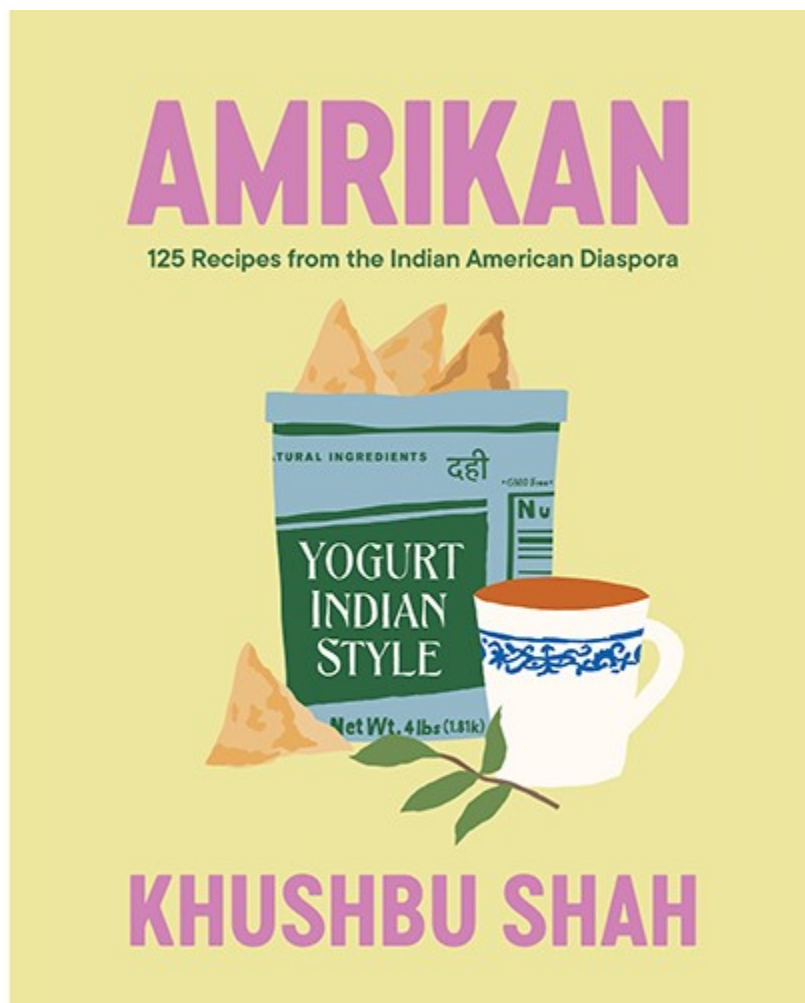




Smithsonian Associates

The Food of the Indian American Diaspora

Monday, December 9, 2024 - 6:45 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET



Recipes Featured:

1. Saag Paneer Lasagna
2. Saag Paneer
3. Crispy Paneer Burgers
4. Garam Masala
5. Shrimp Moilee

SAAG PANEER LASAGNA

Serves 8 to 10

(aka LaSAAGna)

Béchamel

8 tablespoons (2 sticks) unsalted butter

1/2 cup all--purpose flour

1 quart whole milk, at room temperature

1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper

1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg

1/2 cup grated parmesan

Lasagna

1 (12--ounce) block paneer, shredded

24 sheets no--boil lasagna noodles

1 recipe Saag Paneer (page 215) made without the paneer (See below)

1/4 cup grated parmesan

Freezer Note

Once the lasagna has cooled to room temperature, freeze individual portions in airtight containers for up to 3 months. The lasagna reheats well in a microwave or an oven.

I have a lot of very strong opinions when it comes to lasagna. The biggest one? People put too many things in lasagna! It doesn't need the fistfuls of mozzarella, heavy globs of ricotta, vegetables that are too chunky, and ladles of marinara sauce that are often too watery. The optimal lasagna is made from lots of neat, thin layers of pasta, vegetables, and sauce, with minimal cheese. Lasagna should feel indulgent, but not like it is going to murder your digestive system.

