

# Masala Mamas share a love of Indian food

October 2, 2013 by JOAN REMINICK / joan.reminick@newsday.com



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, 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



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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 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 Manhasset 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."

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## 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

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## 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](http://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](http://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.

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