

Improvisational Indian Cooking Level 1

Want to sign up? <https://forms.gle/c4Vg16V9nnmaaLNw5>

Looking for the level 2 class? See [level 2 syllabus](#) or [level 2 signup form](#)

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Questions? Email me: kslauria@gmail.com

Can't take the class but still want to learn Indian cooking? I love nothing more than teaching and talking about this stuff. Email me and we can figure something out!

Summary

- Learn to cook Indian food without recipes, using spices and ingredients you can find in your local store
- I give you a spice box with all spices you need + ingredients like dal
- 4 Saturday afternoons in September and October 2024, noon-1.30pm: 9/21, 9/28, 10/5, 10/12
- Park Slope, Brooklyn
- Capstone potluck, scheduled in two groups where you cook something if your choosing based on what we cover in class
- Pay what you can afford: \$110, \$200, or \$270

What is the point

Indian cooking seems so complicated and difficult! Long lists of ingredients you can never find, multi-step recipes and unpronounceable names. And yet, hundreds of millions of cash-poor and time-poor people feed themselves with this cuisine every day. What's going on? The problem is that it's taught badly: as a disconnected bunch of specific recipes, each of which must be memorized and then re-enacted exactly as instructed.

It doesn't have to be this way. Over the last 10 years, I figured out how to cook Indian food in my tiny New York City kitchen while working demanding jobs and enjoying my life. I discovered a small core of skills and ideas that I could use to cook with whatever I happened to have at hand. And I found that I could teach these skills to my friends, because they're just not that hard. Anyone can make Indian food because it's really easy and accessible.

Indian cooking is a powerful technology, developed over centuries, for making delicious, healthy and cheap food. Take this class and I'll teach it to you!

What this class will empower you to do

My goal is to move you from “I can’t really cook Indian food” to “I’m hungry so I’ll make a quick and easy Indian thing right now.”

By the end of this class, you’ll be able to walk into a reasonably-stocked kitchen, spend \$30 on groceries and put together an Indian meal for yourself and your companions. You’ll be able to open your fridge, see what’s there and make a quick weeknight dinner. When you read a recipe and find that you’re missing an ingredient, you’ll be able to make effective substitutions. When you’re bored of making the same thing over and over, you’ll use those same substitution skills to come up with your own variations.

The mindset I’d like you to come out with is: I can cook great food anywhere, at any time, for anyone.

Who this class is for

The core audience for this class is occasional home cooks who have done little to no Indian cooking.

Other groups who I believe would benefit from this class:

- Home cooks who want to reduce meat and get more vegetables in their diet
- Experienced home cooks who haven’t done much Indian cooking
- Experienced home cooks who do some other Asian cuisine but not much Indian
- People who have done a lot of Indian cooking but mostly by thinking of it as a collection of specific dishes and recipes
- People who learned Indian cooking from family members and are looking to supplement the traditional approach with some structure and concepts

Can I take this class if I’m a total beginner at cooking?

Yes ... I think? I’m not assuming prior knowledge, and since the class will be small I can tailor it to the specific humans who are there. I’m very happy to spend more time answering your questions and showing you the many little things involved in operating a kitchen. A lot of that is independent of the specific kind of food you’re making, and that’s ok! I’d love to help.

I’ve taught a few total beginners before and it went well, in my opinion. If you’re motivated you can definitely learn very quickly!

Can I take this class if I don't like spicy food?

Yes! Definitely 100% yes! Many people in India don't or can't eat spicy food, including my grandfather. By default, we'll be making food that uses *spices* (like cumin or coriander) but isn't *spicy* (in the sense of causing a burning sensation) at all.

That being said, I'll show you how to modulate spice levels so you can get it to where you like. And for those who really love spicy food, I have some special techniques and fun condiments for you!

What kind of Indian food?

Mainly North Indian food, but the techniques and ideas and recipe templates work really well for thinking about South Indian and other regional Indian cuisines.

I'm from a family of Punjabis who resettled in Rajasthan and Delhi after fleeing Lahore during the Partition, so I grew up eating food that reflects a bit of all those regions. But! Chemistry is universal! I love cooking South Indian food and would be happy to talk about how it works during class, if people are interested.

What will happen in each class

Each class will consist of

- discussing the worksheet from last class and answering questions
- a short lecture
- a couple of cooking demos
- tasting the food at intermediate stages, so you know how the ingredients feel, look and smell at different points
- tasting the final dishes
- a quiz: I bring a Mystery Food to class, you taste it and tell me how I made it and what's in it
- discussing cooking puzzles related to the demos

You will not cook in class. It's my first time running this class and I want to keep things simple. In the future, I'd like to rent some commercial space so you can cook during class and get immediate feedback. But not this time.