I am extremely partial to spinach lasagna with a cheesy béchamel sauce. I love the contrast of the bright green layers against the beige pasta, and the way the béchamel makes the dish rich and creamy but not



too heavy. One day as I was making Saag Paneer (page 215), it dawned on me that it would make for the perfect lasagna filling, with the cilantro and spices giving it a little more depth and oomph than a standard spinach lasagna filling. To make this version, I use the saag paneer base but keep the paneer to the side so I can crumble it before gently pan--frying, so that you get a little salty paneer in each bite. As the kids say these days, this lasagna fully slaps. It's a hit every time I make it, with high demand for any leftovers. It also freezes incredibly well, making it a good option to gift new parents or for meal prep. This lasagna is now a staple of my Thanksgiving table (along with the Biryani Baked in a Squash on page 159) and I hope it finds a way onto your table, too.

Lasagna Layering Guide

Top layer: Noodles, béchamel, parm

Middle layer 1: Noodles, saag sauce, paneer crumbles, béchamel

Middle layer 2: Noodles, saag sauce, paneer crumbles, béchamel

Bottom layer: Thin layer of béchamel, noodles, saag sauce, paneer crumbles, béchamel

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F. Oil a 9 x 13--inch baking dish with tall sides.

To make the béchamel, melt the butter in a large pot over low heat. Add the flour and whisk until the roux turns golden, 3 to 4 minutes. Add the milk, turn the heat up to medium, and continuously stir the mixture until it starts to bubble and thicken. It should coat the back of a wooden spoon when ready, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and fold in the black pepper, nutmeg, and parmesan, whisking until smooth. Set aside.

To make the lasagna, spread a thin layer of béchamel on the bottom of the prepared baking dish, then add 6 sheets of noodles, breaking the noodles as you need to fit the pan. Next spread one--third of the saag sauce over the noodles, then one--third of the paneer shreds, and one--quarter of the remaining béchamel. Repeat this process 2 more times, starting with another layer of noodles. Finish with a final layer of 6 noodles, the remaining béchamel, and then the parmesan. Here's how it will look:

Cover the lasagna with aluminum foil and bake for 35 minutes. Remove the foil and bake for about 15 minutes, until the lasagna is cooked through and lightly golden on top. Let the lasagna cool for at least 15 minutes before slicing and serving.

SAAG PANEER

Serves 4 to 6

1 pound baby spinach
2 small Roma tomatoes, quartered
2 green serrano peppers, cut in half
1 bunch cilantro, leaves only
3 tablespoons kasoori methi (optional but highly encouraged)
3 tablespoons ghee or neutral oil
1 medium white onion, finely chopped
1 1/2 tablespoons garlic paste ^[1]_[SEP]or 5 garlic cloves, minced
1 1/2 tablespoons ginger paste ^[1]_[SEP]or 1 1/2--inch piece fresh ginger, grated
1 1/2 tablespoons ground coriander
2 teaspoons ground cumin
1 1/2 teaspoons Kashmiri red chili powder
1 teaspoon ground turmeric
Salt to taste
3/4 cup water
1 (12--ounce) block paneer, cut into 1--inch cubes

Freezer Note

Saag paneer is very freezer--friendly. Divide up leftovers into individual--serving airtight containers and freeze for up to 3 months. Reheat in the microwave or in a pot on the stove over low heat.

Extra credit

I like to use leftovers to make frittatas (page 26), as a base sauce for naan pizza (page 149), and in lasagna (page 169).

Saag paneer is perhaps the most delicious way to get yourself to consume a boatload of leafy greens. They're cooked down until they form a silky sauce that is tossed with cubes of cheese—what is not to love?

You might see this dish called palak paneer on certain menus and saag paneer on others. “Palak” refers to a dish made from just spinach, while “saag” refers to a mix of leafy greens—like spinach, mustard greens, and even Swiss chard. In this recipe, I use mostly spinach plus a little bit of cilantro and dried fenugreek leaves out of convenience, but feel free to mix and match. I also find it vital to blend the greens—some do not—but the texture of the sauce is much more velvety if you do. It also helps the sauce feel creamy without the addition of any dairy.

