tablespoons broken-up stick cinnamon or cassia*  
*2 tablespoons black peppercorns*  
*1 tablespoon whole cloves*  
*1 tablespoon cardamom pods*  
*4 black cardamom pods*  
*1 teaspoon caraway seeds*  
*1 teaspoon black cumin seeds*  
*1 teaspoon fenugreek seeds*  
*½ teaspoon ground turmeric*  
*Pinch of saffron threads*  
*1 nutmeg*  
*1 strand mace*

- In a large heavy skillet, dry-roast the coriander, cassia, cumin, peppers, poppy seeds, cinnamon, peppercorns, cloves, cardamom, black cardamom, caraway, black cumin, and fenugreek just enough for them to start smelling toasty but not to color. Let them cool down for a few minutes before you go on to the next step.
- In a coffee mill reserved for grinding spices, pulverize the toasted spices with the turmeric, saffron, nutmeg, and mace. Sift them into a bowl, pressing through the sieve rather than shaking, which raises too much nose-tickling powder. Pour the mixture into a jar; cap it tightly and store in a cool, dark place.

## COCONUT

Dealing with coconut is an everyday operation in Parsi kitchens. In earlier days, there was no other way of getting coconut milk except by cracking one open. Now there are options. Throughout the book, I will let you know when a substitute is acceptable and when nothing but the freshly prepared ingredient will do.

An exotic in ancient Persia, coconut has become an important part of Parsi ceremonial life and food alike. Our ritual array of symbolic objects, the *ses*, always has a coconut on it. Coconuts figure as a symbol of fertility and bounty in just about every important ceremony throughout the life cycle, as they do for a large part of India.

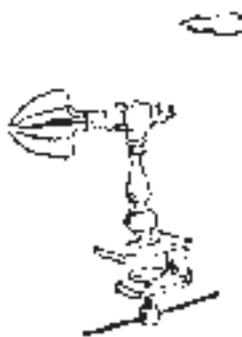
One of the characteristic morning sounds in Parsi households is (or was) the thump-thump-thump of a stone roller against a granite slab as it crushes pieces of coconut to be ground into smooth pastes, masalas, for the day's cooking. Coconut is used in so many Parsi dishes that it's important to talk about some fundamentals. We'll deal first with fresh coconuts and then with the alternatives.

*Buying coconuts.* For those who don't live in the palm belt, buying a coconut is a gamble. I could tell you to choose a coconut that's heavy, to listen for a dull sloshing sound as you shake it, to make sure there are no cracks and nothing growing out of the eyes. You could bring home a coconut that met all these requirements and still end up with a dud. The important thing, then, is to buy coconuts where there's a brisk turnover or responsible selling policies. When you bring a coconut home, plan to use it soon. Nowadays, you can buy coconuts described as young; but for making coconut milk, you want mature ones. Young coconuts have a delicious leathery texture that's wonderful in salads, and their water is sweet and refreshing, but they're not the right ones for coconut milk.

*Cracking the coconut and dealing with it.* There's a really easy way to get into a coconut. First strip off any extra fiber. Then hold the coconut over a bowl to catch the water. Using a standard hammer—no dainty tools here—give the coconut several sharp whacks around its equator, where it will generally crack in two. Inspect the flesh and taste it. There should be no trace of mold, and the smell and taste should be fresh and sweet. Sometimes, with mature nuts, the juice—known as coconut water—can

taste a little sour but the flesh will be absolutely sound. If the water tastes good, drink it as the cook's bonus. You can also use it in the making of coconut milk or for cooking rice.

