

Good Food

Hindu holiday vegetarian fete

by Barbara Ann Rosenberg

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Indian mythology is full of wonderful images, though none is more striking than a scene that is said to have occurred 5,000 years ago.

According to a myth in the Ramayana (Book of Tales), the Hindu deity Prince Rama returned in a horse-drawn carriage to his native city of Ayodhya after 14 years of exile, accompanied by his consort, Sita, and his brother, Laksman. The townspeople, overjoyed at his return, rushed out to meet him with lighted torches.

The annual autumn festival that commemorates Lord Rama's triumphant return and his belated coronation as king is known as Dipavali, or Divali, from a Sanskrit word that means "garland of light." For approximately 10,000 Indian emigres living in the Philadelphia area, it is the biggest, most festive holiday of the year. This year, it falls on Nov. 3.

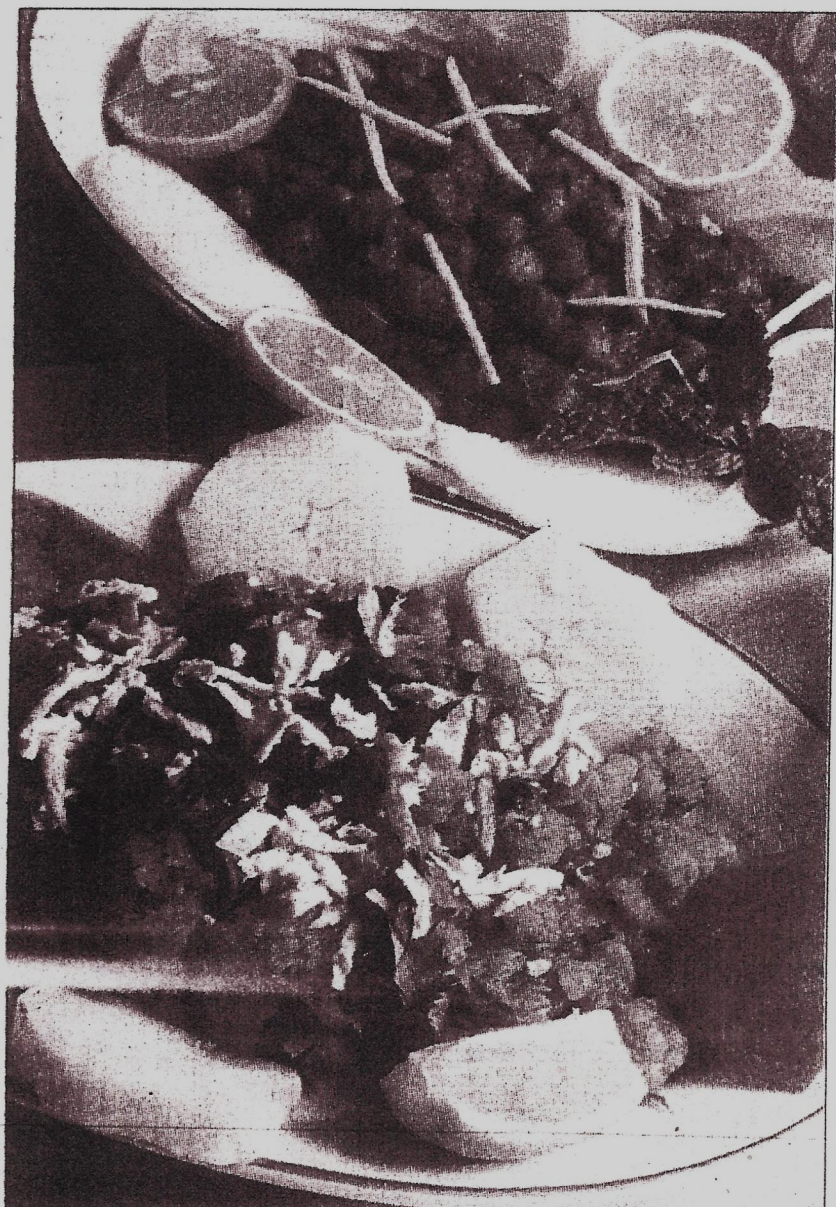
While Divali is technically a Hindu holiday, "everyone celebrates, regardless of religious belief or caste," said Raja Jhanjee, vice president of operations for the Passage to India restaurants in Philadelphia and Montgomeryville. "It's like a Christmas kind of a holiday in India."

During this time, Indians eat sweets and exchange gifts with family members, friends and business associates. They buy new clothes, light candles in their homes, set off firecrackers, gamble at card games and feast on wonderful vegetarian food. The month leading up to Divali is a major shopping time, and many rounds of dinner parties are hosted.

Indians also open the doors of their homes to admit Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, who — according to tradition — they hope will visit them.

Although not all Hindus are vegetarian, more vegetarian foods are eaten during religious holidays, said Bandy Saluja, owner of Philadelphia's Passage to India. It depends on how observant the household is: "Some take it stringently, and some take it casually," he said.

During Divali, Passage to India will deck its city and suburban dining rooms with extra lights for the



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Chickpeas in tomato-ginger paste (top) and cauliflower and potatoes

holiday and add special dishes to its menus. A number of private dinner parties have already been booked, Saluja said.

The following recipes, typical of the vegetarian dishes prepared in Indian homes during the holiday, are drawn from several sources.

