

taste buds chef Larry Janes

Hot to try cooking with chilies

I could be sitting here telling you how great a big, cold dish of ice cream would taste. I could be envisioning cool salads, icy beverages and chilly desserts, but instead, I'm hot to trot, having been enjoying the taste of chilies in my air-conditioned kitchen.

My fingers are still tingling from splitting a few Serranos and the chili pepper plants are going wild in the garden after all the rain and sunshine. So now's about as good a time as any to fill you in on (excuse the pun) what's hot.

There are many forms of chilies from which to choose. From their origin in Mexico and Central America, chilies have circled the globe, becoming a part of the culinary cultures of Spain, Italy, Hungary, Asia, Africa, India, China and Japan.

The few original chili varieties changed with each new soil and climate so that today there are between 1,000 and 1,500 individual types of chilies. Anything goes, from sweet to mild to hot to fiery. Chilies are abundant just about everywhere, either fresh, dried or ground.

When shopping for fresh chilies, look for firm, brightly colored, shiny pods with no signs of bruising or rotting. Fresh pods can be wrapped in paper towels and stored in the crisper section of the fridge for up to five days. They also can be roasted and frozen.

ROASTING IS done to remove the skin and heighten the flavor.

To roast, first rinse and dry the chilies. Spread in a single layer on a cookie sheet and with a small knife, pierce each chili near the stem. Place the chilies under a preheated broiler and cook on all sides until they blister. Don't let them char or you'll get a burnt taste.

After blistering, place them immediately in a paper or plastic bag and allow them to steam for 15 minutes. Skin, seed and de-vein before using. As previously warned, use plastic gloves when working with hot chilies.

Chilies can be frozen whole after roasting. Do not skin. Simply let cool and pack in plastic bags. After defrosting, skin, seed and de-vein. Another trick I like to use is simply to pack them (after roasting) in jars and cover with oil.

Here's a beginners' list on what's available locally in most good grocery and produce shops. Prices will begin falling soon because of the summer glut, so freezing and/or storing now will save dollars and time later.

ANAHEIM: Mild to hot, with mild flavors prevailing. Light-green color, subtle flavor.

CAYENNE CHILE: Hot to very hot. Green color, subtle flavor.

JALAPENO: Hot, dark-green color, round, meaty flavor.

POBLANO: Mild to hot, dark-green color, with sweet overtones.

SANTE FE GRANDE: Medium hot to hot, yellow-green to yellow, with a lively, tingling flavor.

SERRANO: Hot to very hot, green, with a bright flavor.

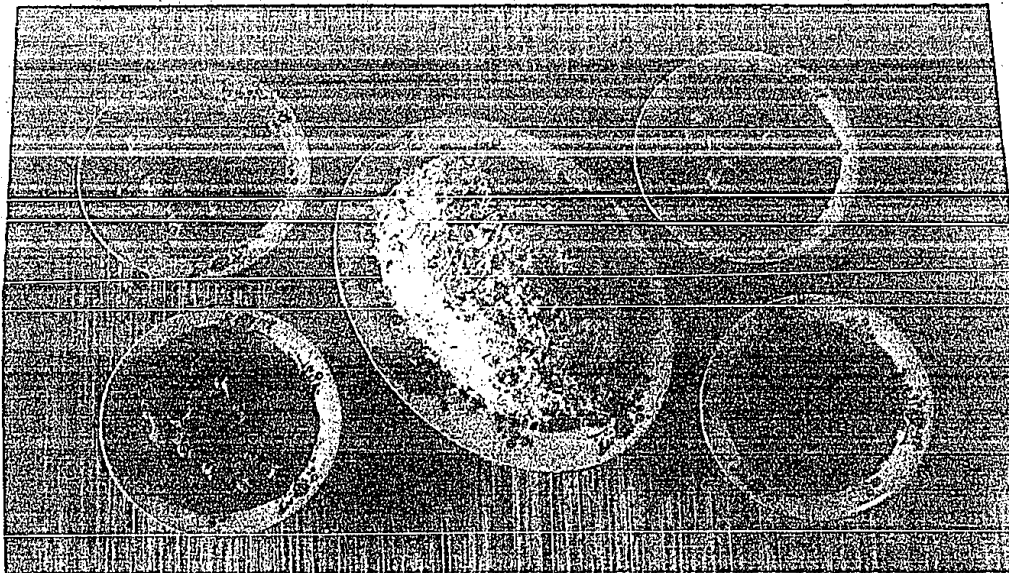
In addition, you can buy a fair amount of dried whole chilies in most good markets and ethnic food stores. Look for dried whole chilies with even color and no dark or yellow spots. Hang in open air or place in moisture-free bags.

