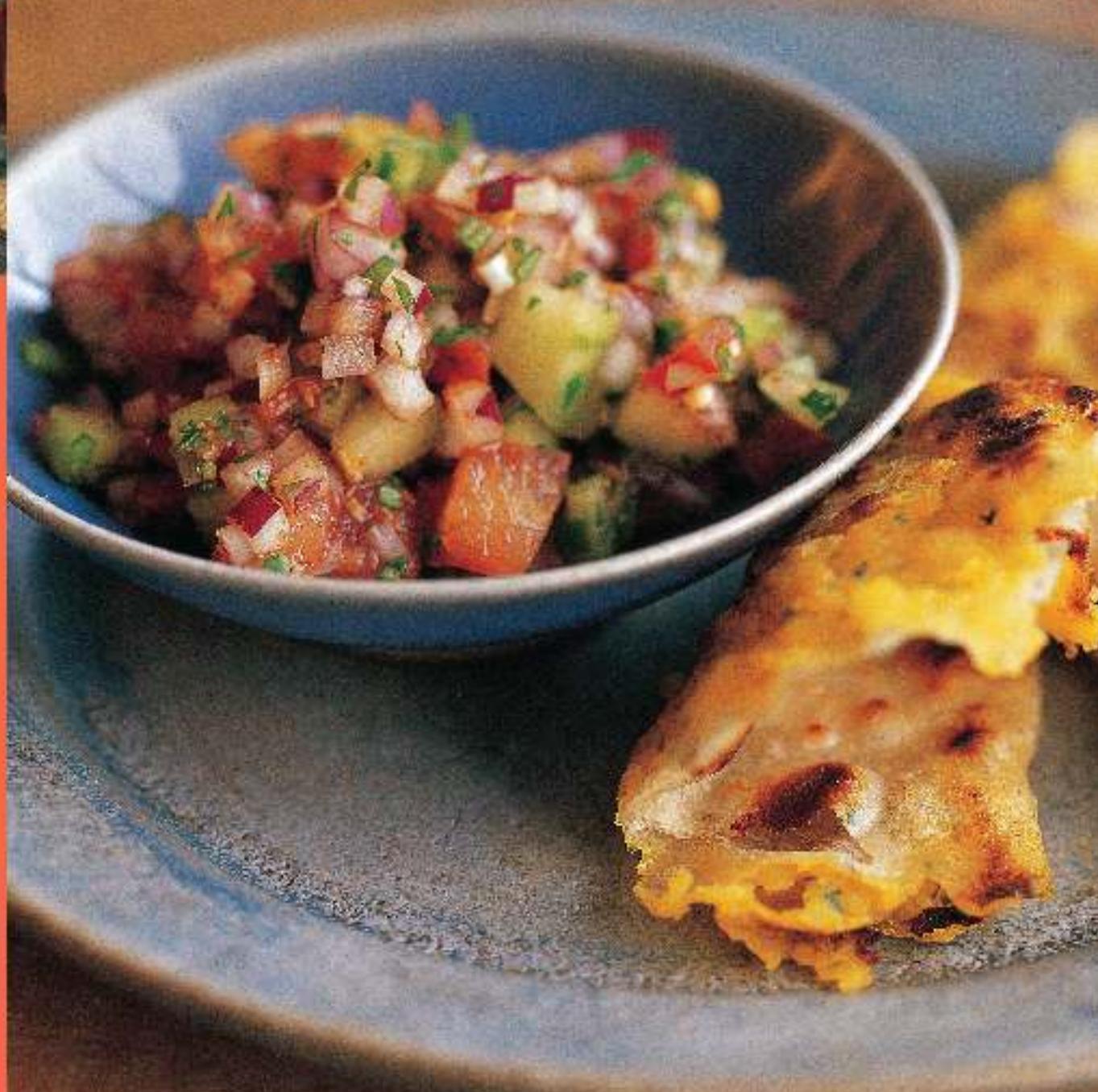


# MANGOES & CURRY

CULINARY TRAVELS THROUGH THE GREAT



JEFFREY ALFORD AND NA  
award-winning authors of

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# MANGOES & CURRY LEAVES

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ALSO BY JEFFREY ALFORD AND NAOMI DUGUID

