

The spice of life: Cooking instructor shares her love of North and South Indian cuisine

By Jennifer K. Weitzman

Follow the scent of spices and herbs and you'll learn to make delicious chutneys, yogurt dishes and a variety of meat and meatless dishes at the School of Authentic Indian Cooking.

Founder and owner Sadia Bukhari is an experienced chef and instructor in East Indian culinary arts with a degree in food and nutrition from Pakistan. In addition to teaching at the Bitter Lake Community Center, she has produced a cooking-instruction video called "Cuisine of India" and recently started a catering business.

"I consider Indian cooking an art that is highly personalized and reflects personal taste," Bukhari said. "I wanted to share that personal touch with my American friends."

She resumed her classes last August, offering lessons in how to cook both North and South Indian cuisine.

A sensory experience

Upon arriving to class, I enjoyed some red grapes and lentil wafers dipped into a delicious coriander chutney. The chutney is spicy and sweet with a citrus tang. Bukhari lets me know that her intent is to have her students learn about spices, how to combine them and the health benefits they will experience.

"Among the fresh ingredients used in North Indian cuisine are ginger, garlic and onion also known as 'wet trinity,'" Bukhari said. She explains that cardamom, cumin, cinnamon and cloves are also indispensable to this region's cuisine.

"South Indian food cannot be completed without the use of coconut, chilies, mustard seeds and legumes. North Indian cuisine tends to have a lot of meat dishes, along with their popular vegetarian entrees, while South Indian is mainly vegetarian," she explained.

I quickly learn Bukhari's favorite utensil to use is her hands. She mixes the chickpea flour for the pyaaz pakora (deep-fried onion rings in chickpea flour) and talks about how consistency is the trick.

She mixes in the spices (cumin seeds, red pepper and salt) with four fingers because she claims it makes it fluffy.

Bukhari said that you can add veggies to the batter as well, but she warns, "we are nothing without spices and herbs."

The cooking demonstration by Bukhari is helpful for all levels of cooks, and her explanations

are layered with stories. She stresses the importance of making food from scratch since premade foods most likely have preservatives.

She also explains that if you make food in bulk and freeze then you have a supply ready to use.

A healthful diet

For her classes, Bukhari creates her own recipes that are high in protein and fiber and low in carbohydrates. She claims this type of eating has helped her lose weight.

"I wanted to clarify any misconceptions about Indian food being rich, oily and unhealthy," she explained. "I believe that with the right combination of spices and ingredients, Indian cuisine can be a very good option for health-conscious people."

As she cooks the students try a bit of the ingredients. At the end of the class, there is plenty of food for a light supper.

The menu on this night includes Chana Chat (chickpeas and potatoes with a tangy sauce), Imli Chutney (sweet-and-sour tamarind chutney) and Pyaaz Pakora.

One student, Joy Baker, said she enjoys the ease of this type of cooking because the demonstrations make it easy.

Sri Purohith, from South India, has been taking Bukhari's classes for six months. He said he has learned how to mix spices properly and become a better cook for his two children.

With a blend of cooking instruction, enticing facts about culture, history and nutrition related to each dish and finally the tasting of the food, your mouth will water for another class.

The next series, Basics of an Indian Kitchen, is offered Wednesdays, April 5, through May 3. A membership package is available for \$38 per class as a series or \$45 for individual classes. Classes take place at the Lake City Community Center, 12531 28th Ave. N.E. To register, contact Sadia Bukhari, at saic_seattle@yahoo.com or 330-2065. Upcoming classes include an introduction to herbs and spices, as well as homemade yogurt and Khichri (basmati rice cooked with split, washed moong beans), on Wednesday, April 5; and roasting, grinding and crushing techniques to prepare Sambar masala, Garam masala and Sambar (lentil stew with vegetables), on Wednesday, April 12.