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WOMEN WHO
SHARE A PASSION
FOR INDIAN FOOD
AND CULTURE **B8**

THE MASALA MAMAS

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PHOTO BY MARGE PERRY

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PHOTOS BY MANJEE DRISOLINA

THE SPICE GIRLS

The Masala Mamas bring Indian culture and food to the table



ON THE COVER Masala Mamas, from left: Deepa Ipektchi, Sherril Sharma, Harshila Malhotra, Ekta Patel, Ena Johar and Vandana Samuel

BY JOAN REMINICK
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The mingled scents of cumin, coriander, turmeric and mustard seed waft out of the kitchen of Ekta Patel's Syosset home, leading guests down to the family room, where the buffet table is laid out with appetizers. Among the offerings are damni dhokla, or lentil patties; two kinds of raita; mango yogurt soup, and the cheese-stuffed potato cakes called aloo tikki.

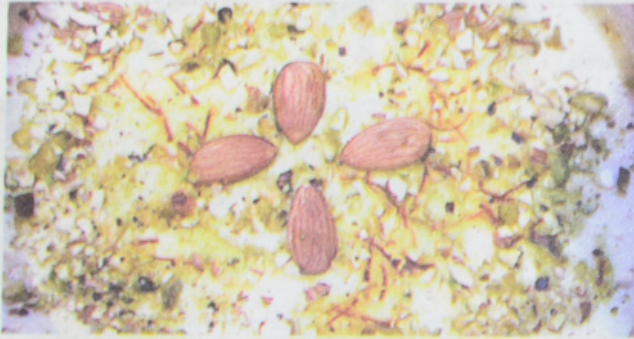
No question, the New York Masala Mamas are in the house. And they're cooking.

The group of about 20 women meets regularly to eat and exchange recipes and notes on their lives. They are accomplished women in many areas: There's a dentist, a pharmacist, a fashion wholesaler and a retailer, to name a few. All have some connection to Long Island's vibrant Indian-American community. And their moniker

suits them well. "We're all moms," says Patel, 37. "And masala is the Indian word for spice."

These mamas have been spicing up their monthly nights out with food and chatter for about two years now. It all began because Harshila Malhotra, 44,

See SPICE on B10



PHIRNI (Indian rice pudding)
(From Jiya Chatrath of Port Washington)

- 1/2 cup white basmati rice
- 4 1/4 cups plus 2 tablespoons whole milk, divided
- 1/2 cup white sugar
- 4 to 5 green cardamom pods shelled and ground with mortar and pestle
- For garnish: 1/2 teaspoon saffron (kesar) strands
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped pistachios and almonds

1. Thoroughly rinse rice, put into a bowl and cover with 1 cup water. Soak for 2 hours. Drain all but 1/4 cup water and grind the rice to a fine paste in a blender. Set aside.
2. In a heavy saucepan, bring 4 1/4 cups milk to a boil while constantly stirring with a wooden spoon so it does not stick to the bottom. Bring to boil twice more; remove from heat.
3. Add ground rice to the milk slowly, stirring continuously to make sure rice does not become lumpy. The milk will become thick. Return to heat and simmer for 3 to 4 minutes, stirring continuously. Add sugar and cardamom powder and boil 4 to 5 minutes longer over low-medium heat, stirring continuously. When the mixture is the consistency of thick batter, remove from heat.
4. Place in serving bowl while still hot; it will thicken more as it cools. Mix saffron in remaining 2 tablespoons warm milk and pour over pudding as a garnish. Refrigerate for 2 to 3 hours and serve chilled, garnished with almonds and pistachios. Makes 6 to 8 servings.



