

Anatomy of a Dish: Goan Prawn Curry

One of the most beautiful areas of India also has one of the most sophisticated cuisines in the country. We take an in-depth look at one of the classics of Goan cuisine: the prawn curry.

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Golden Goa, with its steamy jungles and silky beaches, has long lured travellers to India's western coast. The region is a diverse meld of peoples, each adding to the rich blend of culture and cuisine. And nowhere is the evidence of this fusion more delicious than in the fiery prawn curry that's a favorite throughout the state. Each delightful bite carries hundreds of years of Goan history, each ingredient provides a glimpse into the region once famed as 'the empress of the east'.

Prawn curry begins, of course, with prawns. Goa is lapped by the Arabian Sea and saltwater prawns are plentiful, except during the monsoon months (May-August), when weather makes the waters too rough for many fisherman. Luckily, however, Goa is also blessed with rivers, and freshwater shrimp are available throughout the year.

Curiously, the blisteringly hot chillies that predominate many Goan dishes aren't native, but were introduced to India when the Portuguese colonised during the sixteenth century. They arrived in a land already under Arab influence -- Arabs having controlled India's spice trade since the end of the 12th century -- and began promoting a Christian agenda while bringing exotic foodstuffs such as tomatoes, potatoes and cilantro to the region. It's estimated that the Portuguese introduced more than 300 plants to the Indian subcontinent, while exporting native species such as coconut, mango and sugar cane.

Prawn curry is an explosion of spices, and the scarcity and value of these

precious powders and pastes drew the Europeans east. As used in India, curry simply means 'sauce', and refers to foods cooked in sauces. The mildly-flavoured leaves of the curry plant are occasionally included, but do not give curry powder its name. While there are almost as many formulations as there are lovers of Indian food, they are largely based around four spices: coriander, cumin, fenugreek and turmeric. In addition, curry powder may contain ginger, dill seed, black and white peppercorns, cinnamon, mace, cardamom and cloves ... to name but a few. The value that these ingredients, now part of almost every household, carried hundreds of years ago is almost impossible to believe. A peasant's annual wages barely equalled a handful of cinnamon, and slaves could be purchased for peppercorns.

In addition to what was once a king's ransom in spices, the prawn curry so loved in Goa is distinguished by its liberal use of chilli peppers, which are moderated by coconut milk. Tamarind is a usual ingredient, although in season raw mango or bilimbi fruit may be added to provide extra tartness. Goan curry is usually served with steamed rice, or poee, a spongy yeast-leavened bread, and accompanied by chutneys and chopped cashews. Traditional beverages are sweet red Goan port wine, cashew feni (often called Goa's national drink), or any of the region's excellent beers. No matter how it's enjoyed, a traditional prawn curry is a taste of Goa that will never be forgotten.

Classic Recipe

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ingredients

- 1 cup (200 g) 7 oz Prawns, small, shelled, deveined
- 2 cups (200 g) 7 oz Coconut (nariyal), grated
- 2 cups (500 ml) warm water

for the spice paste:

- 8 Kashmiri chillies (sookhi lal mirch)
- 1 1/2 tsp (3 g) Coriander (dhaniya) seeds
- 1 tsp (2 g) Cumin (jeera) seeds
- 1/2 tsp Uncooked rice, washed
- 1/4 tsp Turmeric (haldi) powder
- 6 cloves Garlic (lasan), minced
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 Onion, small, finely sliced
- 1-2 Green chillies, seeded and
- 5 Curry leaves (kadhi patta)
- 1 unripe Mango, sliced
- 1/2 tsp Sugar
- Salt to taste

Method:

- Grind the coconut with 1/2 cup warm water and extract thick coconut milk. Reserve. Add 2 1/2 cups warm water to the coconut, grind again and extract thin coconut milk. Keep aside.
- For the spice paste, grind all the ingredients with a little water to a smooth paste in pestle and mortar.
- Heat the oil in a pan; saute the onion for 3 minutes. Add the spice paste; saute for 1 minute more. Add the thin coconut milk, green chillies, and curry leaves. Cook on medium heat, partially covered, for 10 minutes.
- Add the mango to the curry with the prawns. Cook for 5 minutes. Add the sugar and salt to taste.
- Finally, add the thick coconut milk. Simmer without boiling for 2 minutes and remove from heat.
- Serve with steamed white rice and chopped cashews.