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# MANGOES & CURRY LEAVES

CULINARY TRAVELS THROUGH THE GREAT SUBCONTINENT

**JEFFREY ALFORD & NAOMI DUGUID**

Photographs by Jeffrey Alford & Naomi Duguid

Additional photographs by Richard Jung







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the great subcontinent

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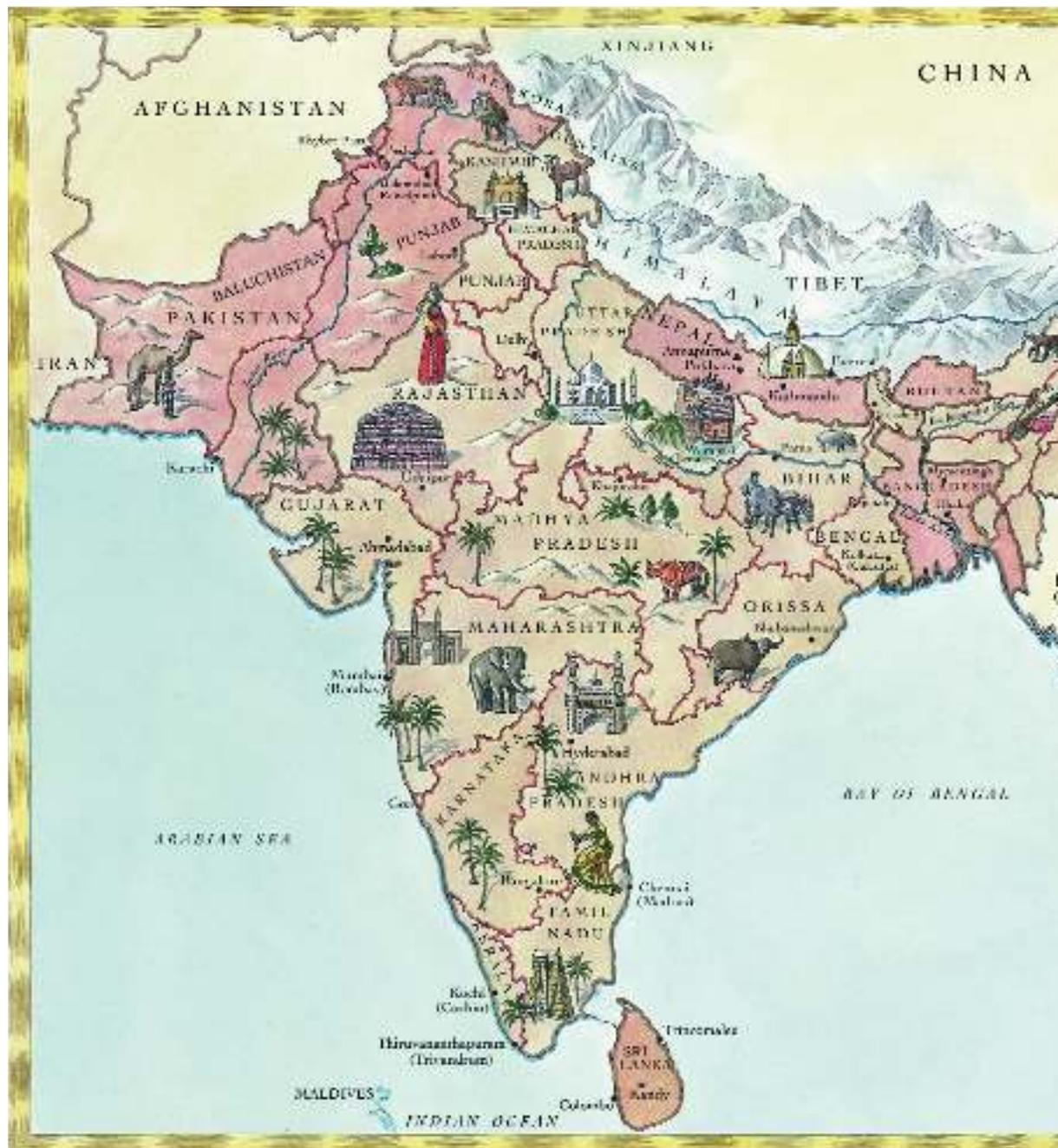
# P R E F A C E

It's a long way from where we live in Toronto to the Subcontinent. If we fly east through Europe, it takes us eight hours to get to London, an hour of layover, and then another eight hours to Mumbai. Sometimes we fly west, across the Pacific, then it takes six to eight hours longer. Either way, it's a long flight. We get tired on the airplane, there's a part of us that doesn't like being a little bit uncomfortable. When we're on the ground, we find yet another awkward position in which to sleep. And yes, the Subcontinent is a long way from where we live. *the world!*

We've been making trips to the Subcontinent for thirty years. We first started traveling there not as backpackers, having heard and read so many travelogues, but as backpackers. Our trips were long journeys filled with high highs and low lows, times we'll never forget. But as we've gotten older, and as we've become parents, our trips have become a lot more frequent and generally shorter, though in some ways almost always with more emotion. A trip to the Subcontinent has become a homecoming. We come home feeling more alive, more connected.

In the Subcontinent, we're continually amazed by the everyday food. Whether a simple meal of rice and lentils or grilled fish served with a hot tandoor bread and a hot chutney, it doesn't have to be elaborate to be good, or to be interesting. One thing we've observed in eating our way around the Subcontinent is there's tremendous creativity and harmony in the food, on an everyday basis. Like all good food (and good cooking), it's at times both simple and complex, faithful to tradition and to the moment.

This book is all about the food of the Great Subcontinent, through the eyes of two people who aren't from the Subcontinent. It's about tasting the food as travelers and as cooks, whether in a restaurant or the main market in Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) or in our kitchen at home. We can't pretend to know the food from the inside out, but we do know it intimately. We're looking in. From Sri Lanka to Bangladesh, from the Indian subcontinent, this book is but a taste of one of the most extraordinary cuisines in the world, served with a little slice of life on the



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# THE GREAT SUBCONTINENT

## **In geological terms, the Subcontinent is a story**

A hundred million years ago, it was attached to the Asian continent, but then it gradually separated, floating atop a tectonic plate moving north-northeast across what was then the Sea of Tethys. About 50 million years ago, this floating subcontinental plate collided with the Asian plate, and when these two giants met, like two ships crashing head on, they collided with such force that the sea floor on the Asian edges rose and buckled. On the Asian side of the collision (the Himalaya-Tibet), the land rose up into a plateau almost three miles high. On the Subcontinent side, the land rippled up into ranges of mountains, including the mountains in the world, the Himalaya and the Karakoram.

If you hike in the high ranges of the Himalaya and Karakoram, and ice, it's still possible to find fossils of seashells and pinkish coral, left from the ancient Sea of Tethys. In some parts of Pakistan, in the Karakoram range, there are valleys surrounded by unbelievably massive mountains of rock. You can see where "rivers" of rock, like flows of lava, met the mountains.

Geologically speaking, the Himalaya is a young mountain range, still growing, but the Subcontinent in people terms is ancient. When the two continents collided and the mountains rose, the land was flowing down toward the sea, making fertile land that led to great civilizations. The Harappan civilization, which flourished on the banks of the Indus River (in present-day Pakistan), was a civilization as developed in every way as the

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and the Nile. Far from the Himalaya, in the tropical climes of the southern parts of the Subcontinent, the highly civilized kingdom of Anuradhapura, on the northern plains of Sri Lanka, existed for nearly fifteen hundred years, beginning in the fourth century B.C.

