

Women, Food and the Sustainable Economy: A Simple Relationship

By Hemalata Dandekar

The preparation and eating of food are important and intimate matters. This is especially so in traditional societies where food and its preparation remains predominantly the purview of the women of the household. In these traditional societies, a cook's judgment—adding a pinch of this or a handful of that—adds the personal stamp that gives identity to the foods prepared by an excellent cook. The comment that she has a “good hand” was the ultimate praise in my own extended family in India—an important ingredient of being a cultured and accomplished woman.

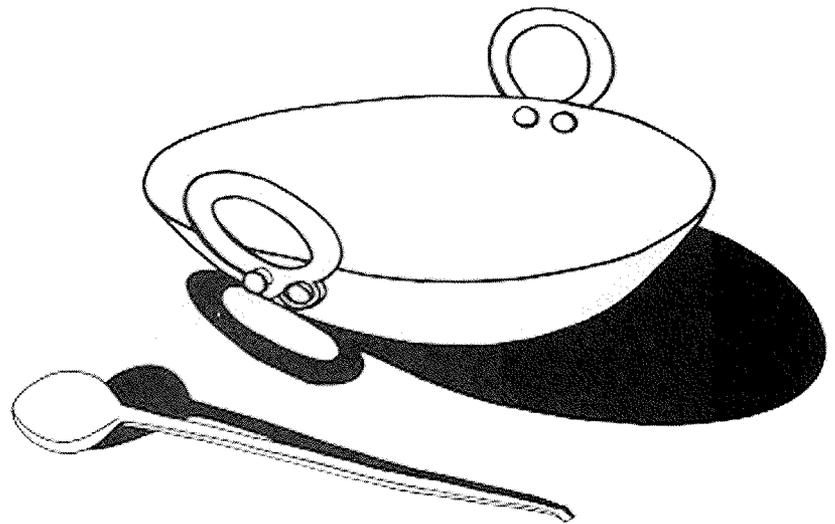
Simple “Grounded” Food

My mother's family was from the dry, peanut-and-millets-growing region of the Deccan Plateau, while my father's family originated in the rice-growing, coconut-fringed coastal plains of the Konkan, in Maharashtra State, India. As Brahmins by caste, the traditional dishes were vegetarian. Both sides of the family had long abandoned their rural roots but urban culture had not erased the grounded specificity of their preferred cuisines. Peanuts were in many dishes, and favorite desserts included fillings of coconut and sugar, flavored with cardamoms. In the rural areas of Deccan Maharashtra, where I did my doctoral fieldwork, a preponderance of dishes is still made from products grown in the local region. The majority of women from households other than the most elite and affluent cook with parsimony. Every element of a potential food source is gleaned with care; little is thrown away—the outer skin of the mango, for instance, and the flesh, the seedpod and seed are all treated in a variety of ways. I still remember the triumphant gleam in my aunt's eyes the time she finally succeeded in conjuring up very palatable chutney from the outer, particularly bitter skin of a gourd which she normally used to throw away. I recognized that gleam recently when my young Spanish instructor passed around a photograph, taken in South America, before consumption of a guinea pig fried whole. My instructor's comment that the crispy whiskers were delicious was a reminder that this parsimony and relish of the whole food is a characteristic of much of the cooking, baking and food preparation in the third world.

Simply Served and Eaten

The basic eating and cooking rituals in most parts of India are characterized by simplicity tempered

by custom. In my part of Maharashtra, foods are always served in a strictly defined order on *taats* or *thalies*—large brass (now stainless steel) platters, up to fourteen inches in diameter, with raised edges. In the coastal area of the Konkan, where banana trees are plentiful, meals, especially at feasts for marriages and births, used to be served on freshly cut banana leaves. In the upland plateau region of the Deccan, round plates and bowls are fashioned out of a particular type of dried leaves stitched together with small twigs. Now plastics and Styrofoam containers have largely supplanted these highly disposable and biodegradable ones, except in the more remote parts of the countryside.

