

## The HOME FORUM



**SPICY:** A traditional Indian spice box comes with cups to fill with the cook's favorite spices, including Bengal gram, red chilies, and tumeric.

## Indian Beans and Peas

## FOR TEMPERING

- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 1 teaspoon black gram dal (also known as *urad dhal*)
- 1 teaspoon Bengal gram dal (also known as *chana dhal*)
- 1 dried red chili
- A few curry leaves (optional)
- 1/2 teaspoon minced garlic

## OTHER INGREDIENTS

- 1 pound fresh green beans (remove strings and cut beans into 1-inch pieces)
- 1 to 2 handfuls of frozen peas
- 2 tablespoons grated, unsweetened coconut (frozen or dry)
- Salt to taste

For tempering: Heat the oil over high heat in a small pan, and keep the lid nearby. When the oil gets hot, add the mustard seeds and put the lid on right away. Turn the heat to low when the mustard seeds begin to pop. When seeds stop popping, add all the other tempering ingredients. The minced garlic should go in last. Stir until the black gram dal turns a golden brown, about 5 minutes.

Steam the green beans until they are slightly tender. Cook the frozen peas, following the directions on the package. When the beans are steamed, transfer them to a larger pan and add the peas. Mix in the coconut.

Remove the red chili and curry leaves from the tempering (they are not meant to be eaten, just to add flavor). Add the tempering mixture to beans and peas, and toss together. Salt to taste.

Serves 5 to 6 as a side dish.

WHEN I SET off to graduate school in the US, the Internet had not yet taken over the world. I actually spoke to people to gather information about life in America in general and my destination, New Orleans, in particular.

I was delighted to find a woman whose son was an undergraduate

at the university I was headed to. "My son had some problems initially with the food, but you should be fine. You are a girl, no?" she said to reassure me.

Biting back my foolish but proud claim that I would be as useless in the kitchen as any son of hers, I focused on the issues at hand. What was the weather in New Orleans like? Did I have to drive around? Was there public transportation? Food, in fact, was my last concern.

Newly arrived and equally clueless, two other Indian students joined me in the lounge of the chemistry department. We were inseparable in the initial weeks.

Pointing to this and that, we tried various items in the cafeteria. Determined to be vegetarian, my new friends stuck to whatever was green, such as Brussels sprouts floating around in brine or salads with rusting iceberg lettuce.

Tabasco sauce, a dash of which was supposed to perk up every meal, did nothing for us. We exhausted all the combinations of toppings in the nearby pizza place.

Soon, we found a furnished apartment close to school and signed the lease. As I began to unpack – a pressure cooker and a year's supply of spices materialized from my huge suitcase.

So did a round stainless-steel box with seven circular cups within. It was a gleaming replica of my mother's spice box. Instinctively, I began to fill the containers with turmeric, cumin, coriander, black pepper, Bengal gram, red chilies, and mustard seeds.

As I was about to take my suitcase down to the basement, I found a thin cookbook in its cavernous depths.

Inside there was a simple inscription in my mother's neat hand: "From Amma."

Flipping through the pages, I decided that

## A SPICE BOX AND A COOKBOOK GOT HER STARTED

tomato *rasam*, chicken soup for the vegetarian soul, seemed like a good place to start my culinary career.

I kept some spicy V8 handy, just in case the *rasam* lacked the bite we were used to, but did not have to open the can at all.

With this book in hand, I did not dread my

weekly turn at cooking. Three months later, I even offered to bring a dish when a professor had us over for Thanksgiving dinner.

One of the hardest lessons I had to learn was that a secret to south Indian cooking, the technique called "tempering," cannot be picked up from any book, no matter how well written. You lay out a spoonful or less of spices on a plate. It is tempting to blend them but you cannot do that. Popped, one by one, into a small quantity of hot oil, each spice yields its distinct flavor at a particular temperature. A tiny miscalculation and you'll end up with a semi-charred mess. But done right, the redolent mix gives vegetable dishes a nutty, crunchy flavor.

The dance of the mustard seeds in the hot, smoky oil during this process can easily get out of control, and many a time I had to put a lid on its wild frenzy, sometimes – unfortunately – not before the smoke alarm went off.

But a "mastery over the seasonings can make all the difference," the author of my cookbook emphasized. Learning to temper spices efficiently in an American kitchen was tough, but the procedure paid gastronomical dividends and taught me the virtue of patience.

Initially, when I walked down the produce aisles of the neighborhood grocery store, I could name only some of the vegetables.

Jalapeños, the pleasantly plump relatives of the tiny Indian *mirchi*, looked deceptively harmless. My roommate decided to bite into one to check if this chili was "hot," and ended up doing a crazy jig in Aisle 6 until I rushed back with a bottle of blue Gatorade.

It took a sniff test to distinguish between curly parsley and cilantro, and one roommate always brought back the wrong herb. Humongous egg-

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plants, which neither looked nor tasted like the aubergines back home, called for an entirely different treatment than the cookbook's suggestions.

Broccoli, a cousin of the cauliflower, is not amenable to spices, I found. Asparagus is as easy as green beans; fiddleheads are not fussy either. With some thought and effort, I could eventually handle most of the produce.

My mother's strategic additions to my luggage had rescued me from bland American food, as well as my own picky eating habits.

Over the years, my palate has become more sophisticated, and my collection of cookbooks has grown into a small library. But the one slim volume my mother gave me still holds it own.

And if there had ever been a real fire that made the oversensitive smoke alarm wail for all it's worth, I would have grabbed my spice box, run outside, and calmly waited for the red truck to arrive.

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