The potato curry recipe was provided by Jyoti Gupta, owner of Jyoti canned sauces, which are available at Indian groceries. The cauliflower-potato casserole recipe was provided by Gurmail Singh of Tandoor India restaurant, 106 S. 40th St.

CUCUMBER RAITA

2½ cups plain yogurt, regular or lowfat

- 1 cucumber, peeled, seeded and coarsely grated
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh mint or cilantro, or 1 tablespoon dried mint
- ½ teaspoon whole cumin seeds, lightly toasted and ground
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne
- 1 teaspoon salt
- A few grinds fresh pepper, or ½ teaspoon ground black or white pepper

Beat yogurt with a fork until broken apart and creamy.

Drain grated cucumber in a strainer, or press with hands until most of liquid is gone. Add other ingredients; mix thoroughly. Serve

as a snack with Indian bread or whole wheat pita, or as an accompaniment to a meal. Serves 6.

EGGPLANT SAUTE

- 3 tablespoons corn oil
- ½ onion, thinly sliced
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- 2 cups canned whole tomatoes, chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon dried red pepper flakes
- ½ teaspoon black pepper, or several grinds pepper
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground turmeric
- 2 pounds small eggplants, preferably long Japanese type, cut in 2-inch chunks
- ¾ cup water

Heat oil in a large pan. Cook onions until light brown. Add tomatoes and cook 3 to 5 minutes, stirring. Add salt, red and black pepper, cinnamon and turmeric, and cook another 3 minutes, stirring constantly. Add the cut eggplant and water.

Cover pan and cook about 15 minutes, until eggplant is tender but not mushy. Serve with rice. Serves 6.

CHICKPEAS IN GINGER SAUCE

- 2 (20-ounce) cans chickpeas, with liquid, or 4 cups cooked chickpeas with 1 cup of liquid
- ¼ cup corn oil
- 2 cups finely chopped onions
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped garlic
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh ginger, peeled
- 2 teaspoons ground coriander
- ½ teaspoon ground cardamom
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper, or several grinds pepper
- 2 to 3 teaspoons fresh lemon juice
- ½ cup whole canned tomato, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ cup water
- 1 medium onion, peeled and thinly sliced
- 1 long green chili, finely chopped

Drain the chickpeas, but keep the liquid. Set both aside.

Heat the oil in a large skillet, add onions and stir constantly over medium heat until onions are cooked and light brown. Add garlic and ginger, and keep stirring another 2 to 3 minutes.

Add coriander, cardamom, cayenne and black pepper, and stir another 1 to 2 minutes, until spices begin to give off a fragrance. Add lemon juice and tomato, and cook until oil begins to separate from the mixture.

Add the chickpea liquid and water to cover. Cook about 10 minutes. Add the chickpeas, cover and continue cooking about 10 minutes more. Garnish with sliced onion and chopped chili. Serves 6.

SWEET CARROTS

- 8 medium carrots
- 3 cups milk
- 8 whole cardamom pods (found in the spice aisle)
- 6 tablespoons corn oil
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 6 tablespoons sugar
- ¼ cup golden or regular raisins
- 2 tablespoons pistachio nuts, coarsely chopped
- Optional: 1 cup heavy cream, sweetened and whipped

Peel and grate the carrots. Place the carrots, milk and cardamom pods in a heavy-bottomed pot or skillet and bring to a boil. Cook on medium heat until liquid is evaporated, stirring frequently to prevent burning.

In another heavy-bottomed skillet, heat the oil and butter. Add carrot mixture and fry until they

turn more red than orange, and no longer have a "milky" look, about 15 minutes. Stir often.

Add the raisins and pistachio nuts and cook another 2 to 3 minutes.

Serve warm or at room temperature. If desired, top with 1 cup of sweetened whipped cream. Serves 6.

CAULIFLOWER POTATO CASSEROLE

- 2 hot green chilis, stemmed, seeded and julienned lengthwise
- ½ piece fresh ginger root, peeled and thinly sliced
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
- ½ teaspoon black mustard seeds
- 4 tablespoons ghee (Indian-style clarified butter), or 3 tablespoons of corn oil plus 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 3 medium redskin potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1 large (2-pound) cauliflower or 2 medium, cut into flowers
- 2 medium tomatoes, cut into quarters
- ½ teaspoon turmeric
- ½ teaspoon garam masala (see note)
- 1 teaspoon light brown sugar
- 1¼ teaspoons salt
- 3 tablespoons cilantro, chopped
- Lime or lemon wedges

Combine chilis, ginger, mustard seeds and cumin seeds.

Heat ghee or oil and butter in a large nonstick pan. When hot but not smoking, add chilis, ginger, mustard and cumin seeds and cook until mustard seeds turn gray and pop.

Drop in potatoes and cauliflower and stir-fry 4 to 5 minutes, until cauliflower browns lightly. Add tomato, turmeric, garam masala, sugar, salt and half of the cilantro. Stir.

Cover and cook gently 15 to 20 minutes until tender, adding a bit of water from time to time if vegetables begin to stick. Garnish with the remaining chopped cilantro and lemon or lime wedges. Serves 6.

Note: Garam masala and other spices may be purchased at the International Store, 4203 Walnut St., or other shops selling Indian ingredients.