

Basic Indian Spices

where to find them and how to cook with them..

by Savitha Enner (PART 1 of 3)

Indian cuisine uses about 75 varieties of spices, about 20 common grains (so many more not easily available), and more than 25 types of legumes and lentils. Indian cuisine is so diverse that every 50Kms radius will have its own distinct food culture. When I introduce diverse cuisines of India in my cooking classes and supper club events, my guests are pleasantly surprised with the variety of flavors. So, it's hard to decide what makes for a staple Indian pantry. I researched through most frequently asked questions on my social media posts, menus of Indian restaurants here in US and most popular Indian cookbooks on my local library shelf. That was the starting point to this guide. I choose very few common and popular ingredients my friends are curious about and decided to write this guide and film a corresponding video. This guide or video doesn't list all there in Indian cooking but gives a great starting point.

Hope you find this useful.

This is a part 1 of 3 part guide. Corresponding video is linked for a visual understanding. Video guide can be found on YouTube on my personal channel / Savitha Enner.

<https://youtu.be/D0ZF7JjzhaA>

More recipes high lightening individual spice will be released periodically on my channel.

<https://www.cooklikeayogi.com/> for recipes

1. Spices
2. Grains, legumes and lentils
3. Vegetables and more

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Namaskar
Savitha Enne

PART 1: SPICES

Out of 75 varieties of spices, I have listed the most popular ones. The information includes where to find and how to cook with them.

General rules for sourcing, storing and cooking with Indian spices.

- Find an Indian supermarket where you live. Even if you have to drive a bit, it will be worth your trip. Indian markets carry spices in bulk and are economical. Make a list of all you need and stock up your spices.
- There are several online stores with good quality organic spices. I use 24 organic mantra (no affiliations what so ever) as its easily available here in Maryland Indian stores.
- Store spices in airtight containers or good quality zip locks.
- I keep my extra whole and ground spices in freezer to extend their shelf life. All spices have natural oils and become rancid when exposed to heat and humidity.
- There is not one standard curry powder or curry in Indian homecooking. Spice blends are very personal and versatile.
- Whole spices or ground powder are usually used at the beginning of a recipe by warming up a neutral oil to release their natural aromatic oil.
- Toasted ground spices are added at the end of cooking to keep the dish fragrant and intense.
- Whole spices or seeds need to pop and sizzle in oil to release their aromatic taste. Always warm the cooking oil before adding your spices.

Turmeric

Turmeric has a vibrant yellow color which not only adds color but also an earthy, umami taste to a dish. Turmeric is known for its healing and anti-inflammatory properties. The intensity of the turmeric color depends on the variety and geographical location it comes from. Varieties include milder, almost white versions to ones with a hint of pineapple flavor, to ones with a deeper yellow color and hints of orange. My favorite is from an Indian permaculture farm near my parents' hometown; it has a deep yellow color and taste like pure earth.

How to use Turmeric

- Mix a teaspoon of turmeric and honey in warm milk for quick healing drink
- Mix a teaspoon of turmeric, honey and lemon juice for a facial pack
- Add turmeric to steaming veggies to add flavor and color
- Add turmeric to smoothies
- Infuse turmeric in warm oil to make infused turmeric oil to top salads and soups

Buying Turmeric in the U.S.:

I mostly bring my turmeric from India, but when I have run out of my supply, these are the brands I have tried and liked:

- 24 Mantra organic brand (Indian stores or Amazon)
- Kirkland brand (Costco)
- Simply Organic brand (Target)

Recipe: Turmeric Milk

Ingredients

1 cup of unsweetened light coconut milk

1 cup of any other nut milk (almond, oat or cashew milk)

1/2 tsp cardamom powder

1/2 tsp cinnamon powder

1 pinch of peppercorn powder

1 tsp turmeric powder (more if you like that bright yellow color but the body likes it when you give spices in small doses.(In this case more is not better)

1 tsp of ghee or coconut oil

Method

In a sauce pan, bring all ingredients to gentle boil (do not over boil it). Turn off the heat, add honey, maple syrup or raw sugar, stir well and pour into mugs. Enjoy the creamy, luscious golden latte!

