

INDIA'S BAN LEADS TO LENTIL SHORTAGE HERE

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In the hands of an Indian cook, lentils - also called dals or pulses - might be made into spinach dal or sambar. Whatever dish they go into, they feature prominently on the daily menu of most Indian-American families. Open a kitchen cabinet in a typical home and you can probably find a dozen dals of myriad shapes and hues: red masoor dal, green moong beans, or yellow toor dal. The pulses are so integral to the cooking, and such an important source of protein, that many families have a few pounds of these staples on hand.

In late June, the Union Commerce Ministry of India put a temporary halt on the international trade of pulses until the end of the year. Two weeks later, it extended the ban until March 2007. That means that no pulses will be exported from the Indian subcontinent. The ban is supposed to serve as a stop-gap measure to ease inflation in the Indian domestic market, where pulses that once cost about 40 cents per pound now sell for 50 cents. Earlier this year, moong dal in India cost about 80 cents per kilo (roughly two pounds); it now costs \$1.20.

To understand the nature of the crisis, you have to understand how lentils fit into the cuisine. Each dal has an important culinary role in traditional dishes. For all Indians, a warm bowl of dal complements the meal, but for vegetarians in fact, for a substantial percentage of the population, who shun meat for religious reasons dal is the main source of protein.

The lentil ban puts many people in the Indian-American community in a difficult position. Lavanya Marla, a graduate student at MIT, says, "I use toor dal a lot, so I decided to stock up last week. I bought more than I needed, despite the increase in prices, because the store owner at Little India, where I shop, thinks that the prices are likely to go up even further." Even those in the industry were surprised by the sudden ruling. Large distributors in the United States, like the New York-based House of Spices, are now looking for alternative sources to fill the vacuum. Company president R.L. Soni says that containers of pulses that were ready to ship from India were pulled off docks. Some dals sought by Indian customers are grown in Africa and Thailand, but it will take time to strike deals and start imports from these nations. "The prices of lentils, long overdue for a revision, could stabilize in the next two months once these arrangements are made," Soni says.

In the Boston area, where 43,801 Indians live, the cost of pulses has nearly doubled. Since the inventory is moving quickly, Indian grocery stores are rationing supplies. Malik Bokhari, the manager of the Waltham India Grocery store, says, "About two in five customers have been over-buying dals in the last month."

"Right now, the price of gram flours has gone up, and eventually products made from pulses such as papads [savory wafers] and mithais [sweets] will also be affected by the price increase," says Sarabjeet Babla of the family-owned Shalimar India Food & Spices in Cambridge. Although warm dal is a staple for all Indian meals, South Indian food is particularly pulse-heavy. Urad dal, used in making crepes and pancakes such as dosas, adais, and uthappams, and toor dal for the accompanying gravy-like sambar, are fast disappearing from shelves.

The Dakshin restaurant in Framingham has increased the price of its popular weekend buffet by \$2 (it now costs \$12), though the items on the regular menu remain unaffected. Owner Rajan Viswanathan says that the restaurant is making an effort to put innovative dishes on the buffet table like chili-idli an Indo-Chinese variation on the regular lentil-and-rice dumpling, which uses bell peppers, onions, and soy sauce. This allows cooks to economize on the urad dal. "The sambar will be runny if we try to lower the amount of dal in it, so that is hardly a solution," says the restaurateur, who is unwilling to compromise on the quality of the food.

Even bloggers are in on the act. "It is going to be difficult for me as a lentil addict, but still I support the Indian government's decision," says Indira Singari of Boardman, Ohio, who writes the food blog Mahanandi (www.nandyala.org/mahanandi).

Singari is optimistic that Indian wholesalers will soon make arrangements with other lentil-exporting nations. "I think of this as a chance to explore other cuisines and find vegetarian goodness in them," she says.

Less-modern cooks might disagree.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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