



CHAPTER 1

# ALL about SPICES

*The role of spices in traditional Indian culture*

## A steaming cup of ginger tea on a cold, foggy

winter morning is a great incentive to jump out of bed and leave the comfort of a warm quilt. Ginger tea gives us the needed warmth to keep a cold or cough away. During hot summer months, cumin or cardamom added to a yogurt drink helps keep our bodies cool. We use *ubtan*—a paste made with turmeric, oil, and flour—on our faces and bodies before we take a bath. Turmeric gives an exceptional glow to our skin and its antibacterial properties keep our faces clear of blemishes.

In India, we grew up with spices as an integral part of our lives. No written formulas or notes were kept for us to follow. It is the experiences of our elders and their eagerness to lovingly and carefully share their knowledge that has kept this art alive over many centuries. As we observed our mothers and grandmothers, we learned the traditions of our culture.

### Buying, using, and storing spices

In many Indian households, spices are bought in bulk at the market after the harvest, when they are cheaper. They are dried, pounded, and stored at home so they are readily available throughout the year. Today they are also conveniently available prepackaged at many specialty stores.

Most spices have a long shelf life when stored properly. Here are some tips to keep spices fresh for a long time:

- Store in dry, airtight, glass containers.
- Keep in dry, dark, and cool places.
- Handle with dry hands and dry spoons. Moisture can spoil the spices.

### Descriptions of the most common spices

The six essential spices I used in developing my recipes are listed below. I discuss each spice in detail to help you understand its origin, quality, and usage in Indian cooking.

**Asafetida (*hing*).** A spice with a pungent and peculiar smell. It is collected as a sap from the stem and roots of plants from the Umbelliferae family. When dried, asafetida crystallizes and becomes hard. In crystal form, it is yellowish brown and has a stronger smell than in its powdered form. When powdered asafetida is mixed with ingredients such as rice flour, the spice becomes more mellow and is less potent.

Powdered asafetida is available prepackaged. It produces a strong aroma when added to hot oil or ghee. The smell is comparable to garlic and is often used in cooking as a substitute for onion and garlic, especially as a flavoring spice by people in India who are following a diet that excludes these. Asafetida is frequently used with beans, lentils, and certain vegetables to aid digestion and reduce flatulence. As a home remedy, it is often rubbed on the stomach of a colicky baby to reduce discomfort.

**Chilies (*mirch*).** A variety of dried and fresh fruits of plants of the genus *Capsicum* and the Solanaceae family, also called peppers. The young fruit is green; as it matures, the color changes to red. Many varieties of chili peppers are available around the world, ranging in color and intensity of flavor. When added to food, chilies give a sharp, fiery taste. They help to stimulate the digestive system and promote increased blood circulation and metabolism. The antibacterial properties of chilies help preserve food for longer periods of time.

Green chilies vary in their degree of potency. You'll learn through trial and error which is right for you. The taste varies from the mild, sweet Japanese Shishito pepper, to the medium-hot Hungarian pepper, to the very hot cayenne pepper and the extremely fiery habanera pepper. The shape and size also varies from the thin and small Thai peppers, to the long and slender cayenne pepper, to the long and plump banana pepper. Some peppers are round, like the small cherry pepper and the large and plump bell pepper. Peppers are pale yellow or light green when young. When mature, peppers are bright yellow, orange, red, dark green, or purple depending on the variety.

Chilies can be used fresh, dried, crushed, or powdered. You can find them in the produce and spice sections of grocery, Indian, and many other ethnic food stores. Most dishes from the Indian subcontinent use chili powder in their preparation.

Fresh green chilies are often ingredients in salads and seasonings. When buying chilies, choose those with shiny and smooth skins; these are the freshest. Green chilies refrigerate well for eight to ten days. To store, remove the stalks, wrap in paper towels, and place in an air-tight container.

Dried whole or crushed chilies are often added to hot oil or ghee, imparting a pungent and sharp smell and infusing the oil or ghee with a roasted, smoky flavor. The seasoned oil or ghee is then used to spice up lentils, salads, and vegetable dishes.

Chili powder is prepared by pounding the dry whole chilies and then finely grinding them. The powders vary in degree of potency, from mild to medium to very hot. Chilies from the Kashmir region are very mild and are often used with stronger chili powder to

make curries. When added to curries, this chili powder imparts a red pigment during the slow cooking, giving a peculiar red color to the curry. Southern states and the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan supply the hotter varieties of chili powder.

Take special care when handling chilies. The pith and the seeds are the hottest parts. Many people use gloves while working with chilies. After handling chilies, be sure to wash your hands well with soap. Avoid touching your nose, mouth, and eyes for a few hours. It is the oil from the chili that causes the burning sensation.