The dish pairs extremely well with both Super Flaky Parathas (page 247) and Simple Parathas (page 244), as well as white rice.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil, then add the spinach. As soon as the greens fully wilt (about 2 minutes), drain the spinach in a colander and run it under cold water. Let drain; there is no need to squeeze the water out.

Transfer the spinach to a blender, along with the tomatoes, serrano peppers, cilantro leaves, and kasoori methi (if using) and blitz until very smooth—it should have the consistency of one those bright green smoothies that looks a little too healthy. Set aside.

In a large, heavy--bottomed pot or Dutch oven, melt the ghee over medium heat. Add the onion and sauté for 6 to 7 minutes, until softened and somewhat golden. Add the garlic and ginger and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes. Add the coriander, cumin, chili powder, turmeric, and salt and give it a good stir. Add the spinach mixture, water, and paneer cubes and let the mixture simmer for 10 to 12 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the sauce is slightly thickened.

CRISPY PANEER BURGERS

Serves 4

Tandoori Mayo (see Ingredient Note)

- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon Kashmiri red chili powder
- 2 teaspoons ground ginger
- 2 teaspoons garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon Garam Masala (page 62) (See below)
- 1 teaspoon salt, or more to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon sugar
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cardamom

Burgers

- 1 (12--ounce) block paneer
- 1 cup all--purpose flour
- 1 1/2 cups milk or water
- 2 tablespoons kasoori methi
- 1 tablespoon Kashmiri red chili powder
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 2 cups panko breadcrumbs
- Neutral oil, for frying



For Assembly

Butter or ghee, for griddling

4 burger buns

Generous handfuls shredded iceberg lettuce

Ingredient Note

For a shortcut, feel free to use 3 tablespoons premade tandoori masala blend mixed into the mayonnaise.

Here is one fact of life that I know to be absolutely true: McDonald's tastes better in other countries. The chain is good at "localization," or adapting their menu to focus on the flavors and foods that are popular in a country. The -McDonald's India menu is possibly the most perfect fast--food menu I've ever seen. And the star of that menu? The McSpicy Paneer Burger. A slab of paneer, coated in a spicy breading, deep--fried, and topped with tandoori mayo, on a soft and squishy burger bun.

I would absolutely get on a plane to India for a McSpicy Paneer Burger, but I can't remember the last time I hit the McDonald's drive--thru in America. Unfortunately, flying to India is an expensive and time--intensive endeavor, so I figured out how to make a knockoff at home. Don't skip on the tandoori mayo—it's what keeps the sandwich from feeling dry.

If you don't want to deep--fry the burgers, it is possible to air--fry the paneer. Bread the paneer burgers according to the directions in the recipe, but instead of frying it, brush each side with a little bit of oil and then cook for about 6 minutes on each side at 375 degrees F until golden brown.

In a small bowl or jar, combine all of the tandoori mayo ingredients and mix well. Taste and adjust the salt as needed. (The tandoori mayo can be made up to 2 weeks ahead of time and stored in an airtight container in the fridge.)

Cut the block of paneer into 4 "patties" by first cutting across the middle of the block to create 2 squares. Then cut each square in half horizontally to split it into 2 squares of the same size. The squares should be 3/4 to 1 inch thick.

In a small bowl, whisk together the flour, milk, kasoori methi, chili powder, salt, and black pepper. It should be a little runnier than pancake batter. Put the breadcrumbs in another small bowl to create a little breading station. One by one, dip each square of paneer into the flour--milk mixture to evenly cover the paneer. Then dredge the paneer in the breadcrumbs and make sure the surface is well coated (you can press the breadcrumbs on with your fingers). Place the coated paneer on a plate.

Heat 2 to 3 inches of oil to 300 degrees F in a large pot or deep cast--iron skillet. Working in batches as necessary, fry the paneer on both sides until golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer to a paper towel--lined plate.

Heat another skillet or a griddle over medium heat. Spread a little butter on the cut sides of each bun and griddle them until they have lacy, crispy edges. Spread a thin layer of the tandoori mayonnaise on the griddled sides of each bun. Place a piece of paneer on each bottom bun. Top with a pile of shredded lettuce (All hail, shreduce!), then cover with the top buns.