**The present-day Subcontinent is made up of seven countries:** Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh on the mainland, and the island nations of Sri Lanka and the Maldives (see map, page 7). The northernmost edge of the Subcontinent lies somewhere not far from the latitude of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and its southernmost tip extends south of the latitude of Panama, three degrees north of the equator. The total area of India is approximately one third the size of the continental United States; that of the entire Subcontinent is roughly half the area of the continental United States. The population of the United States is now around 293 million, but the Subcontinent has nearly five times as many inhabitants: about 1.4 billion.

**Life in the Subcontinent, especially agricultural life, revolves around weather and the seasons.** In most parts of the region, the seasons are marked by wet and dry as much as—or more than—by temperature. Wet and dry are largely determined by the seasonal winds called *monsoons*. Most of the Subcontinent is watered in the June-to-September season of the southwest monsoon, the prevailing wind that flows over the region from the southwest in those months, bringing moisture from the Indian Ocean. In the October-to-January period, the monsoon winds blow from the northeast across the Bay of Bengal, bringing rain to the east coasts of India and Sri Lanka.

In the tropical south of India, and in most of Sri Lanka, the climate is fairly constant year-round, around 86° to 90°F, so the traditional way of marking the two main seasons: wet and dry. In the north of India, and in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, there are (or four) seasons: summer (hot season), rainy season, winter, and dry season (fall and winter), and in some areas there are also

The hottest season, summer, is the period before the monsoon comes. In most places it lasts from early March until the monsoon comes. It's marked by baked dry earth (except where there are rivers and winds. Once the monsoon comes and brings rain, the weather changes. As the rains taper off in September, and things cool down, it's the time of the main rice crop and time to plant cooler-season crops like wheat. The air is clear and the temperatures moderate. In the mountains, there is also a cold season, from December to February, and then things start warming up again.

The most pleasant time to visit is dry season, which is the end of the Subcontinent, that is late September to February. In the north (when the southwest monsoon ends), for temperatures are moderate and the skies clear. Nonetheless, the rainy season can be a very exciting time. There are usually downpours, then a period of buildup of clouds and then more rain. The hot summer season until June can be grueling because of the heat, but the benefits and compensations: It has its own beauty, and it's the time for mangoes and a number of other fruits.

## THE PEOPLE

Figuring out who's who in the Subcontinent is not an easy task even for people who live here, let alone for foreigners. After more than five thousand years of human habitation and wave after wave of invaders and wanderers, and with a physical geography (deserts, thick jungles, steep mountains) that in some regions reinforces extreme isolation, it's no wonder that the Subcontinent is one of the most diversely and richly populated places on earth.

**One way to begin to appreciate this incredible diversity of ethnicity and culture is through language.** India has fourteen major languages and more than a hundred others. Nepal, a country roughly the same size as the state of Iowa, has more than fifty different languages. Over time, each deep Himalayan valley gave rise to a distinct culture, each relatively isolated from the next. The same is true in the mountainous regions of northern Pakistan. Perhaps the greatest cultural diversity anywhere in the Subcontinent is in the extreme northeastern part of India, in the states of Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur. Here, as in the nearby Himalayan foothills of southwestern China and the neighboring areas of northern Myanmar, tribal groups make up a majority of the population.

Just as we can group language families in Europe (the Romance languages, the Arab languages, the Celtic languages, and so on), so too we can groupings of languages in the Subcontinent and groupings on a cultural map. Some languages, such as Punjabi, cross international and state borders, while others are

Across the northern part of the Subcontinent are Indo-European, and many of them have Sanskrit roots. Romance languages have Latin roots. They're written in different scripts, and each has a particular literature and millions of native speakers. Some may have roots in other languages (as do Spanish and Italian, for example), but they're distinct. They include Hindi, one of the two official languages of India (the other is English); Bengali, the language of Bangladesh and the state of Bengal; Gujarati; Oriya, the majority language of Orissa; Marathi, dominant in Mumbai (Bombay) and Maharashtra; and Urdu, in both the Indian and Pakistani parts of the Punjab.

*Woman and child in a village near Kaziranga National Park in the state of Assam, India. OPPOSITE, LEFT: Two Tibetan men at the Nepal–Tibet border near Burang, western Tibet. Nepalis and Tibetans come here in the summer to trade salt and wool from Tibet for wheat flour and simple consumer goods from Nepal. RIGHT: Village women in the Khajuraho area, Madhya Pradesh state, India.*



dominant language in Pakistan's Sind province; Assamese; and Nepali. The majority language in Sri Lanka, Sinhala, is also Indo-European. Other Indo-European languages, from the Iranian branch of the family, are found mostly in Pakistan: Urdu, the majority language there, with Arab and Persian rather than Sanskrit roots, and written in Arabic script; Baluchi, the dominant language in the province of Baluchistan; Pushtu, spoken on the northwest frontier and into Afghanistan; and Wakhi, spoken in northern Hunza.

In the south, in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, the majority languages are Dravidian, a language family outside the Indo-European group. They include Tamil, the majority language in Chennai (Madras) and Tamil Nadu, which is spoken by the large Tamil population of Sri Lanka; Malayalam, the language of Kerala; Telugu, the majority language in Andhra Pradesh; Kannada, the majority language in Karnataka; and Gondi, the language of a large tribal group in the northern Deccan.

In the northern hills and mountains of India and Nepal, a number of languages of the Tibeto-Burmese family are spoken, while in the hills of Orissa and Jharkhand (south of Bihar) as well as up through the northeast

provinces of India and in small pockets in Bangladesh, people speak a variety of languages unrelated to any of the above.

**The Subcontinent's rich tapestry of people and all aspects of life, including religion.** While the Indian subcontinent (belonging to many different sects and groups), has the largest number of Muslims in the world (over a billion, some fifty million), some Sunni, some Shia, some Ismaili (including the Khan). The Sinhalese in Sri Lanka follow Theravada Buddhism. The trans-Himalayan peoples in Nepal and India follow Hinduism. Sikhism has more than nineteen million followers and all across India. There is an important Zoroastrian community in the Mumbai (Bombay) area, and pockets of Christians in various regions, most notably in Kerala, Sri Lanka, and throughout India.