If affected by chili burns, wash your skin thoroughly with cold water and soap. Gently dry the area with a soft cloth and apply unsalted butter, ghee, vegetable oil, or skin cream. It may take anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours to completely diffuse the burning sensation.

To reduce the intense heat in the mouth after eating a chili, remove all food and chew a piece of bread or eat plain rice. Follow with a drink of cold milk—which will also reduce any burning in the digestive tract and stomach.

**Coriander (*dhania*).** An aromatic plant belonging to the Umbelliferae family. The leaves and seeds of the coriander plant are used extensively in Indian cooking. Its fresh leaves and young stems add fragrant flavor to a variety of dishes and make an attractive garnish. Coriander powder is an important spice in curries and curry powders. In traditional medicine, coriander is often used for its antibacterial and flatulence-relieving properties.

Coriander seeds are harvested at the end of the growing season and are dried in the sun before use. The seeds are yellowish brown and spherical in shape, slightly smaller than whole black peppercorns. They release a roasted, earthy smell when cooked in hot oil or dry roasted.

Coriander powder is a basic and frequently used spice. Seeds must be completely dried before grinding into powder. The powder is light brown with a mild and sweet taste. Coriander powder adds savory flavor to curries and helps thicken the gravy. Both coriander seeds and powder are available in the spice sections of grocery and many ethnic food stores.

**Fresh coriander (*hara dhania*).** The fragrant leaves and shoots of the coriander plant; known as cilantro in the United States. The cuisine of countries such as India, Mexico, and Thailand use cilantro. When added during cooking, the aromatic chopped fresh leaves and stalks add color and freshness to any dish. When finely chopped, they are a beautiful garnish. Cilantro is an essential ingredient in many salads and chutneys.

Cilantro is available year-round in produce sections of grocery and many specialty food stores. It is often sold in bunches with roots, stems, and leaves. To store cilantro, remove the roots and thick stems. Spread it on a paper towel to let the moisture evaporate; turn stalks over after ten minutes and repeat. Wrap cilantro in the paper towel, place in a plastic container or plastic bag, and refrigerate. Cilantro will stay fresh up to ten days. Wash cilantro just before using it. Fresh cilantro is always recommended since it

loses its effectiveness and aroma when dried or frozen.

**Cumin seeds (*jeera*).** The aromatic and flavorful seeds of the cumin plant, which, like parsley, is a member the Umbelliferae family. Cumin seeds are one of the essential spices used in seasoning lentils and vegetables. No spice rack is complete without them. The light brown cumin seeds are small and cylindrical with pointed ends and ridges on the skin. Raw seeds are bitter, but roasted or fried cumin seeds have desirable taste and a strong, pleasant aroma.

Cumin seeds can be used raw, fried, and dry roasted. Most lentils are seasoned by frying cumin seeds in ghee. Dry roasted and powdered seeds are used in many yogurt dishes. Powdered raw cumin is used in curries and curry powders.

The mature seeds are harvested and dried in the sun before they are sold at the market. Most grocery and specialty stores carry cumin seeds and cumin powder. Roasted cumin powder is prepared at home and is not available in the stores. (See Chapter 7, page 161.) It is also used in Mexican and some African cuisines. Cumin has a cooling effect on our bodies. It also is used as an aid in digestion.

**Mustard seeds (*raai*).** The tiny, spherical-shaped seeds from the mustard plant, which belongs to the Cruciferae family and the genus *Brassica*—the same group as common cabbage. Mustard seeds range in color from dark reddish brown to black. Raw seeds have no odor, but the crushed and powdered seeds have a pungent smell and a very sharp taste. Powdered mustard seeds are used in Indian pickles to give a sour taste and help preserve them. Mustard seeds are used to season a variety of lentils and vegetables. To prepare the seasoning, the seeds are added to hot oil or ghee. When heated, they change color from brown black to grayish brown and give a rich, roasted, nutty flavor to a dish.

Oil made from mustard seeds adds authentic flavor to many regional dishes in India. In northeastern India, the oil is used for its pungent smell. Oil from mustard seeds is also used for stimulating body massages and as a hair tonic. Black mustard seeds are not available at regular grocery stores but can be found in Indian stores. In general, yellow mustard seeds are not used in Indian cooking.

**Turmeric (*haldi*).** A tuberous rhizome used in powdered form for its preservative and medicinal characteristics. This yellow, bitter-tasting spice is a must in Indian cooking. Although it does not add any particular taste to a dish, its antibacterial and preserving properties make turmeric the most important spice in Indian cuisine. It has an acrid smell and gives a peculiar yellow color to the curries.

The underground stem portion of the plant comes from the same family as the popular herb ginger. The roots are boiled and dried in the sun before they are pounded to prepare the turmeric powder. Fresh turmeric is faintly aromatic and is slightly bitter in taste. In many Indian grocery stores, you will find fresh young turmeric for making