Freezer Note

To freeze the cooked paneer burger patties, separate them with layers of parchment paper and store in an airtight container for up to 2 months. When ready to eat, reheat in an air fryer or oven.

GARAM MASALA

Makes about 1 cup

1/2 cup coriander seeds
1/4 cup cumin seeds
3 tablespoons cardamom seeds
16 whole cloves
4 to 6 inches cinnamon sticks
4 star anise pods
2 teaspoons fennel seeds
1 teaspoon ground nutmeg

Storage Note

When stored in an airtight container in a cool, dark place, garam masala can last for at least 6 months, if not longer. Do not freeze the spice mix, as sometimes the flavor can change.

Garam masala might translate to “hot spices,” but don’t make the mistake of thinking that it is something that is light--your--mouth--on--fire spicy. “Garam” in this case points to the fact that it’s a blend of warm spices that add a cozy layer of flavor to any dish. Every family has their own combination of spices that make their garam masala—maybe it’s heavier on cumin, contains less cardamom, or has no star anise whatsoever. This is the blend my mom, Hina, likes to make, and the one I cooked with while growing up. Everything feels so rushed these days, but gently toasting your own spices, coaxing out their fragrances, is such a calming act. It requires you to slow down and really pay attention—even if only for a few minutes. A batch will last for at least six months stored in an airtight jar. (It makes a great gift!)

In a small saucepan, combine the coriander, cumin, cardamom seeds, cloves, cinnamon sticks, star anise, and fennel seeds. Toast the spices over medium--low heat, stirring constantly, until fragrant and toasty, 5 to 7 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat and carefully pour the spices onto a plate or wide bowl to let them cool. Add the nutmeg to the spices. When the spices are at room temperature, transfer to a spice grinder or blender and whizz into a fine powder. Transfer to an airtight container and seal well.

SHRIMP MOILEE

Serves 4

- 1 tablespoon coconut oil or neutral oil
- 2 tablespoons garlic paste or 6 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon ginger paste or 1--inch piece fresh ginger, grated
- 2 or 3 green serrano peppers, seeded (unless you love heat!) and minced
- 10 fresh curry leaves, chopped
- 1 white onion, diced
- 1 1/2 teaspoons ground turmeric
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 2 teaspoons lemon juice
- 1 (13.5--ounce) can full--fat coconut milk
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 24 large shrimp, peeled and deveined
- Fresh cilantro leaves, for garnish (optional)



Freezer Note

The base sauce (without the shrimp) will stay well in an airtight container in the freezer for at least 3 months. Thaw it in the fridge or on the counter and then reheat on the stovetop, with any proteins or vegetables you like.

Extra Credit

Try it with sweet potatoes or even tofu, too.

It's worth always keeping a can of coconut milk in your pantry simply to be able to make moilee whenever the craving strikes. I know butter chicken gets all the love when it comes to saucy Indian dishes, but moilee is the overlooked and underestimated kid in high school that grows up to be very cool, good--looking, and rich. The south Indian dish is made with a whole can of coconut milk, giving it a lush, velvety texture. The sauce itself is a gorgeous pastel yellow that should absolutely be a crayon color.

Moilee is the best base for seafood; I make moilee with shrimp, as in this recipe, though you will often find it on menus as meen moilee, "meen" meaning fish. Moilee comes together quickly, with minimal chopping, so it's an ideal dinner for busy nights, especially when served with a side of white rice.

Heat the oil in a large skillet over high heat. Add the garlic, ginger, serrano peppers, and curry leaves and cook, stirring constantly, until the curry leaves start to crackle, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the onion, turn the heat down to medium, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion softens and becomes translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the turmeric, salt, black pepper, and lemon juice and stir until well combined. Pour in the coconut milk and let it cook for 2 minutes. Stir in the sugar. Add the shrimp and simmer for 5 minutes or so, until the shrimp are cooked through. Garnish with cilantro, if you like.