

# INDIAN SUMMER



## My top ten spices – Minesh Agnihotri - 4<sup>th</sup> July 2016 – The Usual Suspects?

As I was growing up, I didn't realise what a wonderful cook my mum was and the time and effort she took to roast and grind spices, prepare marinades and treat us to fantastic Indian food. 35 years later I understand what makes some of these spices so special with the right treatment.

Many people think cooking a traditional "curry" is just garlic, ginger turmeric, chilli and ready made curry powder. The first bit of advice I give is to throw away the curry powder, it should not exist. The array of spices that we use is actually a complete game changer and will give your dish layers and layers of wonderful flavour. The word curry actually comes from the Tamil word "kari" meaning black pepper. I refuse to call dishes curry as they should be respected from their origins and their heritage rather than be labeled with a common name to encompass all regions. There are a number of spices available. The following is my personal top ten in which used correctly can make a fantastic dish

### **Turmeric (Haldi)**

Turmeric is possibly the most common Indian spice we use. It can be used fresh (like ginger) or dried. It has been known to have a host of health benefits and is used in a lot of spice mixes. My mum raves on about the benefits of applying to cuts and drinking it in milk. The flavour of fresh turmeric is slightly stronger than dried, and it stains very easily, so careful with your clothes and utensils while using it. It has a pungent, earthy fragrance; use it in small quantities to give your dish a beautiful golden colour. We use this in a lot of dishes, from tarka dal to Malwani mutton

### **Cumin (Jeera)**

Cumin is used frequently whole and in spice mixes to add a characteristic smoky note to Indian dishes. Distinctive brown seeds and intense fragrance. It is sometimes confused with fennel, but you can tell the difference by looking at its color (brown, as opposed to green fennel) and taste (smoky, as opposed to a stronger licorice taste). Cumin is best used freshly ground for the most intense flavor. One thing to keep in mind while dry-roasting this spice is that it burns really easily, and burnt cumin tastes very bitter and will be very noticeable in your dish. Toast this spice until your nose just gets a whiff of smoke and fragrance (about 30 seconds max), and then let it cool before blending into mixes. We use this in abundance, our second most widely used spice. We love using this to make our garlic cumin butter to flavour our tandoori roti's

### **Coriander (Dhaniya)**

Coriander is probably the most ubiquitous of spices in the Indian spice rack. It is one of the oldest-known spices in the world, and it's characterized by its golden-yellow colour. The seeds are very aromatic with citrus notes. Whole coriander is used as a base for many of our spice mixes, and ground coriander is one of the most commonly used ground spices in Indian cuisine. Like cumin, it needs to be dry-roasted until you can start seeing a light golden-brown tinge to the seeds and they start "dancing" and popping in the pan. This is used in abundance in our Hyderabad Chicken dish.

### **Cassia bark (Dalchini)**

Dalchini is an interesting spice. Also known as Chinese cinnamon, it is the bark of the cinnamon tree. It is rougher and more rustic than the sweeter cinnamon. Cinnamon is a little bit different from cassia, (sweeter) and usually differentiated by being called "true cinnamon."

We use dalchini as it has a stronger flavour. Cassia can also be used whole or ground in spice mixes. It is easily distinguishable by its rough, tree bark-like texture, and the best way to check for freshness is to rub a little on your fingers. If you can smell a cinnamon fragrance, then the bark is fresh. If substituting cinnamon for dalchini, the taste will be sweeter but less intense. We use dalchini for a lot of our dishes mainly in marinades and is a big player in our tamarind and date chutney.

### **Mustard Seeds (Rai)**

One of the most common sounds in our family as I was growing up. My mum would temper the oil and these little brown seeds would be flying everywhere. Smoky and nutty, the flavour is released when fried in oil. Usually paired with curry leaves and different oils from Coconut (south) to mustard oil (north). Different regions of India would use these with different oils.

### **Green cardamom (Elaichi)**

The world's third most expensive spice. Sweet and light. It is usually used in indian sweets and savoury aromatic dishes. You can use the spice whole to flavour hot oil at the start of making your dish or you can dry roast, grind and intensify the flavour. We use this in our Hyderabadi chicken, Malwani mutton, paneer and meat marinades.

### **Black Cardamom (Moti Elaichi)**

One of my favourite spices. This is the big brother of green cardamom.

This cardamom is a bigger black pod. Smoky, intense and very aromatic, fantastic in lamb dishes paired with mustard oil. A word of caution, use sparingly as it is very aromatic. We use this in our Malwani mutton and lamb marinades. Again, can be used to temper the oil or dry roast and grind.

### **Nutmeg (Jaifal)**

Another one of my favourites. A beautiful delicate flavour. I love using this spice as it brings a delicacy and refinement to a dish. Use freshly ground and do not roast as it impairs its flavour. We use this in our Hyderabadi chicken.

### **Saffron (Kesar)**

The most expensive spice in the world but hey it is so worth it. Expensive as it has to be hand picked. Very floral and fragrant, it is wonderful in desserts.

We make a saffron sauce with onions, cashew nuts, cream and saffron, it is amazing with slow roasted lamb. Make it by adding to warm milk or water and then add to your dish. Great for adding to biryani's

### **Garam Masala (literally means hot spice)**

This can be bought ready made from shops but the best result is to roast and grind your own. I get asked all the time about what makes up garam masala. My mums was always very individual to her and most indian families would have their own recipes. Usually includes, cumin seeds, coriander seeds, black pepper, dalchini, bay leaves & cloves. This list is by no means exhaustive and varies from all different parts of India.

The above is purely a list of my favourites, which make the top ten. There are so many other wonderful spices and also essentials like kashmiri chilli powder, kasuri methi (roasted fenugreek leaves), kalonji, fennel seeds, mace and cloves to name a few.