

Recipe Packet: Indian Cooking for Beginners

Vegetable Pakoras

Serves 4 – 6

1 medium onion, peeled, halved and lyonnaise sliced
1 zucchini, grated (use the large holes)
1 carrot, grated (use the large holes)
1 small bell pepper (red or green), julienned
1 small jalapeno, seeded and minced
3 cloves garlic, peeled and minced
2 ½ cups chick pea flour
¼ cup rice flour
½ teaspoon baking soda
1 tablespoon ground turmeric
pinch cayenne pepper
¼ teaspoon ground cardamom
½ teaspoon ground cumin
1 ½ teaspoon kosher salt
1 ½ - 2 cups water (divided)
1 quart canola oil (for frying)
2 tablespoons sea salt (for garnish)
2 tablespoons chopped cilantro (for garnish)
6 lime wedges (for garnish)

In a mixing bowl, combine the onion, zucchini, carrot, bell pepper and jalapeno together.

In another mixing bowl, stir together the chickpea flour, rice flour, baking soda, turmeric, cardamom, cumin, garlic and salt. Slowly add the water and whisk to combine. Add more water if needed – the mixture should resemble pancake batter. Set aside.

Pour the oil into a wide, shallow skillet or sauté pan to shallow fry the pakoras. Heat over medium high heat until it begins to shimmer. You can test the oil by inserting a wooden spoon or chopstick – if the oil starts to fry and bubble around the wood, the oil is at the proper temperature.

Add the vegetables into the batter and fold to combine. Use a large tablespoon to scoop the mixture and use another spoon to carefully push the mixture into the hot oil. Be careful not to splash the hot oil. Make sure the pakoras do not touch in the oil – they may stick together.

Fry for 5 to 6 minutes, making sure to flip them if they are still pale on top. Use a skimmer to scoop the pakoras out of the oil and drain on a cooling rack set over a sheetpan to catch the oil. Sprinkle with sea salt and serve immediately with cilantro and lime.

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Fresh Paneer Cheese and Peas

Serves 4-6

This is a lighter, less saucy version of Mattar Paneer, an Indian curry dish that is more like a stew than a sauté. I prefer to make this non-traditional as it can be thrown together easily in a matter of minutes!

**1 cup fresh peas (or frozen)
2 – 4 tablespoons ghee (or clarified butter), divided (you can also substitute coconut oil)
1 piece homemade paneer, cut into ½-inch cubes (recipe follows)
1 tablespoon ginger, peeled and finely minced
4 garlic cloves, peeled and finely minced
1 small shallot, thinly sliced
½ teaspoon garam masala
1 teaspoon black mustard seeds
1 teaspoon ground coriander
1 teaspoon ground cumin
generous pinch red pepper flakes
¼ teaspoon ground turmeric
12 grape tomatoes, halved (or 2 roma tomatoes, diced)
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
2 tablespoons fresh mint leaves, coarsely chopped for garnish**

Blanch the peas (if using freshly shelled peas) in well-salted boiling water for 1 minute. Scoop out the peas and transfer immediately to a bowl of ice water. Drain the peas after 1 minute and set aside to dry. If you are using frozen peas, omit this step.

In a large sauté pan or skillet, melt the ghee over medium high flame. Fry the paneer cubes until the sides are golden brown. Season with salt and pepper and transfer to a plate and set aside.

Add the remaining ghee to the pan and sauté the garlic and shallots until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add the spices and stir until the mixture combines, about 30 seconds. Add the tomatoes, peas and stir until they are heated through. Return the paneer back to the pan and toss until coated and heated through. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Garnish with the mint and serve immediately with steamed basmati rice

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Fresh Paneer Cheese

Makes about 10 ounces of cheese

Whole milk is preferred, but 2% milk can also be used, though the paneer will be slightly less rich and creamy. Avoid using skim and nonfat milks; these don't separate as easily into curds and whey. Pasteurized milk is fine to use for making ricotta, but avoid UHT (Ultra High Temperature) pasteurized milk as this process changes the protein structure of the milk, preventing it from separating.

1/2 gallon whole milk, organic and not UHT-processed

1/4 cup lemon juice (or vinegar)

1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

Special Equipment:

1 large saucepan (at least 1 gallon capacity)

Slotted spoon

Stainer or colander

Mixing bowl

Cheesecloth, for straining

Large Dinner plate (10-12 inches across)

Weight (large can or something heavy that weighs more than 2 pounds)

Heat the milk in a large saucepan over medium heat. Bring the milk to a simmer (just below boiling, about 200°F). Occasionally stir the milk and scrape the bottom of the pot so make sure the milk doesn't scald. When ready, the milk will look foamy and steamy.