Nearly 75 percent of people in the Subcontinent are rural, although the urban population is more than three billion. In all this great mix of people, there are many tribal groups. In remote (and not so remote) regions, their lives are shaped by their dominant cultures.





*A simple lunch made by a settled Ribari woman in a village near the Pakistani border in northwestern Katchh, in the state of Gujarat. On the left are millet skillet breads; lower right is a simple potato curry (see Katchhi Village Potato Curry, page 150) and above it, chopped onions to be eaten as a fresh condiment.*

## THE FOOD

Generalizations about food in the Subcontinent are difficult to make. As starters, it's a very big place! We feel we could try to do it, but we still not be comfortable making such generalizations. The result of the Subcontinent's size and scale, but also its diverse terrain and culture. It's very easy in the Subcontinent for food to be subdivided into subregions and then into sub-subregions. Perhaps all old civilizations share, a long layering of food over time. But, to do the best we can, here goes.

**Pakistan**, in the northwest corner of the Subcontinent, has a diverse terrain and climate: high cold mountains and hot lowlands and deep isolated valleys. What people eat in the mountains differs from the food of Lahore, the capital city of Pakistan, which also differs from the food of the Hunza Valley in the mountains, and from the Baluchi desert on the border with Iran. Pakistan is a mix of immigrants, Muslims who moved (bringing their food with them) from many parts of India, especially Mumbai and the eastern Punjab, at the time of Independence. Before India was partitioned into Pakistan (East and West Pakistan), most of the population of Pakistan is Muslim, very little Hindu, but lamb, goat, and beef, as well as chicken, are eaten, though not afford it. Pakistan is just across the mountains from India, its neighbor, has had wave after wave of invaders, from Alexander the Great to the Moghul conquerors. The food is apparent in the widespread use of the large vertical clay ovens, *tandoors* for baking bread and cooking meat and vegetables. Bread is the staple, either unleavened rotis (skillet flatbread) or naan. Rice cooked with meat and aromatics, especially chicken or biryani, using techniques very like those used in India, is eaten at some meals and on special occasions. Meat, sometimes chicken, is cut into pieces and marinated in a hot oil or cooked in a tandoor oven, or it is simmered with

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make a curry. In the Hunza Valley and other isolated mountain regions, dried fruit and wheat are staples.

Unlike Pakistan, which has been a passageway for ideas and invaders, and is on several trading routes between the Subcontinent and Central Asia, the kingdom of **Nepal** has long been fairly isolated from its neighbors. Until fifty years ago, connections in and out of Nepal were by rough tracks, traveled by people and animals on foot. And within the country, as in Pakistan, the rugged terrain means that small pockets of different cultures stay isolated from one another, their only contact through the occasional trade caravan passing through (rather as the different valleys of Switzerland remained very isolated until after the middle of the nineteenth century). In the mountain communities, this isolation, as well as extremes of climate, means that the food choices are limited. The staple foods are rice, millet, lentils, and vegetables, with which Nepali cooks work very inventively. In the main valleys, around Kathmandu and Pokhara, there's a wider range of vegetables, and dairy products are also available. Wheat is grown in some valleys, so chapatis (skillet flatbreads) are a staple. The most common cooking oil is mustard oil, and flavorings include onions, garlic, and several locally available souring agents, as well as dried spices such as cumin and black mustard seed. Beef is not eaten, but water buffalo meat, as well as chicken, pork, and some wild game, is appreciated when available.

The mountain kingdom of **Bhutan** has also long been isolated from the outside world. Bhutan lies on several trading routes between Tibet and India, but even these have been closed since the Chinese took control of Tibet in the 1960s. The population is primarily Tibetan-style Buddhist, but over time a large number of Nepalis have moved to Bhutan for work, bringing their food traditions with them (much of the Nepali population has recently been ejected by the Bhutanese government). Bhutan has steep north-south valleys, some of them with relatively mild climates that favor farming. People also live at higher elevations near the Tibet border, as in Nepal. The staple foods grown in the valleys are rice and buckwheat. Hot red chiles are widely grown and

dried for use throughout the year. Meat of all kinds, including root vegetables and root vegetables, fresh cheese, and dairy products are part of the diet. Ingredients are usually boiled together in a thick sauce with salt and hot chiles, and eaten with the distinctive flatbread.

Whereas Pakistan, Nepal, and Bhutan are mountainous, Bangladesh is quite different, absolutely flat. And whereas much of the land in Bangladesh is well watered by huge rivers and a large part of the land in Bangladesh is fertile, because it's alluvial and is regularly flooded that deposit their silt as they retreat. The soil is richly grown, along with a wide assortment of greens, and many fruits flourish in every season. Freshwater fish are a favorite, and are eaten in different ways; some seafood is also eaten. Because the majority is Muslim, beef, chicken, and goat are eaten, but pork is not. It has a distinctive cuisine that resembles that of the Indian subcontinent with which it shares a culture and history. Mustard oil is used, and the Bengali five-spice mixture is often used to flavor cooking oil before other ingredients are added. In contrast to the Hindu cuisine of Bengal, onions are used as both a flavoring and ingredient. Dishes are eaten with rice (rather than, as in much of the region, being eaten with flatbread) accompanied by rice. There's a taste for bitter and spicy flavors in many dishes, as well as a tradition of sweets.