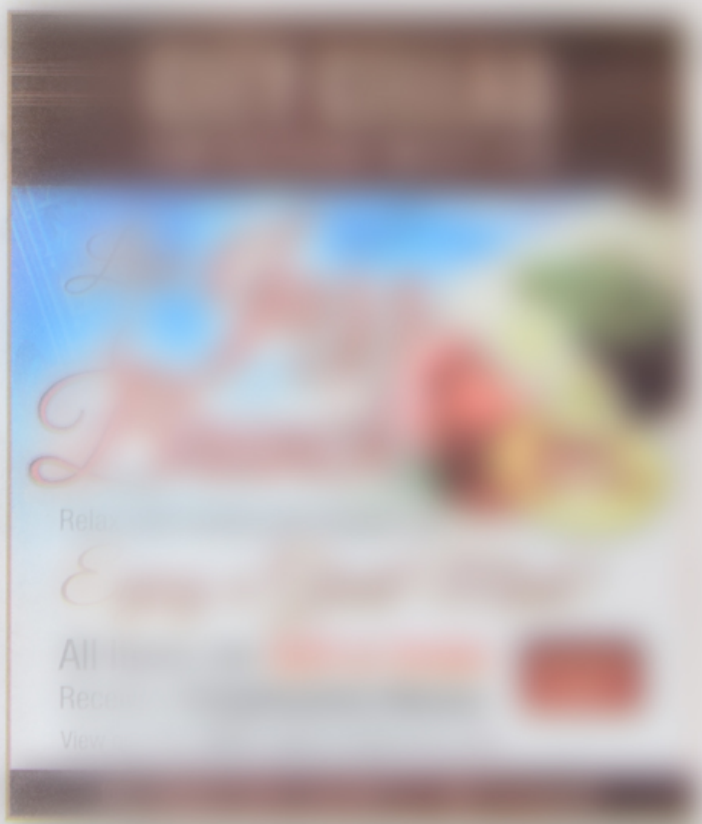
MANGO LASSI
(Mango yogurt smoothie)
(From Deepa Ipektchi of Dix Hills)

- 1 cup plain yogurt, low fat or whole milk
- 1 ripe mango, peeled and pit removed
- 3 to 4 teaspoons sugar, depending upon sweetness of mango
- 3 ice cubes

Place all ingredients in a blender and blend until smooth. Makes 1 serving.

Deepa Ipektchi serves up a batch of her mango lassi smoothies.

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October 10, 2014

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A large, stylized pink awareness ribbon graphic is overlaid on the right side of the page, partially obscuring the text in the sidebar.

The SPICE GIRLS

SPICE from B8

of Old Brookville, decided her cooking wasn't up to what she tasted whenever she ate at her pal Ena Johar's home in Oyster Bay. "Ena inspired me," said Malhotra. So she invited Johar to her house, along with about 20 of their friends. "I said to Ena, 'You're going to cook for me, and everybody will learn and have fun.'" From there, the group took off.

"We decided it was a way to keep our culture of food alive on Long Island as well as to learn," says Vandana Samuel, 43, of Dix Hills, who is known unofficially as The Organizer.

Over litchi martinis and appetizers at a recent gathering, the discussion turned to how cooking Indian food in the United States differs from cooking it in its land of origin. "In India, there is a lot of domestic help doing the chopping," says Jiya Chatrath, 41, of Port Washington, who notes the availability of convenience foods at Indian markets here. Still, while some of the women may occasionally buy pre-chopped garlic or pre-mixed spices, you'd never catch them near the supermarket seasoning called "curry powder," an American interpretation of the blend of Indian spices known as garam masala.

The culinary talk is interrupted by the announcement that it's demo time, so everyone troops up to the kitchen. First, Deepa Ipektchi, 42, of Dix Hills, demonstrates how to make a simple but refreshing drink, mango lassi, in a blender. Then, Johar cooks paneer makhani, Indian farmer cheese in a spiced tomato sauce enriched with ghee (clarified butter) and heavy cream.

A handy tip she passes along is to saute a month's worth of onions and freeze them in ice cube trays and use as needed. "That way, you'll only have to smell up the house once a month." Johar also pre-chops garlic and grates ginger, both of which keep well in the refrigerator for a week.