Red Chilly Powder

Chilly powder is what gives Indian food the intense, red color which we associate with a curry. There are so many different varieties of chilly peppers and as many varieties of chilly powders. The best way to buy a good chilly powder is to try a few brands, test their degree of smokiness and heat – as well as the color after cooked – and choose the best one for you. Personally, I like my chilly powder with some kick (but not too spicy), a bright color and a bit of sweet smoky taste. I get this by using a variety called Byadagi chillies ,I grew up eating.

How to use chilly powder

- Use whole red chillies to infuse in warm oil
- Use red chilly powder to add spiciness to any dish
- Use red chilly powder on roasted veggies, nuts and beans to add flavor

Buying Red chilly powder or Red chilly in the U.S.

- Some recipes call for whole red chillies. The crinklier, long variety found in Indian stores are less potent and less spicy than the smooth, short variety. There are also stout, round ones which are smokier and spicier than these two. I personally like the crinklier, longer variety, which are called Byadagi chillies.
- You can make your own blend of chilly powder by combining equal parts of cayenne with sweet and smoky paprika
- You can buy Byadagi Chillies from Indian markets and process them in your spice grinder to a dusty powder.
- You can buy Kashmiri Laal Mirch / Kashmiri chilly powder from Indian markets or Online

Recipe: Quick Tomato and Chilly Pickle

Ingredients

- 1 pint grape/cherry tomatoes, halved
- 3 to 4 whole Chillies (seeded)
- 1 tsp grapeseed or olive oil
- 1 tsp salt
- 1tsp mild chilly powder
- juice of 1 lime
- 1 tsp mustard powder
- 1 tsp agave nectar or white sugar

Procedure

In a large glass bowl, combine tomatoes ,salt, lime juice, mustard powder, agave or sugar and mix thoroughly.

Heat a small skillet, add oil and bring it to a smoky point.

Add your seeded chillies, toss for 15 seconds and turn off the heat.

Pour this mixture into the rest of the ingredients in a bowl and mix well to combine.

Let sit for at least one hour.

Serve on toasted baguettes, pita bread or as a relish on sandwiches or tacos.

Can be refrigerated up to a week.

Coriander and Cilantro

Cilantro

Cilantro leaves bear coriander seeds, which are ground to into a powder adds an earthy, meaty and a little floral taste to India dishes. I have found two types of cilantro in markets in India and here in the U.S. The variety with smaller leaves with skinnier stems is more fragrant compared to

the variety with fleshier leaves and succulent stems. I personally favor the first variety. It can be hard to find in stores, which has motivated me to grow my own in my herb garden. Cilantro plants like the cooler temperatures of spring and fall, and shady areas of the garden. All parts of cilantro can be used: leaves, stems and thoroughly cleaned roots. The stems have more flavor than their leaves, though leaves are pretty fragrant with lots of oils. I generally use both the stems and leaves, chopping them up finely or blending them into sauces. I use the leaves for garnishes and the thoroughly cleaned roots in vegetable stock.

Buying Cilantro in U.S.

Almost all grocery stores and markets sell fresh cilantro. If you want to buy larger quantities or find cilantro for a lower price, Asian markets are a good bet.

Coriander (Dried seeds or powder)

The seeds from cilantro are little fruitier and almost floral, whereas cilantro is more grassy. Coriander powder gives body to a curry and an umami taste when slow toasted in oil. Coriander is also the main ingredient in curry blends in both South and North Indian spice mixes. I buy coriander seeds to make my spice blends but also buy good quality powder to give a fragrant saucy texture to my curries. Coriander powder is pretty forgiving; is the mildest of all Indian spices.

Buying Coriander in the US

Coriander seeds and premade coriander powder are available in all asian markets. Whole foods and Target have organic brands.

How to use Coriander and Cilantro

- Crush a few seeds in motor and pestle to add while grilling or roasting veggies for a robust bite.
- Use coriander powder to add texture to your sauces.
- Use cilantro to add a fresh, herby taste like in pesto, hummus, relish or as sandwich green.