The next step is determined by what you want to do with the coconut. If you're making a masala paste and you have a wet-dry grinder, you can pry the coconut away from its shell in pieces. If you want to grate the coconut for making coconut milk, you can hand-grate the pieces you pry out, or throw them into a food processor or powerful blender with some coconut water or tap water. (If you want pristine white coconut milk, you need to peel off the tough brown skin first.) Or you can do what's done in India, Sri Lanka, and points eastward, all the way to the Philippines: Use a rotary coconut reamer-grater or a coconut grating stool. The rotary graters are usually mounted or clamped to a



ROTARY COCONUT  
GRATER AND A COCONUT  
GRATING STOOL



table. The business end is a hemispherical grater on a shaft that gets turned with a hand crank while the halved coconut is pressed against the blades with the other hand. With a grating stool, you sit or kneel on it and rotate the coconut around a fixed rasp. Coconut grated in either of these ways yields more and better milk. Sometimes when you need grated coconut for a dish, a good way to get a small amount is to use an old-fashioned crinkly-edged bottle cap, the kind known as a crown cap or crown cork, and scrape it against the inside of the coconut.

*Making coconut milk.* An average mature coconut will yield about 4 cups of grated meat. Barely cover the grated coconut with boiling water, using the coconut water for part of the liquid. Let it stand for at least 30 minutes. The simplest way to squeeze the milk out of the coconut is to put a couple of handfuls at a time into a good-size piece of dampened cloth. Gather up the ends and squeeze very hard over a bowl until the grated coconut is dry. Repeat with the rest of the coconut. The milk is now ready to be used and the wrung-out coconut either discarded or used for making sweets. For curries, let this milk stand for 2 to 3 hours until the cream rises to the top. The thinner part is used in the cooking of the dish; the cream gets saved as a finishing touch, added just before serving. In India, the squeezed coconut is moistened and squeezed yet again. This is known as the second milk, also used in cooking.

*Lazy coconut.* Sometimes, time and the coconut odds are against us. There are options: these are desiccated or frozen grated coconut; and frozen, canned, or spray-dried coconut milk. Let's dispense with desiccated coconut straight away, especially the sweetened supermarket kind.

Frozen grated coconut comes sweetened and unsweetened. Stick with the unsweetened. You can get it grated in 1-pound bags in the frozen foods section of Southeast Asian markets. This is really decent stuff for making chutney, masala, or coconut milk to be used in cooking.

My first choice in prepared coconut milk, the kind that is closest to fresh, is the frozen variety that comes from Thailand, usually in flat plastic packets. My second choice is coconut milk in tetrapacks (like the packages of juice that children take to school). The best brands are made in Malaysia, Singapore, and India, but may be difficult to find except on the Internet, so consider bringing some back with you if you travel. Some brands of canned coconut milk, such as Chao Koh, are consistently more reliable than others and do well for most dishes.

Spray-dried coconut milk is a product that is a little misunderstood. It is simply coconut milk that has been spray-dried (like powdered cow's milk). There are no nox-

ious additives, apart from maltodextrin or sugar, and it's easy to find brands that are less sweet. I was first told about it by Sri Lankan cooks almost twenty years ago. In our house, we use it from time to time in emergencies. It works perfectly well for curries, for anything that's cooked, and for some sweets.

### TAMARIND

The English word comes from the Arabic *tamar-i-hind*, “date of India.” For information on the plant itself, see the Glossary. In U.S. markets, tamarind sometimes comes in its original package, a brown beanlike pod with a brittle skin containing several seeds encased in a fibrous sweet-sour pulp. The more mature the tamarind, the darker and sweeter the pulp. It is also sold in blocks of compressed pulp, the Indian version very dark and dry, the Thai, moister and lighter. A third option is the commercial tamarind extract from Thailand and India. The Thai varieties, which I prefer, are thinner and fresher-tasting; the Indian ones are darker, thicker, and sometimes almost tarry.

To extract tamarind pulp from whole fruit, break the brittle covering off the whole seedpods and tear off the fibrous net around the pulp. (If you're using compressed tamarind, simply break off the amount called for by the particular recipe.) Cover the tamarind with boiling water and let it steep for at least 30 minutes and up to a few hours. Or put it in a nonreactive pan, cover with water, and simmer over low heat for 15 to 20 minutes; then let it steep until it's cool enough to handle. Break up the tamarind with your fingers and rub it through a stainless steel or nylon strainer into a bowl, scraping the bottom of the strainer to collect the pulp as you go. Moisten the residue with a little warm water and rub and push it through the strainer again.