Turn off the heat and remove the pot from the stove. Stir in the lemon juice. Cover, and wait for the milk to curdle, about 10 minutes. If it doesn't curdle, add more lemon juice or check to make sure that you are NOT using UHT-processed milk. At the end of the 10 minutes, the curds should have separated and the liquid whey should look yellow and watery.

Line a strainer or colander with cheesecloth and set it over a mixing bowl. Carefully transfer the curds into the strainer using a slotted spoon. Let the whey collect in the bowl beneath. Gather the cheesecloth in your hand and gently squeeze to remove excess whey. Be careful – the mixture may still be quite hot!

Open the cheesecloth back up and sprinkle the curds with 1/4 teaspoon of salt. Stir gently and taste. Add more salt if desired.

Gather the cheesecloth back up and fold together into a rough, tight square(ish) shape. Fold the extra cheesecloth tightly around the package. Set the cheese on a sheetpan and place a dinner plate on top to weigh it down. Place another weight on the plate and let it press for at least 30 minutes (up to an hour).

After pressing, paneer is finished and ready to use! Use immediately or refrigerate tightly wrapped in plastic wrap for up to 2 days.

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Aloo Gobi

Serves 4 – 6

1 large cauliflower, cut into florets
4 tablespoons ghee (or coconut oil), divided
6 medium-sized potatoes (Yukon golds are my favorite), sliced into wedges
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
2-inches of fresh ginger, peeled and finely minced
2 cloves garlic, peeled and finely minced
½ teaspoon ground turmeric
2 teaspoons chili powder
generous pinch of red pepper flakes
1 teaspoon garam masala
2 tablespoons cilantro leaves, coarsely chopped (for garnish)
Lemon wedges (for garnish)

Blanch the cauliflower in a large saucepan with salted boiling water for 2 minutes, or until tender. Scoop out the florets and transfer immediately into a bowl of ice water to stop the cooking process. When the florets are cold, drain and set aside.

In a large skillet or dutch oven, heat the ghee over medium high flame. Add the potatoes and sauté until the potatoes are tender, about 7-8 minutes. If they start to brown, that's a bonus!

Add the cauliflower and sauté for 4 more minutes. Add the ginger and garlic and sauté until fragrant. Stir in the turmeric, chili powder, salt and pepper and cover. Turn the heat down to medium low and simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Check for doneness by inserting a small paring knife into the thickest piece of potato. If the potatoes and florets are tender, they are done. Sprinkle the garam masala over the potatoes and florets and toss to combine.

Transfer to a serving bowl and garnish with chopped cilantro. Serve immediately and squeeze a bit of lemon juice over if desired.

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Saffron-Studded Basmati Rice

Serves 4-6

Ever since I was a child, the steamed rice served at Indian restaurants has mesmerized me. It was so fluffy, so soft and flecked with brilliant red-orange rice grains. In my childish imagination, I thought they were marigold petals plucked and added to the rice.

1 generous pinch of saffron threads

3 tablespoons butter

pinch of kosher salt

3 cups basmati rice

4 ½ cups boiling water

Wash the basmati rice 4 times, rinsing clean each time. Soak the rice in cold water and sprinkle a pinch of salt over. It's best to soak the rice for at least an hour, or up to 4 hours. Just before you are ready to cook, drain the rice and allow it to dry out for 10 minutes. After soaking, basmati rice is very delicate and fragile so during cooking, stir gently!

With a mortar and pestle, grind a generous pinch of saffron and add 2 tablespoons of hot water to the saffron and let it steep for about 30 minutes.

In a large shallow pan (or dutch oven), melt the butter over medium heat and gently sauté the rice until all the grains are coated. Add a couple of generous pinches of salt and stir again (gently).

Turn the heat down the lowest setting it can go and add the water to the rice. Stir only once and shake the pan gently to make sure the rice is spread out evenly in the water. Cover tightly and keep on the low heat for 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, the water should be completely absorbed and the rice should be fluffy and white. If not, turn the heat up very slightly and leave until done.

Pour the saffron infusion into 3-4 points in the rice and cover. Leave the rice alone for 10 minutes.

When ready to serve, use a fork to gently fluff the rice and watch the golden flecks from the saffron infusion work its way through. Gently pour the rice over a serving platter, not a bowl, as the weight of the rice might mash the bottom layer.