You will get all the spices I'll be using, in the first class. I'll give you enough of everything to make a bunch of stuff at home and get some practice.

Cooking is not a spectator sport so you must cook at home and, ideally, bring what you make to class so you can get feedback.

There will be a worksheet after every class that you'll complete based on what you cook at home. It's designed to incentivize you to actually cook! And also to think about the cooking!

What you'll learn

You will learn specific **skills**, **ideas** and **recipe templates** that you can use to put together meals and solve cooking problems. We will de-emphasize memorizing or following specific recipes.

Here's a bunch of words that you aren't expected to know at the beginning of class, but that will hopefully make sense by the end.

Skills

- Tempering whole spices
- Cooking powdered spices
- Browning
- Moisture awareness
- Seasoning: salt, acid and sugar
- Substitution: fats, proteins, acids and vegetables
- Cooking dry lentils, beans and grains

Those are the main skills. Some adjunct skills that we'll probably talk about but not prioritize are

- Knife skills
- Scheduling, like which steps of which dish to do in what order when putting together a multi-dish meal
- Choosing cuts of meat and poultry
- Garnishing

A big-brain spicy take: *shopping* is actually the most interesting and important cooking skill. Cooking is a series of decisions, and the most impactful decisions happen in the grocery store. Extended over time, running a kitchen is like operating an industrial machine where the inputs are groceries and the outputs are meals, each meal solving some problem that I've set for it. The actual cooking begins to feel less important compared to the business of matching meal outputs to shopping inputs and opportunities, over time.

We'll talk about shopping a bit, and I'll send you some specific shopping guides (full list below). But the great beauty and subtlety of shopping can only be appreciated after getting some experience. So you should go home and cook and come back with questions, and we'll discuss shopping topics as they come up.

Ideas

My friend told me not to call this section *Chemistry* because that might turn some people away, when all I want to do is make Indian cooking friendly and accessible. But I really think that a little bit of food chemistry is empowering, and it doesn't have to be complicated. I'll introduce these ideas and bring them up every time I'm doing a demo and it's relevant.

Why is this important? Good food doesn't come from expensive ingredients or complicated recipes or long cooking times. Good food comes from understanding. This is the stuff you'll want to understand:

- Water will get hotter up to its boiling point, and then it'll stay at that temperature until it's all turned to steam and left the pan
- Water is in everything, to some lesser or greater degree
- Fats can get hotter than water but will eventually start smoking and burning
- Fat touches food intimately, forming a kind of pan that coats the surfaces of the food
- Salt draws water out of the inside of vegetables
- Heating proteins browns them, making delicious and complex flavors (Maillard reaction). This happens at temperatures significantly higher than the boiling point of water.
- Heating sugars browns them, making delicious and complex flavors (caramelization). This happens at temperatures even higher than the Maillard reaction.

Recipe templates

- Vegetable in spiced oil
- Raita: salty yogurt with spices + veg
- Spiced onion and tomato base + veg or protein
- Meat stew
- Herb chutney
- Soupy legume + tempered spice

Okay I get that you're against memorizing recipes but seriously, what specific dishes will you actually make in class, come on

Fine:

- Mustard seed cabbage
- Cucumber raita
- Green cilantro chutney
- Cumin potatoes
- Hing peas
- Dal fry
- Cumin rice
- Chicken stew with tomato and ginger

What if I have food allergies or dietary restrictions?

That would be a delightful gift to me, because we will get to practice our food substitution skills and figure out how to work around your restrictions!

What qualifies you to teach this class? Why shouldn't I learn this from my grandma/neighbor or a professional chef?

You should! The traditional method of passing down Indian cooking has evidently worked brilliantly, because it's an incredibly vibrant, living cuisine of breathtaking depth and variety. If that teaching style works for you then you should go for it because we have proof that it works.

However, I don't really think about Indian cooking that way, and I experience joy, freedom and creativity in the kitchen that I believe are difficult to access through the list-of-recipes way of thinking.

Many experienced cooks have been doing it for so long that they've forgotten what it's like to suck. They throw a dib of this and a dab of that, measure nothing, forget to mention critical steps, splash in water at seemingly-random times and rarely explain their thinking process. They have a lot to teach but it's often inaccessible to the beginner.

I have not forgotten what it's like to suck.

What materials will you give me?