Although the island nation of **Sri Lanka** is not mountainous, the island is a massif that rises to more than seven thousand feet. In the mountains thus has a temperate climate where many crops such as cabbages and beets grow well, while in the lowlands at lower elevations, there is an amazing variety of fruits and vegetables, as well as coconut palms. The cuisine is rich with a wide array of ingredients. The Sinhalese population is primarily Buddhist; Sinhalese cuisine includes meat and fish. The repertoire of lightly cooked vegetable dishes known as *roths* is

Beef is, however, forbidden to the largely Hindu Tamil population of the island. Tamil dishes such as *idli* (a steamed bread) and *dosa* (a crepelike bread), which originated in southern India, are common. The Sri Lankan dish called *hoppers* (a leavened skillet bread) is thought to be a Tamil addition, its name deriving from the Tamil word *appam*. About 11 percent of the island's people are Muslim, to whom pork is forbidden. Rice is the staple food throughout the island, eaten with a variety of curries and the chile-hot salsas called *sambols*. Coconut milk is widely used in sauces, and grated coconut is often part of the flavoring or the thickening of a dish. Another distinctive Sinhalese flavoring is Maldive fish, small chunks of dried tuna with a salty pungent taste, which are crumbled into dishes to give an appealing smoky-salty flavor, much as fish sauce and its relatives are used in the cooking of Southeast Asia.

In southern India, in both **Kerala** and **Tamil Nadu**, the cooking in some ways resembles the cooking of Sri Lanka, with widespread use of coconut milk and grated coconut. Rice is the staple, at the center of the main meal, accompanied by a wide array of curries and sauces, which are blended into it by each diner as he or she eats. The Hindu population of both states is largely vegetarian, with an inventive repertoire of dishes based on rice and other grains, dal, fruits, and vegetables, although many Hindus in Kerala also eat fish. Kerala is also home to a large Syrian Christian community, descendants of early converts to Christianity, who eat meat and fish of all kinds.

The adjacent states, working northward, are **Karnataka** and **Goa** on the west coast, and **Andhra Pradesh** to the east, where, once again, the tropical and subtropical location means that the staple food is rice and that coconut plays an important role. *Dosas* and *idlis* are common snack foods. Many people are vegetarian, though not so much in Goa: Goa was for a long time

a Portuguese possession, and the result is a fusion of cuisines. In the north, a large Christian population that eats beef and pork is common. Hyderabad, capital of Andhra Pradesh, was, like Agra, and Lucknow, ruled by descendants of the Mughals. The staple food of the (largely Muslim) elite there is very *Mughal* (see the Glossary), but with a fascinating infusion of tropical flavors.

**Mumbai (Bombay)** and **Maharashtra**, the state to the west, has a subtropical ambiance that reminds us of Los Angeles. People from all over India can be found there, but local cuisines are a mix of several distinct communities that have been living there for centuries: the Parsis, Zoroastrians who came from Persia long ago, whose food is subtly spiced and nonvegetarian; the Marathas. North of Maharashtra is **Gujarat**, on India's northwestern coast, with vegetarian traditions and a distinctive cuisine. Gujarati food is mild tasting, and meals come with a subtle balance of flavors, from mildly hot. Legumes (dals) find their way into breads, as snacks and main dishes; the assortment of flavors is wide.

Northeast of Gujarat is the desert state of **Rajasthan**. The *Rajput* caste is a Hindu warrior caste, with a meat-eating tradition. Lower-caste Rajasthanis are likely to be vegetarian. The palate is spicier than that of Gujarat and a dependence on wheat, as well as on wheat, for making staple breads. Because of frequent droughts, so agriculture can be precarious; many people in the western part of Gujarat are nomadic or seminomadic, living on herds of goats, sheep, or camels. The food of Rajasthan is simple, but it can also be delicious and inventive.

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In the fertile valleys of mountainous **Kashmir**, in the northwest corner of India, the Muslim majority and Hindu Brahmin minority share overlapping culinary traditions, including rich *pulaos* made with lamb or chicken, delicately spiced *kormas* and *koftas*, sauces enriched with yogurt, simmered vegetable dishes, and an array of interesting flatbreads. Like those in the Himalayan communities in Nepal, people living at higher elevations, in the mountains of Ladakh and in Baltistan, eat barley rather than wheat or rice and, as Tibetans have done for centuries, depend on dried fruits, dried meat, dried vegetables, tea, and butter during the long cold winter months (see “Rebirth,” page 184).

In the **plains of northern India** from the Punjab in the west over to the border of Bengal in the east, wheat generally grows well and so, as in Pakistan, the staple food is flatbreads such as chapati. The breads come hot to the table and then are torn into pieces that are used to scoop up mouthfuls of dal and curry and accompaniments. As in Pakistan, Moghul influences abound (spicing often includes cinnamon and cardamom, and yogurt plays a big role). The Muslims, Sikhs, and nonvegetarian Hindus eat tandoor-cooked kebabs, rich simmered lamb and chicken curries, tandoor-baked naan, and complex flavored rice dishes in the *pulao*-biryani tradition. The cities of Lucknow (capital of the pre-Independence kingdom of Oudh), Delhi, and Agra are particularly famous for their Moghul-style cuisines.

In the Indian **Punjab**, with its fertile agricultural land and long-settled traditions, the menu tends to have more vegetables and meat in it than the Pakistani Punjabi menu. Interestingly, Punjabi cuisine, both the Pakistani and Indian versions of it, was the first subcontinental cuisine to make its mark in North America. It remains the most familiar, with

its vegetable dishes such as *muttar paneer* (cheese and peas) and *gobi* (potatoes and cauliflower) and its meat dishes such as *saag* (spinach and lamb curry).

East of Delhi is the state of **Uttar Pradesh**, and to the south is **Bihar**, places that, together with the state of **Madhya Pradesh**, are as the heartland of North Indian cooking. They are part of the Indo-Gangetic Plain, the fertile region watered by the Ganges River and its tributaries, and have been continuously inhabited for millennia. The majority of both states is Hindu and very traditional, so there are many vegetarian dishes. Meals are traditionally served on a platter. A stack of fresh chapatis or other flatbread, one or two vegetable dishes, several vegetable dishes, one or two pickles or chutneys, and a simple sweet make up the meal.