Recipe: Cilantro and mint chutney

Ingredients

1 cup chopped cilantro
1/4 cup chopped mint
1 Thai green chilly or Serrano pepper
1 inch ginger (peeled?)

Juice of 1 lime
1/2 tsp salt
a little bit of crushed peppercorn

Procedure

Blend all ingredients with very little water and check seasoning to your taste.

Cumin

Cumin is spicy and smoky like black peppercorn, and has an ability to take a dish to the next level of taste and flavor without any complimentary spices. Cumin seeds are one of my favorite, go-to spices when I want to make a simple but exceptionally tasty dish. I remember putting too much cumin in dishes when I first started to learn cooking, and it would overpower all other subtle flavors. If you have choice between buying cumin powder and seeds, please invest in some good quality seeds. There are various ways you can use this versatile spice. The raw, uncooked seeds have a spicy bite to them, but when you toast them, the smokiness comes through.

Where to buy Cumin in the U.S.

- Most International markets carry cumin seeds and powder as cumin is popular in Mexican, African and Mediterranean cooking.
- You can buy bulk seeds at Indian markets for much more economical price.

How to use Cumin

- Toast the seeds in a dry pan or in oil to release their flavor.
- Powder ,toasted or raw cumin seeds to add to soups and curries (using a spice grinder or mortar and pestle)
- Combine coriander and Cumin seed powder to flavor many North Indian dishes
- Infuse cumin seeds in hot oil, along with mustard seeds to flavor many South Indian dishes
- If using the seeds, always use at the beginning of the dish, by popping them in hot oil to release their natural smokiness.

Recipe: Cumin flavored Cauliflower

Ingredients

- 1tsp oil of your choice
- Cauliflower florets or cauliflower rice
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- salt and pepper to taste

Procedure

Heat oil in a large cast iron skillet.

When the oil reaches its smoking point, add cumin seeds and allow them to pop and splutter.

Add cauliflower florets or cauliflower rice and toss them until well coated in this infused oil. Do not over crowd them or you will end up with soggy mess.

Cook covered on a medium to high flame until tender, with some charring on the florets.

Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Garam Masala

Garam Masala is a specialty blend of spices originating from Mughalai cuisine in India. “Garam” means hot* and masala means spice blend. Some common spices used to make garam masala are red chillies, coriander, cumin, cinnamon.. Each family has its own custom blend(s) or a person (a “masalchi”) who makes a special blend for them. As a result, garam masala is unique to each region and contributes to India’s diverse cuisine. Garam masala is used in a lot in North Indian cooking and has spread into rest of the India.

* In Ayurvedic cooking, spices are termed “hot” or “cool” depending on their nature. So, some of the hot-natured spices are ground to make a blend that is intense in its taste.

Where to buy garam masala in the U.S.

- There are overwhelming choices of garam masala online or Indian markets, and each brand will taste very different.
- I make my own blend, but I have tried few store-bought ones. MDH, Mantra 24 Organic, and Badhsah are some I have tried and liked. My personal favorite is Rajwadi Garam masala, which is available in most Indian stores.
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How to use Garam Masala

- Make your garam masala using your favorite spices. Most garam masala blends start with toasting the spices. Start with some chillies, coriander, cumin, peppercorns, cinnamon and other spices to make your signature garam masala.
- Add garam masala after your dish is almost cooked to add some oomph! to your dish.
- Add garam masala to roasted vegetables – one of my favorite ways to enjoy this blend.
- Mix a tsp of garam masala in some olive oil and serve with warm bread.

Sambar Masala Powder

Sambar powder is a spice blend used in Southern Indian cuisine almost every day. Like every other masala, sambar powder is a very personal blend of red chilly, coriander seeds, cumin, curry leaves, urad dal, chana dal, peppercorns as base ingredients and some additional spices for specific and personal taste. This type of spice mix is used to make Sambar, curries, Rasam and many other dishes. In some parts of South India, coriander seeds are also called sambar seeds, as they are main ingredient for sambar powder.