YOU CAN slightly temper the fiery flavor of dried chilies by de-veining and removing the seeds.

For mild effects, add the whole dried pod to chiles and recipes, then remove the pod before serving. For the full impact, crush the entire pod and stir into the dish.

Varieties range in sweetness and fieriness, with most dried chilies being medium hot to hot. And if you are looking for something to blow off Uncle Mike's toques, look for the fieriest chilies around, either Pequin or Tepala.

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JIM RIDER/staff photographer

At Star of India restaurant in Troy, a variety of curry entrees is available. Bowl of rice is surrounded by (clockwise, from left) shrimp curry, mixed vegetable curry, chicken curry and lamb curry.

Curry a very special spice

By Katie McBride
special writer

CURRY MAY BE one of the most misunderstood — and multifaceted — flavor agents around. The average American places curry in the same class as cinnamon, ginger and other fragrant spices conveniently offered in cans or jars. But curry is much more complex than your basic bay leaf or basil.

Examine the label on your curry container and you will see it's a blend of numerous herbs and spices. Curry dishes are a part of the daily diet in India, where people shun commercial preparations and grind their own spices to taste.

Local Indian restaurants rely on experienced chefs from their native country to concoct the special blends.

"The chefs make up their own recipes for curries," said Mohammed Amin, co-owner of the Star of India restaurant in Troy. "They have to practice," he said, which makes the blends "more perfect."

CURRY HAS HELD an important place in Indian cooking for centuries. Research reveals more than one possible explanation for the origin of the word.

Some say it derives from "turcari," a Hindustani term that was shortened to "turri." English-speaking people mispronounced it as curry, and the name stuck.

A more common explanation is that curry is the West-Asian way of saying the Indian word "kari," which refers to the leaves of the kari plant used in regional Indian dishes or a cooking technique for preparing stir-fried vegetables.

Indians call the spice blend for kari dishes "kari podi," or curry powder. The combination of herbs and spices in Indian cooking varies by region, but Julie Sahni, author of "Classic Indian Cooking" (William Morrow and

It's more than you imagined

Company, Inc., 1988), says the typical mixture usually contains black pepper, coriander, cumin, fenugreek, kari leaves, mustard seeds, red pepper, turmeric and sometimes cinnamon and cloves. Indian cooks concoct their own special blend, roasting and grinding it into a powder. Sahni suggests curry came to the West through British merchants and the East India Trading Co. The traders lived along the southeastern coast of India and quickly became fond of the fragrant, flavorful kari dishes. Unable to master the Indians' culinary creativity in combining spices, they added kari podi to stews and casseroles, creating dishes with the golden cast and spicy flavor they loved.

NEW HERBS and spices were added to the curry blends when the British expanded to the north and east of India. For example, Chinese curry dishes have a flavor all their own. Unlike Indian chefs, who refuse to use commercial blends, the Chinese restaurants often use brand-name powders to prepare their curries. Additional

spices and different cooking techniques make the dishes unique.

Shen Yu, manager of New Peking Chinese Restaurant in Garden City, said they offer customers two kinds of curried chicken: shrimp or beef, stir-fried or with gravy. The stir-fried shrimp and chicken curry dishes are most popular.

"We cook individually. Everything is fresh," Shen Yu said. "Our curries are very different. Indian dishes are orange-brown in color. Our curries are more yellow."

In addition to curry powder, New Peking chefs use garlic, ginger, green onions and rice wine to flavor their curries. While Indian restaurants often use red pepper or chili powder to make a dish more potent, Shen Yu said they use white pepper instead.

"It has a different taste — still hot, but special," he said.