East and northeast of Bihar lies the Indian state of **West Bengal**. In the mountains the food resembles that of Nepal and includes pockets of Bhutanese, Sherpa, Gurka, Lepcha, and other influences, depending on wheat, potatoes, and hardy vegetables. The low-lying parts of Bengal are fertile and well watered. The food of Bengal is a mix of rice, meat and some rice. The low-lying parts of Bengal are fertile and well watered. The food of Bengal is a mix of rice, fish, and vegetables, and the widespread use of mustard oil as a flavoring, but with much less use of onions, at least in the north. **Orissa**, the state to the south of Bengal, has simple food on its coastal plain, but inland in the mountains the food is more tribal (see “Orissa,” page 274), subsisting on local ingredients and simple dishes.

*Star Fruit Chutney (page 34). OPPOSITE, LEFT: Banana-Jaggery Fritters (page 330) along with a glass of Tamarind-Mint Tea (page 313); they rest atop our granite mortar from Bengal. RIGHT: Prawn White Curry (page 217).*



### IN OUR KITCHEN

We both started cooking Indian food when we were in our late teens and early twenties, several years before first traveling to South Asia. Naomi, as a student in London for a year, lived in a hostel in Bayswater, where she had a good introduction to the food of the Subcontinent through meals in small, inexpensive Indian and Pakistani restaurants. It was there that she tasted her first *thali* meal and encountered her first pork vindaloo.

I was living in Laramie, Wyoming, light-years away from even a whiff of ground coriander seeds and fresh curry leaf. But with my friends Mark and Barb, I discovered a restaurant in Boulder, Colorado, a hundred twenty miles away, serving Indian and Sri Lankan home cooking. It was called the Indo-Ceylonese, as I remember, and it was run by a family from Sri Lanka. The owner would bring each dish family-style to the table and announce its name as he put it down. For us, it was incredibly exotic, and an adventure: After eating there, we would replay our meal for weeks on end and look forward to the next.

Spurred on by our restaurant meals, we bought a paperback cookbook called *Indian Cookery*, by Dharamjit Singh, and began cooking our way through it (I still have it, tattered and discolored). Mark and Barb lived in an old Laramie house with a formal dining room, and on weekends we'd gather at their house and each work on a different recipe or two, then eat our Indian feast in the dining room. The whole time, we'd talk about what to cook next time and what we'd try on our next trip to the Indo-Ceylonese.

For both of us, there's always been an element of curiosity about the cuisine of the Subcontinent; for Naomi in London, it was about first tasting the food and then needing to go, needing to experience it firsthand. But the pilgrimage over time has worked in a different way: traveling to the region to seek out the food and to bring it home. How we eat, how we think about food, and how we have been deeply influenced by eating and traveling in the region.

Nowadays at home, unlike earlier days, we serve a "Sri Lankan" feast, covering the table with a grand variety of North American families, we run around in different directions and then panic when suddenly it's dinnertime. So we'll make a quick dal (a lentil-based dish) and a quick chutney; maybe we'll make a salad. On days we manage to think about dinner in advance, we'll make a Sri Lankan curry, such as the okra (ladies' fingers) curry. We love it, but again, usually we'll serve it simply with a little grilled meat.

Our meals are simple in part because our dining room is a large part because we like them that way. When we serve curries on the table, they sometimes compete with each other and shines individually the way it should. Indian "buffet" lunch here in Toronto, is, we think, sometimes a



trying to advertise its food. The food may be good, but the presentation brings it down; tastes get muddy and lose their distinctiveness.

When we're traveling in the Subcontinent, most of our memorable meals, and memorable dishes, are enjoyed in neighborhood restaurants or in village homes, and it is this food we try most to duplicate at home. We remember a cucumber salad made in a mountain village in Sri Lanka, or a plate of seasoned rice flakes served for breakfast in a tea shop in Udaipur. When we serve some of these dishes to friends and then ask them where they think the food is from, often they have no idea. "But it's good," they'll say, as they go for more. The Subcontinent has so long been associated with curry—and there is, of course, an infinite number of delicious and inventive curries—but there's also a world of good food and different dishes that have nothing at all to do with curry.

One thing we've learned from cooking food from the Subcontinent is how to get different tastes to come forward, to pop, to sparkle. We learned when cooking Southeast Asian food to balance the flavors of hot, sour, salty, and sweet in order to make flavors pop. In South Asian cooking, it's much the same, a process of balancing and then highlighting tastes. Now we are never without tamarind pulp to sour a dish, or frozen grated coconut to sweeten and mellow, or a selection of dried and fresh chiles for heat. We also keep onions and garlic, limes, and fresh coriander or mint on hand, as well as fresh curry leaves (stored in the freezer) and whole spices

(coriander, cumin, black mustard, fennel, nigella, cinnamon or cassia stick, bay leaves, turmeric p

A particularly ingenious South Asian technique that comes forward is called *tempering*. After a curry or a dahl is done, and just before it's served, some garlic and onions are sautéed in oil in a separate skillet, one or more times in the oil, and then they are cooked briefly, enough to highlight the contents of the skillet are mixed into the long-simmered dish. This highlights flavors that have already cooked into the dish, and is added forward freshly just before serving.

Cooking food from the Subcontinent doesn't require special kitchen equipment that doesn't already have a place in a home kitchen. We use our *cast-iron skillets* a lot, and good ones are great for cooking rice and long-simmered dishes, and for sautéing. For dishes that in the Subcontinent are traditionally cooked in a shallow wok-shaped pan that in Britain is widely known as a *flatbread* such as chapatis, we use a dependable *rolling pin* to roll them out with a tapered-at-the-end rolling pin, or a *French pastry pin*. If you have access to a South Asian kitchen, explore the different cookware that is available, and if you can, take home a *steamer* for making the dumplings and buns. But, all in all, there is not a lot of special equipment

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One tool we rely on is a good *mortar* with a *pestle*. Actually, because these can work in such different ways, we've ended up with several different kinds. One time we brought home a flat stone mortar from Kolkata (Calcutta) in our luggage (since then we've seen similar mortars for sale in Indian grocery stores here). We love it. A long rounded bumpy stone is used as the pestle on top of the flat roughened surface of the mortar (see photograph, page 17) and works beautifully for grinding garlic or ginger or herbs to a paste or grinding spices to a powder. For small home-style quantities, it's much faster than even an electric grinder or mini-processor.

