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WESTCHESTER DINING | INDIAN GROCERS

The Lentils and Spices for a Dal All Your Own

By VALERIE PETERSON

DELICATELY scented basmati rice spiced with cardamom, fluffy naan, rich curry sauces served with pungent pickles, and flavorful chutneys — these delicious foods are known to just about anyone who has eaten at an Indian restaurant. But the ingredients used to achieve those exquisite blends of taste and texture may not be quite as familiar. Discovering them at a local Indian grocer can not only spice up the dinner plate at home but also provide some bargains.

Many customers of the tiny Bengal Grocery in downtown White Plains had experienced the flavors of India at the Bengal Tiger Restaurant next door; both establishments are owned by members of the Kalathara family.

As is clear from the restaurant's menu, Indian food is not one cuisine but many, shaped over millenniums by resources and climates, the dietary strictures of its many religions and even the influence of Mogul and British invaders. The unifying trait of the food in India is what brought foreigners to its shores to begin with: spices.

Despite its small size, Bengal Grocery has a robust assortment of spices. Even if you're not in the market for fenugreek or cardamom, the prices of crossover staples like black peppercorns and cloves (\$2.49 each for 3.5 ounces) or cinnamon sticks (\$2 for 7 ounces) make a visit worthwhile. Or pick up some asafetida, a spice added to food to help digestion, or candy-coated fennel seeds, also a digestive aid, as well as a breath freshener.

From 1980 to 2000, the Asian Indian population in Westchester rose to more than 14,000 from just under 3,500, according to census data. There are more than 5,000 Indian families in the lower Hudson Valley, said Jyotin Thaker, the president of the Indian American Cultural Association of Westchester. Kirit Sanchala, the owner of another store, [Bhavik Grocery in Elmsford](#), credits that growth, along with the increased popularity of Indian food among non-Indians, as the reason he expanded his business a year and a half ago.

From native rose water, used for flavoring drinks and desserts, to great lumps of cane-sugar-based jaggery, to the Britannia digestive biscuits that hark back to the days of British rule,

Bhavik's spacious, well-stocked shelves provide a browsing adventure.

For a quick fix of the exotic, the selection of crunchy bagged munchies rivals a supermarket potato chip aisle. The offerings have names like Kerala murukku — savory pinwheels made from rice flour and gram (chickpea) flour, spiced with onion, cumin and chili. Or try one of the crispy, mild or spicy mixtures that include ingredients like fried chickpea flour noodles, puffed rice, fried lentils, nuts, and fruit or vegetable chips. Most of these are great sprinkled on a salad for added crunch and flavor.

Chutneys, pickles and spice pastes can lend easy pizzazz to a meal, and the selection at Bhavik is deep and varied. Mint or mint-coriander chutney (\$3 to \$4) can be added to yogurt for a quick dip or dressing. Marinate chicken pieces in a mixture of tandoori paste and yogurt overnight before grilling, or spread a thin layer of the paste on pounded chicken cutlets before grilling or quick-sautéing. As a side dish, basmati ("the perfumed one") rice cooks up as easily as ordinary white rice but has extraordinary flavor. Ten-pound bags range in price from \$9.99 to \$17.99, for the prized Tilda brand.

If the spirit runs to more elaborate food preparation, one can find the ingredients for traditional dishes, like all varieties of dal (dried lentils, peas and beans). A staple of Indian diets, dal has proteins, fiber and other nutrients that are important to [vegetarians](#). Chickpeas (\$4.99 for four pounds) and whole baby lentils (which resemble French lentilles de Puy and are \$3.99 for two pounds) can be found in many ethnic diets.

In addition to the familiar, like mangoes, the official fruit of India, and coconuts, used in a number of dishes, the fruit and vegetable boxes yield warty-looking karela (bitter melon); the hairy, lumpy arvi (taro root); the ridged toray (a member of the cucumber family); and green beans that range from thin and tiny to a couple of feet long.

If cooking isn't on the agenda, more immediate gratification can be found in the freezer cases, which house naan, the tandoor-grilled bread, and traditional dishes like pakoras (chickpea-battered vegetable fritters), saag paneer (spinach with fresh cheese) and aloo gobi (potatoes and cauliflower), as well as nontraditional ones, like Bombay Bites Paneer Poppers.

Mr. Sanchala reports a growing market for these convenience foods, both among non-Indians and younger generations of Indians who don't want, or have time, to cook. He offers a selection of fresh snacks priced from 50 to 90 cents apiece, like hefty, spicy potato-and-pea-stuffed pastry samosas; dal vada, a savory fried patty made from ground lentils; and medu vada, a breadly, doughnut-shaped fritter made with black lentils (urad dal). They can all be heated upon request.

In southernmost Westchester there are a number of grocers that primarily serve nearby enclaves of Indian expatriates. One is All India Grocery, which sits on an industrial stretch of Tuckahoe

Road in Yonkers. While the exterior is not inviting, there is ample metered parking at the lot next door, which makes it easy to pop in.

Like the other grocers, All India offers Bollywood movies and native beauty products, like hair oils and hennas (used for painting the hands, a wedding tradition). But the main attractions are on the neatly organized shelves, which hold a substantial selection of dry goods — dals, rice, spices, nuts, chutneys and spice pastes — at prices similar to or slightly lower than those at Bhavik, along with a modest assortment of fresh and frozen foods.

Although not as large as Bhavik, All India is much bigger than Bengal Grocery and provides ample ingredients for exploring the cuisine of India at home.

Curry to Go

Traditional Indian food, along with other aspects of Indian culture, will be showcased at a heritage festival on Aug. 2, from 1 to 7 p.m., at Kensico Dam Plaza, Bronx River Parkway, Valhalla. Information: (914) 864-7275.

Traditional ingredients — spices, grains, fruits and vegetables — can be found at:

ALL INDIA GROCERY 19 Tuckahoe Road, Yonkers; (914) 423-5812. Open daily, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

BENGAL GROCERY 140 East Post Road, White Plains; (914) 686-5720. Open daily, 10 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.

BHAVIK GROCERY 130 East Main Street, Elmsford; (914) 592-8086. Open daily, 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.

MATHA 13 South Division Street, New Rochelle; (914) 636-2633. Open daily, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

SURYA 589 Central Park Avenue, Yonkers; (914) 969-7651. Open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 7 p.m.

SWAMI INTERNATIONAL GROCER 642 Main Street, New Rochelle; (914) 632-6856. Open daily, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

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