Freshly extracted tamarind pulp keeps for at least a week in the refrigerator. Tamarind residue is used in many Indian households to clean brass and copper. Coarse salt and tamarind residue are particularly successful with copper.

### BREADS

For us, there are two kinds of bread: leavened bread and *rotlis*, the Gujarati word for the almost universal Indian flat bread, the chapati. In some households, the family expects to see both types at every meal. In my mother's house, *rotlis* appeared almost every night, but rarely in the afternoon; in her mother's house, I suppose they must have appeared on demand. *Rotlis* can be made with a variety of flours—rice, millet, whole wheat—but the only ones I ever saw in my mother's house were made of whole wheat; many Parsis dismiss robust grains such as millet and barley as being too coarse or heavy.

There was usually a loaf of white or brown bread for breakfast toast and teatime sandwiches. India is one of those countries where you can still find good, common white bread available to everyone. The modern presliced loaves in their plastic wrappings are now considered more desirable in that backwards way that thinks it is progress to rush from anything preindustrial. Nevertheless, it's still possible to get energetic, yeasty white bread in loaf or roll form.

In Bombay, you can have bread brought to your door every morning even if all you buy is one roll a day. Before eight, a man arrives at your house on a bicycle weighed down with two large canvas bags of crusty rolls (*gotli pao*) and soft rolls (*naram pao*), regular loaves like good *pain de mie*, and for those who've forgotten to buy them elsewhere, a few eggs, butter, and the processed cheese spreads so popular in India. Once a month, a bill is presented on a scrap of paper with a precise, scribbled accounting, and on every festive occasion, regardless of religion, the householder is expected to remember the rain-or-shine diligence of the *pao walla* (bread man). For me, this wonderful daily bread, sometimes still breathing warmth, is one of the food highlights of being in India. It's one of the rarer experiences of something that's unassumingly taken for granted and utterly luxurious at the same time.

I like to alternate *gotli pao* with *naram pao*, hard pressed to say which is better. With the bread, I love dark, medicinal *jambul* honey from Mahableswar near Poona, or sticky guava jelly that fights the spoon, or one of the peerless jams from WIT, a Bombay women's collective, either the grapefruit marmalade or a Cape gooseberry jam. If the timing is lucky, the *panir walla* will have shown up in time for breakfast, in which case, there are soft fresh cheeses floating in their whey.

People say that San Francisco sourdough can't be duplicated anywhere else. Perhaps the same is true of the yeasty breads of Bombay's small bakeries, though I'd love to see someone give it a try in the way that so many Americans have re-created here the breads they fell in love with in France and Italy. There are some Parsi dishes that demand *gotli pao* or its equivalent, a first-rate crusty baguette. These are lentil stews like *masoor* and *channa ni dar*, as well as *kharia*, the slow-cooked unctuous union of black-eyed peas and goat's feet. With any dish not accompanied by rice, *rotlis* are expected in a Parsi household.

**Chapatis** | ROTLIS

Chapatis, flat breads, can be found anywhere in India now, even in the south, but each community or area has its own approach and its own idea of perfection. Chapatis can be dry, strong, and forceful or pliant and silky like the ones in this recipe, where the addition of ghee to the dough makes the difference, so that they can be kept for more than a day without stiffening. (There are special metal boxes for storing cooked chapatis, but any container with a tight lid will do, for instance a round metal cookie tin.)

As a child, I loathed dolls but loved the small board and rolling pin a family friend of my parents had made for me. I spent endless hours playing with dough, rolling it out in odd maplike shapes. I confess to being an unpracticed *rotli* maker—unlike my mother, whose *rotlis* were superb, perfect rounds, patiently baked over medium heat on her *tava*, the lens-shaped cast-iron griddle that now lives in our house. My *rotlis* aren't always round and I have to fight a tendency to turn up the heat too high, which makes them stiff. Practiced *rotli* makers roll and bake as they go, unconscious of the extraordinary beauty and grace of their actions.