Local ethnic grocery stores are a good place to look for mortars and pestles. We have stone mortars and pestles that we've picked up in Mexican grocery stores, and deep ceramic mortars from Thailand that we've bought here at Asian markets. You can also improvise: Once when we were camping, we found two good stones, one flat and one round; we washed them off, and they worked well. An *electric spice grinder* is a wonderful thing to have in the kitchen (we have two, one for coffee beans and one for spices), but a good mortar and pestle are worth their weight in gold (well, not quite), and they're fun.

Here in Toronto where we live, finding ingredients for cooking South Asian food is not a problem because there are pockets of South Asian

groceries all around the city. But when we are in, for example, some ingredients for some recipes are a hundred miles away. We've tried to give options for ingredients in the recipes and Glossary, but it always has to give the original version first, then to suggest alternatives. We found that what's locally available is changing all the time, especially true of fresh Asian ingredients. If you can't find ingredients, we highly recommend mail-ordering specialty grocery in New York City ([www.kalustyans.com](http://www.kalustyans.com)). We've found similar grocery around North America, at very reasonable prices for South Asian kitchen equipment.

Last but not least, like most home cooks, we find inspiration to a group of tried-and-true recipes (see "Food from the Past" pages 20–23), getting to know a few recipes by heart without having to think, recipes for which we develop a habit. These recipes take a place in our cooking repertoire along with other favorite dishes from Italy or Ontario or elsewhere, partly ours, and they then inspire us to go looking

LEFT: A Hindu worshipper descends the steps of a temple in Khajuraho, in Madhya Pradesh, India. RIGHT: Green cayenne chiles at a market in Udaipur, in southern Rajasthan.



### A NOTE ABOUT CHILES

The food of the Subcontinent has a reputation for chile heat, but on the scale of “hot cuisines,” many of the dishes we eat in the Subcontinent aren’t particularly hot. It’s true that a little fresh green cayenne chile or powdered dried cayenne finds its way into many dishes. Like salt, a little chile gives an edge and can highlight and extend flavor. It’s part of the array of seasonings and flavors used by cooks in the region, and it’s up to the cook to decide how intense a heat he or she wants.

So although chiles are an important ingredient in many dishes, seldom is the chile heat overpowering, especially compared to the fiery dishes of Thailand, or Mexico, or parts of Indonesia. One exception is Sinhalese cooking, in Sri Lanka, which uses fresh hot chiles and can be intensely hot, especially the condiments called *sambols*.

Chiles play an interesting role in flavor, as do other “heating” spices such as black pepper and ginger. The heat seems to help flavors linger on the tongue, blending and extending them. Eating chiles also gives many people a sense of physical well-being, apart from the pleasures of flavor enhancement.

For the recipes in this book, we calculated the heat for our own taste, then reduced it just a bit. We do like chile heat at almost every meal, and probably at a level similar to many home cooks in the Subcontinent. But giving reliable chile heat in recipes isn’t always easy. A package of dried red chiles from Thailand doesn’t necessarily have the same heat as a package of dried red

chiles from India, nor do two different packages of dried red chiles. You also find cayenne powders can be wildly different. In the world of fresh chiles and their various names and varieties, to get the heat (with and without their seeds), the variation of heat is vast.

How to find a chile amount that works for you? Buy a small amount of your own cayenne by finely grinding the dried red chiles. If you don’t have access to, and then whenever you are in doubt, use a small amount. Try to buy the same kind of fresh green or red chiles so you’re familiar with their degree of hotness. *When making a dish for the first time (especially if you’re making it for someone coming over for dinner), look at what is written in the recipe. You can always add a little chile heat later, when you taste the dish, by adding a pinch of cayenne powder.*

The standard fresh red or green chile we call *serrano* is shiny, long, slightly curved, and pointed (see photo). If you remove the seeds and membranes, there’s much less heat. For more on Chiles for detailed instructions). You can substitute serranos, for the same heat, or use jalapeños, which have a different taste.

Do remember all those words of caution about chile heat: not touching your eyes after handling fresh chiles, washing your cutting board and your knife after chopping them.



*Sri Lankan Beef Curry (page 278)*

## FOOD FOR EVERY OCCASION

### FOR A LAST-MINUTE WEEKNIGHT SUPPER

Pea Tendrils with Coconut (page 71)

Mountain Dal (page 182) with Bhutanese

Red Rice (page 83) or white rice

Quick Tamarind Pulao with Curry Leaves (page

Bangla Dal with a Hit of Lime (page 178)

Cumin-Coriander Beef Patties (page 268)

Pea Shoots for a Crowd (page 161) or Stir-fried

Bangla Style (page 165)

### TO DELIGHT CHILDREN

Gita's Luchis (page 115) or Savory Deep-fried

Street-Side Breads (page 134)

Yogurt-Marinated Chicken Kebabs (page 239)

Cumin-Coriander Beef Patties (without the onion)

Home-Style Jalebi (page 319)

Mango Ice Cream with Cardamom (page 324)

Banana-Jaggery Fritters (page 330)

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#### FOR A FEAST WITH GUESTS

Cashew-Coconut Meatballs (page 262), followed by Baked Goan Fish with Fresh Green Chile Chutney (page 205), Spicy Banana-Yogurt Pachadi (page 70), and Fresh Bean Sprout Salad (page 55), all served with plain rice and with crispy Papads (page 289) for crumbling over; for dessert, Silky Goan Pudding (page 331)

Spicy Chickpea Fritters (Vadas) (page 286) served with Andhra Spiced Eggplant (page 49) to start, followed by Duck Vindaloo (page 251), New Potatoes with Fresh Greens (page 154), Spiced Grated Carrots, Kerala Style (page 143), and Nepali Green Bean-Sesame Salad (page 76); for dessert, Mango Ice Cream with Cardamom (page 324)