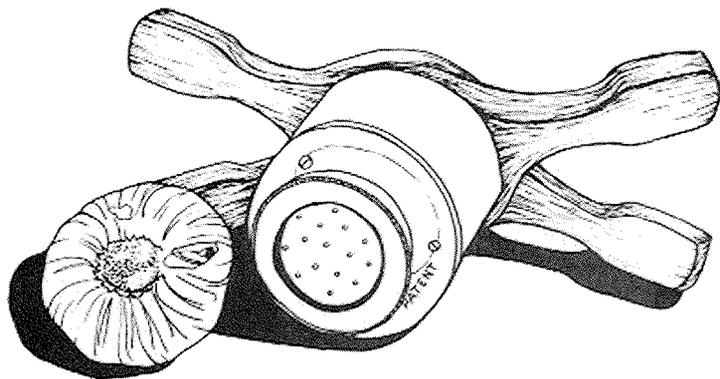


The meal is eaten using only the right hand. Strict rules of etiquette govern. Only the fingers are used and the palm of the hand must remain dry and clean. To allow curry to dribble down your arm is considered poor form. Pieces of chapatti are torn off using only the right hand (a technique that can be learned only by observing the skilled) and wrapped around vegetables and pickles, or used to scoop curry into one's mouth. Rice, too, is mixed with other food and eaten with one's fingers. Some people will use a spoon, for the accompanying curry, but this is not the norm and most meals are served without any cutlery. The left hand is used to drink water, to wave away the flies (important, especially in the rural areas) and to help oneself to more food. After one has started eating, the right hand is not used to serve oneself, since that would be defiling the food that is served to everyone from the common pot. ⇒

Simple Utensils

Traditional cooking utensils in Maharashtra are elegant in their utility and simplicity. The bulk of Indian cooking, particularly in rural areas and in households of the poor, is done on wood- or charcoal-burning mud stoves. A kerosene stove is a luxury and bottled gas is out of reach for most. Stoves are cleaned and scoured with ash and grit, and without benefit of hot water. In fact, even cold water is sometimes scarce. As a result, most utensils are very sturdy and quite basic: a cast iron griddle called a *tawa*, a wok-like pot called a *kadhai*, a ladle (*pali*), two varieties of spatulas (*zara* and *ulathna*) and a pair of tongs (*chimata*) to place and remove utensils on the stove.

Cast iron utensils give a unique, smoky flavor to a spice base and are therefore always used in the preparation of certain dishes such as a chickpea flour curry spiced only with oil, chilies, turmeric and mustard seed, or boiled lentil curry, which is laced with an aromatic hot butter and spice seasoning.



Some Simple Basic Steps

There are several basic steps in Indian cooking. One of the most important is the preparation of an oil and spice base, which in Marathi is called a *phodani*, to which vegetables, cooked beans, rice, lentils and other ingredients are added. The purpose of a *phodani* is to cook the various spices in oil to the different temperatures needed to draw out their full flavor. A properly made *phodani* causes the cook and spectators to cough and sniffle. If this happens, continue undaunted; a successful *phodani* is underway.

For those who assume there is a spice called curry, I have disappointing news. The word curry does not even exist in the Marathi language. In English, the word curry is used to describe a wide range of stew-like dishes made from vegetables, dried beans and lentils, meat, fish or fowl, but it does not refer to any one of a combination of spices. The confu-

sion seems to stem from the fact that all these dishes contain some combination of hot, aromatic spices that gives the liquid sauce a mouth-watering, spicy-hot flavor. The various mixtures that are sold as “curry powder” in Western countries resemble different combinations of spices called *masalas* in Marathi. Self-respecting Indian cooks make their own special *masalas*—wet *masala*, made and used day-to-day, or dried varieties that can be stored and used over a period of ten or twelve months.

Simple Dishes

Red Lentils and Rice Khichadi

Khichadi, the most basic of meals, a one-dish complementary rice and lentil combination, is widely consumed all over India and understood to be nutritious and healthy. It is India’s chicken soup. Bhima, the strongest of the five brothers in the epic Mahabharata, favored this dish, which, we all learned as children, helped maintain his great strength. It is made from rice, widely cultivated lentil and spices grown locally or in the region.

Basic Ingredients

- 1 c. rice (preferably long-grain)
- 1 c. masur dal (red lentils)
- 1 T. vegetable oil
- 4 dried red chilies, broken in half
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 tsp. cumin seeds
- 1 tsp. turmeric
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 2 tsp. salt

Heat the oil in a cast-iron pan. Add cumin, bay leaf and red chilies. When cumin browns, add turmeric and stir until it turns color. Add rice and lentils and stir until they are coated with the oil (about 2 or 3 minutes). Add 4 cups of water, salt, and sugar, and bring to a boil. Continue boiling for a minute or two, lower heat and cover. Simmer for 10 or 15 minutes, until rice and lentils are soft, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking. Add water if necessary.

Other Bean Khichadi

Khichadi can be prepared with other lentils or beans, such as *urad dal*, black-eyed peas, mung beans and European lentils. If the lentils and beans are sprouted, the *khichadi* is particularly delicious. European lentils cook quicker than rice, so, with a plain lentil *khichadi*, add the rice first and fry it well before adding lentils. With black-eyed peas, add the peas first. *Khichadi* can be made substituting ghee or butter for the oil and using fresh green chilies. This has a different and very good taste.

Sanja or Upmaa

Ideal for all those who love cream of wheat (and perhaps even those who don't) *sanja*, known in South India as *upmaa*, is hot and spicy; *sheera* is a sweet version of the same dish. *Sanja* is served for breakfast in South India and as a mid-afternoon snack in Maharashtra. It can also be served for lunch with yogurt and/or a salad. Very nutritious and quick to make, it is an important dish to master. It is very successful taken along on picnics and served cold with yogurt salad or chutney.