Here is the traditional method, followed by a food-processor alternative. For optimal success, buy chapati flour at an Indian market. *Makes 8 to 10.*

*1 to 2 teaspoons ghee*

*½ teaspoon salt*

*1 cup whole wheat flour, plus extra for adjustments and rolling*

*⅓ cup (or more) boiling water*

- Rub the ghee and salt into the flour on a *thali*, a round tray with straight, 1- to 2-inch-deep sides, or on a rimmed baking sheet, adding enough boiling water to turn the flour into a soft, elastic dough that doesn't stick. Add small amounts of flour or water as needed to firm up or relax the mixture. Knead the dough for a few minutes, cover it with a bowl, and leave it to rest in a warm place for at least an hour.
- Form the dough into a log and divide it into 8 to 10 pieces. On a lightly floured surface, roll out each piece about ⅛ inch thick. It should be thin but not transparent or it will tear.
- Heat a *tava* or cast-iron griddle until a drop of water dances on its surface. Turn the heat down to moderate. Lightly coat the griddle with oil or ghee, wiping up the excess with a paper towel, and start baking the *rotlis* one at a time. As soon as the *rotli* begins to look dry and blistery, flip it over and smear a minute amount of

ghee over its surface, using the back of a spoon; keep pressing down on it with the flat side of a pancake turner until it puffs up. Remove at once and repeat until all the *rotlis* are baked, keeping the stack covered as you go. If you like, you can fold them as they come off the fire. Eat them as soon as possible.

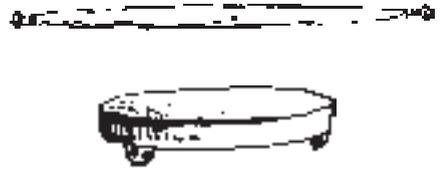
- There's a deluxe version in which you divide each of the pieces into two flattened balls. Smear one with ghee and press both balls together, pinching the edges, before rolling out. You get an extra-puffy *rotli* this way.

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*Food Processor Method:* You can use a food processor for mixing the dough, but turn it out onto a board and knead it briefly by hand before letting it rest. Put the flour and salt in the food processor bowl. Melt the ghee in a small amount of boiling water and sprinkle it over the flour. Then start the machine and add more boiling water through the funnel until the dough pulls away from the sides of the bowl. Let it thump against the bowl thirty times before removing it and letting it rest.

*Tortilla Press Method:* You can also use a tortilla press for making chapatis if you find you don't get the hang of rolling them out perfectly. Indian groceries now sell them as chapati presses, a perfect example of successfully transferred technology. A further technological development is the electric tortilla/chapati press, which flattens and bakes in one operation.

If all this still seems like too much work, do what a lot of U.S.-based Indians do: Buy the darkest whole wheat tortillas you can find. Many supermarkets carry them. Also, most Indian groceries now have an array of close-to-homemade chapatis/*rotlis* for sale.



ROLLING PIN AND BOARD FOR ROLLING CHAPATIS AND PURIS

## Puris

Few things in cooking are as dramatic as slipping a small, flat disk into hot oil and watching it puff up into a perfect sphere. In India, when you're lucky enough to be invited to lunch or dinner in a Gujarati household, the puris keep coming out, wave after wave. The way they're offered is irresistible. "Just one?" And so they keep adding up.

Although people take cold puris on train journeys and picnics, if you're going to all the trouble, they should be hot, hot, hot. Someone has to be on puri duty if you're doing this for more than two or three people. It goes against the American grain to

see someone slaving away while others eat, but you have to believe that this is the only way, and that it does give the maker some degree of pleasure to turn out puffy puris *à la minute*. When I was really little, my mother sometimes made puris and let me make my own beside her, practicing with my own child-size board and rolling pin. She used to fry my overworked gray efforts for me while she cooked cleaner ones for consumption by family and friends. This was one of the few kitchen things she did herself from time to time, perhaps just to entertain me. Unlike in Gujarati households where they can appear at every meal, we usually had puris with *papeta nu sakh* (page 202), named Parsi hash yellows by our friend Bob Carrau. My mother's formula for puris is the same as for chapatis. *Makes about 12.*