CUSTOMERS CAN order hot, medium-hot and mild curries at the Passage to India restaurant in Berkeley. "Karbali" chicken, lamb, shrimp or vegetables is their curried specialty, served tableside in an iron skillet.

"Few people know how spicy Indian food is," said Kazy Moyn Uddin, manager of Passage to India. "It's our job to ask them how they like it. If you've never tried our curry, we suggest the mild."

Matching the heat of the spices to customers' tastes is a relatively easy task for Indian chefs, who grew up eating a wide variety of curries.

"In India, we eat curry every day, but in different ways," Amin said. Varying the spiciness and the ingredients means they "can eat it for lunch and dinner," and not grow bored with their diet.

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Everything's not so jolly now

vided by a harpist wasn't enough to allay our impatience as we waited long stretches between each course.

We started with soups (\$1.25-\$2.95) and/or shrimp cocktail. The French onion soup was delicious. The New England clam chowder in particular was nicely flavored. It was the first time, however, we've been served teaspoons with soup — and we soon discovered why the soup spoon was created.

OUR DINNER SALADS were fresh and crisp, and the vinaigrette dressing was good. But those who chose the Caesar salad were disappointed.

The menu focuses on fresh fish, veal dishes and pasta. While the main menu ranges in price from \$13.95 to \$24.94, the daily specials are less pricey (\$11.95-\$16.95). Our order included a variety of entrees, from grilled tuna or salmon to filet mignon and veal fra diavola. While the entrees were nicely flavored and generally well-prepared, they were lukewarm upon arrival — which is why we think the service was the main problem, not the chef.

The veal medallions were sauteed in a seasoned egg wash with mushrooms, lemongrass and a touch of sherry. Two of three medallions were delicious. But the third was tough and overcooked. The filet mignon was truly tender, and the bear-naise sauce served with it was light and creamy.

We found the grilled fish dishes especially well done, the grilled tuna was cooked to perfection, neither undercooked nor overdone, and was served with an interesting pepper sauce. Ditto for the salmon.

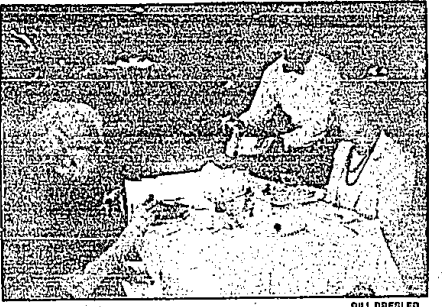
We finished up with an excellent cup of coffee, skipping the lineup of desserts because of the lateness of the hour. The restaurant features a dessert tray with fruits, tarts, brownies and fruits. Selections range

from \$2.95 for Haagen Dazs ice creams on up.

IN ALL FAIRNESS to the restaurant, we visited shortly after the change in menu and the problems we encountered may have been part of the transition. But we wonder whether the challenge of feeding large parties in the ballroom next door (the fourth largest one in the state) detracts from the hotel's efforts at developing a first-class restaurant. We had the distinct feeling our courses were interspersed between meals being served at the high school prom next door.

The restaurant relies heavily upon hotel guests for its clientele. But it draws also from the western suburbs — those people who know how to find the hotel despite the fact that the M-14 freeway passed it by without an exit.

Those who do find it enjoy the comfort. The harp music (on Friday and Saturday nights only) provides a special ambience to an already pleasant atmosphere. The menu "up-grading" no doubt relates to the hotel's transition into a Radisson. With better coordination between the kitchen and service staff, the Park may yet become a memorable place to eat. We'll have to wait and see.



GILL DREGLER

Customers dine at the Park, formerly the Jolly Roger, in the Radisson Hotel Plymouth, which was the Plymouth Hilton.

Details: the Park, 14707 Northville Road, Plymouth, 459-4500.

Hours: breakfast, 6:30-11 a.m. Monday-Saturday; 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sunday; lunch, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Saturday; dinner, 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5:30-10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 1-9 p.m. Sunday. Sunday brunch is discontinued during the summer in favor of a Sunday "Barbeque in the Park."

Prices: lunch, \$4.95-\$7.95; dinner, \$11.95-\$24.95. Visa, MasterCard, American Express, Diner's Club. Value: Fair, expensive.