About midway through the demo, she asks Patel for her spice box. "Every household



Ena Johar cooks paneer makhani, a dish of Indian farmer cheese in spiced tomato sauce, ghee and cream, as Sonika Nanda watches.

has one," she says, removing the cover from the well-worn metal container fitted with smaller containers of turmeric, cumin seed, coriander powder, mustard seed, salt and red chili powder. A murmur of recognition runs through the room.

The dish is finished, plated and brought downstairs. The other entrees have been heated and set out on the table. For those who aren't vegetarians, there's a Kerala chicken curry as well as chicken tandoori, baked in a regular (not the traditional clay) oven. Patel, the host, has made roti (wheat bread) as well as rice. There's also Punjabi chole (a chick pea stew), a Sindhi vegetable curry and more.

Sonika Nanda 44, of Manhas-set notes that Indian cuisine is

generally healthful, although eating habits vary among Indian-Americans. "My husband grew up here," she said. "He wants meat every day. But I have been able to make tasty vegetable alternatives."

Before anyone gets near the table, Samuel whips out an iPad and shoots photos of every dish. Only when she's done can the eating begin. The talk and laughter continue through dessert.

The finale that takes center stage is an artfully decorated bowl of phirni, Indian rice pudding. Samuel snaps another photo and then explains the group's long-range plan.

"We decided to write a book for our children," she says. "We will keep these traditions alive and pass them on to them."



A plate of food from the Masala Mamas meeting includes chole, aloo tikki, damni dhokla, tandoori chicken, paneer makhani, Sindhi curry, kale salad, rice and dal



TANDOORI-STYLE CHICKEN (Marinated spiced baked chicken)
(From Sonia Banani of Manhasset Hills)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>20 pieces skinless chicken, drumsticks and thighs
3 teaspoons salt
1/2 teaspoon garam masala, available in Indian markets
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
2 teaspoons garlic paste, available in Indian and Asian markets
2 teaspoons ginger paste, available in</p> | <p>Indian and Asian markets
2 tablespoons lemon juice
2 tablespoons olive oil, plus extra for oiling pan, divided
3 tablespoons tandoori chicken masala, a dried spice mixture available in Indian markets
1 cup low-fat or whole-milk yogurt</p> |
|---|---|

1. Wash and dry chicken pieces and cut small slits in the meat to absorb seasoning.
2. Place chicken in a large bowl and add remaining ingredients (except extra oil to oil pan). Mix thoroughly; cover and let chicken marinate in the refrigerator for 2 to 3 hours.
3. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Oil a large baking pan or 2 small pans and arrange chicken pieces. Bake about 45 minutes, turning once. Makes about 10 servings.

■ More recipes: newsday.com/food

Indian food markets

While you may find what you need at a small Indian specialty store, these two Hicksville supermarkets are a sure bet:

PATEL BROTHERS

415 S. Broadway, Hicksville
516-681-0091, patelbros.com

The Long Island branch of a national Indian and Pakistani supermarket has virtually anything an Indian recipe would include. The store boasts a definitive selection of spices, rice, beans, lentils and other legumes. Fresh produce, frozen food and even snack foods are available. Prices are reasonable.

APNA BAZAR

217 Bethpage Rd., Hicksville
516-931-2045

apnabazar.dealonaire.com

Part of a New York metro area chain, Apna Bazar offers Indian groceries, produce, spices and an extensive selection of frozen foods.

A glossary

Here are some common Indian food terms:

Aloo Indian term for potatoes

Curry A sauce, often tomato-based, made with a blend of aromatic spices

Ghee Clarified butter, made by melting the butter and removing the foam that forms on top

Lassi A refreshing drink usually made with fruit and yogurt

Makhani Means "with butter"

Masala Spice, or spice mixture

Garam masala A blend of ground roasted aromatic spices

Paneer Indian farmer cheese

Phirni A milky rice pudding made with cardamom, saffron and pistachios

Raita A dip or sauce made with yogurt

Roti Indian whole-grain flatbread

Tandoor A clay oven

Tikki A croquette or cutlet

— JOAN REMINICK