*1 to 2 teaspoons ghee*

*1 cup whole wheat flour (preferably chapati flour), plus extra for adjustments and rolling*

*¼ teaspoon salt*

*⅓ cup (or more) warm water*

*Peanut or grapeseed oil, for deep-frying*

- Rub the ghee into the flour and salt on a *Thali*, a round tray with straight sides, or on a rimmed baking sheet. Add ⅓ cup warm water, or more as needed to make a soft, elastic dough that doesn't stick. Knead by hand for a minute or so, even if you've used a food processor for the mixing as in the previous recipe. Cover with a bowl and let rest at room temperature for at least an hour.
- Roll the dough out ¼ inch thick. Using a cookie cutter or a glass with a good strong edge, cut out puris to the size you want them. My mother's puris were about 3 inches across. The usual Indian way is to divide the dough into lots of little pieces and roll out each puri individually, frying as you go. It drives Americans crazy to see such apparent inefficiency, but a skilled puri or chapati roller can turn them out at a brisk clip and not miss a beat. In the end it's more efficient than constantly gathering the trimmings and rerolling them.
- Heat about 3 inches' worth of peanut oil in a large, deep frying pan or wok. Deep-fry the puris 2 to 3 at a time in the oil. Push the puris below the surface to make them puff up. They're done as soon as they puff and look golden brown. Remove, drain on absorbent paper and eat while still hot.

## Papads

Call them *papads* or *papadams*, or *appalams* in the south—these are the universally popular flat breads of India. Papads are usually, though not invariably, made of the flour of various dals, sometimes plain, sometimes highly seasoned. (A friend recently gave me fabulous potato papads from Benares with coriander leaves embedded in them.) Making papads requires the kind of time, space, and labor that most urban households lack. The dough has to be rolled paper-thin and the parchmentlike disks laid out to dry in the sun. In some rural communities, papads are made by cooperatives of women who take the dough home from a central mixing station and bring it back rolled, dried, and stacked, ready to be packed up and sent to cities in India and all over the world.

Papads vary in size and seasoning from region to region. South Indian ones are usually small, thin, plain, and at their best when fried. Papads from the rest of India are often seasoned with cumin, garlic, chiles, or black pepper. Sizes range from very small (potato-chip size, known as cocktail papads) to 15 inches or more in diameter.

Indian groceries in the United States sell papads of all sorts. Experiment until you find the ones you like the most. My favorites are plain or black pepper- or cumin-flavored, and I like to buy papads made by women's cooperatives.

There are three ways of dealing with papads: frying, toasting, and the microwave (with which I have no experience). Parsi households tend to fry small, plain papads. There's no argument that a billowy, well-fried, well-drained papad is a delicious thing to eat, but it's impossible to stop with one. If you don't want to be like the universe, forever expanding, a toasted papad is equally delicious. It's also a little sturdier and more versatile as a predinner nibble and as a vehicle for spreads. Here are the basic guidelines for both frying and toasting.

*To fry papads.* Heat oil in a wok or frying pan with a curved bottom to ensure maximum depth for the amount of oil used. You'll probably need about 2 cups. Slip a papad into the hot oil, turning it quickly and removing it as soon as it's puffed, in the case of the South Indian ones, or blistered and opaque, if it's one of the thicker kind. Remove at once and drain on paper towels. Serve immediately. Keep eaters waiting if necessary.

*To toast papads over a gas or charcoal flame.* You will need to work out a rhythm with your heat source and remember that you can't look away for a second. Turn on a gas burner to medium-high, or find a place on your charcoal grill that doesn't incinerate the papad as soon as you set it down. Using tongs, keep repositioning the papad nim-

bly until it changes from smooth translucence to blistery opacity. Little dark spots are all right; huge burnt ones are not. Neither are unblistered, raw patches. You will have to sacrifice one or two victims until you work out your papad choreography. Once you get good at it, you can keep two going at the same time. Stack them as you go. Papads can be done ahead and kept warm in an oven with a pilot light or reheated briefly in a low oven before serving as part of the introduction to the meal or as an accompaniment to a rice dish.