Sambar powder sometimes is also called as madras curry powder(A very British term after the colonization).

Where to buy Sambar powder in the U.S.

- You can make your own by using my recipe and make changes as you get the hang of it.
- My favorite brand of sambar powder to buy in an Indian store is MTR
- Mantra organics and MTR sambar powder is also available on amazon.

How to use Sambar powder

My recipe for sambar powder (sometimes I add different spices to change the flavor of my mix)

Slow roast the following individually one at a time on a very slow flame until aromatic:

- 1/4 cup of coriander seeds
- 1Tbsp cumin seeds
- 1/4cup chana dal
- 1Tbsp urad dal
- 6 to 7 dry red chilles
- 1/4 cup curry leaves
- 1tsp peppercorns
- 1tsp met-hi seeds

Blend the roasted ingredients in a spice grinder. Store in an airtight container

- Sambar spice mix can be used to flavor soups, broths, cooked dal, cooked beans, roasted vegetables, sambar, curries and many rice dishes.
- Mix sambar spice with a warm tablespoon of coconut oil or olive oil as a dipping sauce for breads and crackers.
- Sprinkle a generous amount of spice mix to roast vegetables .

Recipe: Tomato Sambar

Ingredients

1/2 cup toor dal (any dal works)

2 large tomatoes

1 tsp Coconut oil

1 tsp mustard seeds
10 curry leaves
1 tsp salt
1/2 cup chopped cilantro
4 to 6 cups of water

Procedure

Cook 2 large tomatoes(roughly chopped) and 1/2 cup of toor dal in 4cups of water

Once the dal is cooked thoroughly, use a hand blender to bring into soup consistency.

Add additional water if needed.

Add 2 tsp of sambar mix, and salt to taste (at least a teaspoon)m and bring it to boil again.

In a separate small pan, heat 1 Tbsp of coconut oil or ghee, add 1 tsp mustard seeds and curry leaves. Let them pop and sizzle.

Immediately pour this hot infused oil into the soup, and garnish with cilantro before serving.

Add more lemon juice(optional)

Some other common spices used in Indian cooking

- Mustard seeds : Raw mustard seeds are intense and bitter. Seeds are always popped on a dry pan or in oil at the beginning of a dish to bring out their smokiness.
- Curry leaves: Fresh curry leaves are used every single day in southern India. When curry leaves hit warm oil, it releases the oils and flavors the whole dish. My most favorite ingredient in my kitchen which I use almost everyday.
- Fennel seeds : Fennel seeds have liquorish, sweet after taste. Raw or toasted seeds are used to aid digestions in teas and curries.
- Cloves : Cloves are intense and spicy. I mostly use them a complimentary spice with cinnamon and cardamom.
- Cinnamon: Cinnamon is of the main spices in some of the most popular spice blends like garam masala or curry powder.
- Peppercorns: Crushed Black pepper are very intense and mostly used to spice(hot) the dish.
- Fenugreek seeds and fenugreek dry leaves (Kasuri methi): This a magic ingredient like miso or maple syrup. Gives a umami taste to the dish like tikka masalas and biryani.
- Cardamom: Most floral of all the spices. One of the most popular spice in my pantry. Used in chai spice,biryani, garam masala and almost all sweet dishes. Its the lavender of Indian cooking.
- Poppy seeds : ground up seeds are used to thicken the curry and add a nutty flavor.
- Kalonji/ Nigella seeds: They are smoky and almost have oniony taste to them. A very popular spices in western India
- Mango powder/ Anchor powder: Sprinkle some amchur on your fries(my favorite) or roasted vegetables to add the tart tast

- Saffron: Beautiful saffron is mostly used in dessert and specialty rice dishes. Soak saffron from atleast 20minutes in warm water or milk to get the most out this pricy spice.
- Anise : This liquorish spices is used in biryanis to intensify the flavors.
- Nutmeg
- Caram seeds
- Bay leaf