Pakistani Lamb Pulao (page 104) with Hot Sweet Date-Onion Chutney (page 28), Fresh White Radish Slices with Salt (page 54), Zinet's Young Ginger Pickle (page 346), and Cucumber Raita (page 67); followed by Creamy Pudding with Mace and Cardamom (page 334)

Crisp-Fried Okra Tidbits (page 288) as an appetizer, followed by Lamb Slipper Kebabs (page 257) with Home-Style Tandoor Naan (page 116), Cachoombar (page 57), Tamarind Potatoes (page 152), and Star Fruit Chutney (page 34); with Gulab Jamun (page 318) for dessert

#### AROUND THE GRILL

Tikka Kebabs (page 256), with Hot Sweet Date-Onion Chutney (page 28)  
Nepali Grilled Chicken (page 238)  
Yogurt-Marinaded Chicken Kebabs (page 239)  
Grilled Marinaded Beef (page 272), with Star Fruit Chutney (page 34)  
Himalayan Grilled Tomato Sauce (page 94)  
Bangla-Flavored Grilled Zucchini (page 144)

#### UNUSUAL TECHNIQUES TO TRY

Slow-Cooked Wheat Berries and Lamb with Fresh Greens (page 154)  
Spiced Rice-Potato Dosas (page 114)  
Dhokla (page 125)  
Tamarind-Mint Tea (page 313)  
Home-Style Jalebi (page 319)

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#### MAKE AHEAD

Gujarati Mango Chutney (page 40)  
Hot Sweet Date-Onion Chutney (page 28)  
Slow-Cooked Wheat Berries and Lamb with Fresh Mint (page 266)  
Roadside Café Chicken (page 250)  
Aromatic Slow-Cooked Chicken (page 242)  
Shallot Sambhar (page 187)  
Mango Ice Cream with Cardamom (page 324)  
Creamy Pudding with Mace and Cardamom (page 334)

#### FOR COLD WINTER DAYS

Spiced Chai for Cold Mornings (page 305)  
Goan Meat Tarts (page 292)  
Potato-Stuffed Parathas (page 130), with Udaipur Urad Dal (page 189)  
and Fresh Coriander-Peanut Chutney (page 28)  
Sri Lankan Beef Curry (page 278)  
Goan Pork Vindaloo (page 280)  
Chicken Biryani, Dum Style (page 102)  
Shallot Sambhar (page 187)

#### FOR ADVENTUROUS EATERS

Beets with Tropical Flavors (page 166)  
Spicy Bitter Melon (page 159)  
Sri Lankan Fenugreek Dal (page 179)  
Green Mango Cooler (page 313)  
Persian-Flavored Eggs (page 230)  
Chile-Hot Bhutanese Cheese Curry (page 173)

#### OUR TRIED-AND-TRUE

Cumin-Flecked Skillet Breads (page 126)  
Bangla Dal with a Hit of Lime (page 178)  
Chapatis (page 110)  
Cumin-Coriander Beef Patties (page 268)  
Eggs with Curry Leaves (page 234)  
Bone-in Grilled Chicken (page 239)  
Bangla Slow-Cooked Beef with Onion (page 273)  
Himalayan Grilled Tomato Sauce (page 94)  
Stir-fried Greens, Bangla Style (page 165)  
Mountain Dal (page 182)  
Pea Tendrils with Coconut (page 71)

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## VEGETARIAN FEASTS

**Nepali Polenta with Himalayan Grilled Tomato Sauce (page 94), served with Pea Shoots for a Crowd (page 161), Mountain Dal (page 182), and Chapatis (page 110); followed by Sweet Yogurt Sundae with Saffron and Pistachios (page 323)**

**Simmered Kashmiri Paneer (page 171), Cauliflower Dum (page 148), and Katchhi Village Potato Curry (page 150), served with Stir-fried Rice and Dal (page 96), with Tart Mango Salsa (page 48) on the side; followed by Silky Goan Pudding (page 331)**

**Sweet Sev with Raisins (page 287), followed by Sri Lankan Fenugreek Dal (page 179), Spiced Cabbage Salad (page 77), and Sri Lankan Village Salad (page 66), served with Gita's Luchis (page 115) or Hoppers (page 121), with crispy Papads (page 289) for crumbling over; for dessert, Coconut Custard (page 335)**

**Bangla-Flavored Fried Zucchini (page 144), Hasna Begum's Mixed Vegetable Curry (page 164), Aromatic Pumpkin and Coconut (page 160), and Bangla Dal with a Hit of Lime (page 178), all served with rice; followed by Sweet and Creamy Rose Water Dumplings (page 328)**

## FOR A SPECIAL BREAKFAST OR BRUNCH WITH

**Eggs with Curry Leaves (page 234), with Chapatis and Flecked Skillet Breads (page 126); followed by Sweet Potato with Saffron and Pistachios (page 323)**

**Andhra Scrambled Eggs (page 235) with Chapatis and Style Tandoor Naan (page 116); followed by Sweet Potato (page 320) and Banana Lassi (page 308)**

**Darjeeling Market Tibetan Breads (page 136), with Shallot Salad (page 55), served with juice from the Shallots (page 312); followed by Creamy Pudding with Raisins (page 334)**

**Semolina Uppuma (page 92) with all the trimmings and Cardamom Chai (page 305); followed by Mango and Cardamom (page 324)**

## FAVORITES FOR A POTLUCK

**Aromatic Pumpkin and Coconut (page 160)**

**Mountain Dal (page 182) or Udaipur Urad Dal (page 182)**

**Ginger-Lamb Coconut Milk Curry (page 261)**

**Tamarind Potatoes (page 152)**

**Chicken Biryani, Dum Style (page 102)**

**Pork Curry in Aromatic Broth (page 279)**

**Cauliflower Dum (page 148)**

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