Basic Ingredients

- 1 c. cream of wheat
- 1 c. onions, finely chopped
- 1 T. vegetable oil
- 1 or 2 dried red chilies, broken in half, or fresh green chilies, cut in pieces (to taste)
- 1 tsp. cumin seeds
- 1 bay leaf (optional)
- 1 tsp. turmeric
- 3 T. *urad dal* (split black gram, optional)
- 1 c. peanuts, preferably raw, with skins (to taste)
- 1 tsp. salt
- 2 to 3 c. boiling water

Heat the cream of wheat in a cast iron pan, stirring constantly (as it tends to burn), until it is slightly roasted and turns a darker yellow-brown. The cream of wheat gives off a delicate fragrance and sounds slightly grainy, like sand, when it is stirred. Remove from pan and set aside.

Have all ingredients pre-measured and at-hand, as the pace picks up here and the spices can get burned. Heat oil in the cast iron pan. Add cumin, bay leaf and chilies. When the chilies begin to sizzle, add turmeric and stir. When turmeric turns dark yellow, add the *urad dal*, peanuts, salt and onions. Stir and cook until the onions are a golden yellow. Add the cream of wheat and 2 cups boiling water. The cream of wheat will expand rapidly and absorb the water. Stir, turn down the heat, cover and cook for 5 minutes until the cream of wheat feels soft to the touch and tastes "done." Additional water (up to one cup) may have to be added before the cream of wheat is fully cooked. A dish of *sanja* is delicious garnished with fresh grated coconut and chopped fresh coriander or with some plain yogurt.

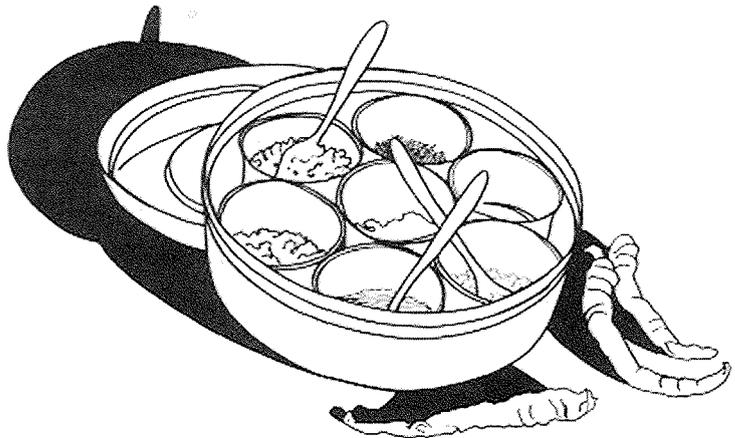
Onion-Tomato-Peanut-Yogurt Salad

Salads are consumed mixed with rice or scooped up with bread. In Indian cuisine they are not stand-alone components of a meal. This salad, which is extremely simple to make and has countless possible variations, is a useful complement in many meals.

Basic Ingredients

- 2 c. tomatoes, chopped
- 1 onion, finely chopped or sliced lengthwise
- 1 c. dry-roasted peanuts, chopped
- 1-1/2 c. plain yogurt
- 1 tsp. sugar (to taste)
- 1 tsp. black pepper, ground (to taste)
- 1 tsp. salt (to taste)
- 1 or 2 fresh green chilies, finely chopped (optional)
- fresh coriander leaves, finely chopped (optional)
- sprig of fresh mint, finely chopped (optional)

Sweet onions may be used, if preferred, or soak cut onions in cold water for 30 minutes to remove some of their hotness. Drain and mix with remaining ingredients in a large bowl. Wait at least 15 minutes before serving to allow the flavors to mix.



Variations

1. Omit the yogurt and squeeze two tablespoons lemon or lime juice on the salad. Reduce salt to $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon only.
2. Omit the yogurt and add 2 cups shredded lettuce and 3 tablespoons lemon juice.
3. Omit the onions and substitute scallions or finely chopped, preferably unpeeled, cucumbers.
4. Add thinly sliced or freshly chopped bell peppers.
5. With a spicy meat dish like beef or mutton curry, a salad consisting of only onions or of onions and yogurt is delicious and helps to cut the greasy taste of the meat. Follow the above procedure, using only onions or onions and yogurt.

Hemalata Dandekar is head of the School of Planning and Landscape Architecture at Arizona State University. For additional recipes of Maharashtrian food, see, Hemalata Dandekar, Beyond Curry, Quick and Easy Indian Cuisine From Maharashtra State, Center for South and Southeast Asia, The University of Michigan: 1983. All illustrations courtesy of Hemalata Dandekar.