You'll get all this in the first class:

- All the spices I'll ever use, in some reasonable quantity, so you can go home immediately and start doing stuff
- A guide to shopping for spices in the New York area, in smaller towns, and Amazon links

At the end of each class, you'll get:

- A cheatsheet with the recipe templates from that class
- A handout about the skills and ideas from that class
- A homework assignment worksheet which asks you to cook something based on the material we cover that class + questions based on how that cooking went
- A drill worksheet to help you review the material we covered in that class, designed to be completed whenever you have a few moments, e.g. when you're taking the train to class the following week

At appropriate points, you'll get:

- A guide to buying dal: the various types; whole, split, washed and their effects on cooking times; substitutions
- A guide to substitutions: spices, produce, acids, proteins, and fats

Tell me what happens in every class

Below you will find words, many words! It's possible that each class goes exactly as planned. But the class ultimately exists to serve the goal of moving you from "I can't really cook Indian food" to "I'm hungry so I'll make a quick and easy Indian thing right now."

We'll prioritize presence over preparation. In practice, that means I might skip things if there's a great discussion happening, and I will almost always want to spend time answering your questions instead of rushing along with the class plan.

Class 1: tempering whole spices

- Goodies for you:
 - baggies of spices so you can cook at home
 - printed syllabus
 - printed shopping guides
 - recipe template cheatsheet
 - homework worksheet 1
 - drill worksheet 1
- Lecture: boiling point of water, water is in everything, fat carries flavor, spices will burn.
- Demo: progressively burning whole mustard seeds
- Demo: progressively burning whole cumin seeds
- Demo: mustard seed cabbage
- Demo: cucumber raita
- Cooking puzzles:
 - What if you don't have mustard seeds?
 - What if you don't have cabbage?
 - What if you want to make the veg dish a little fancier or turn it into a meal? Nuts, garnish, pickled red onion, roti

Class 2: cooking with powdered spices

- Goodies for you:
 - extra spice baggies for anyone that needs a re-up 😊
 - recipe template cheatsheet
 - homework 2
 - problem set 2

- Worksheet discussion: what did you cook? How'd it go?
- Lecture: the importance of seasoning; how to develop boldness and taste in seasoning; powdered spices burn faster, powdered spices still need to be cooked, what is the point of turmeric; developing depth of flavor; how size of food affects cooking time and final texture
- Demo: cumin potatoes
- Demo: hing peas
- Demo: green chutney
- Demo: underseasoned chutney, well-seasoned chutney, over-seasoned chutney
- Quiz: Mystery Food!
- Cooking puzzles:
 - What if you don't have cumin seeds? What if you don't have any kind of cumin?
 - What if you want to make the chutney fancier? Steal ideas from pesto, chimichurri, hummus, tzatziki: nuts, yogurt, cheese, olive oil
 - What if you don't have potatoes?

Class 3: dal

- Goodies for you:
 - extra spice baggies for anyone that needs a re-up 😊
 - recipe template cheatsheet
 - dal cheatsheet
 - dal shopping guide
 - homework worksheet 3
 - drill worksheet 3
- Worksheet discussion: what did you cook? How'd it go? Did you scale up? What went wrong?
- Lecture: how to cook dal, a different way to use tempering, tempering whole and powdered spices together
- Demo: basic dal
- Demo: dal with aromatic base
- Demo: underseasoned dal, well-seasoned dal, overseasoned dal
- Quiz: Mystery Food!
- Cooking puzzles:
 - What if you have a different kind of dal?
 - What if you want to make the tempering fancier? Onion, garlic, tomatoes
 - What if you want to make the base dal more flavorful? Ginger, onion, green chilis
 - What if you want to add some veg? Cook carrots, peas, cauliflower, or squash with the dal; stir in leafy greens at the end to wilt
 - How do you feed yourself over the course of a week?

Class 4: Chicken stew

- Goodies for you:

- extra spice baggies for anyone that needs a re-up 😊
- recipe template cheatsheet
- substitution guide
- homework worksheet 4
- drill worksheet 4
- final exam info
- Administrative discussion: why there's a final exam, how it will work, what I'm hoping you'll get out of doing it, how to schedule it, how you would prepare for it if you wanted to
- Worksheet discussion: what did you cook? Who did you cook it for? Any trouble shopping?
- Lecture: recap of everything so far and how it's going to come together in this capstone project, why this recipe template works and some common variations
- Demo: chicken stew
- Quiz: Mystery Food!
- Cooking puzzles:
 - What if you don't have tomatoes? Acid substitution, umami substitution, bulk substitution
 - What if it needs to be vegetarian?
 - How to incorporate yogurt into a sauce for extra flavor and body without messing up the texture,
 - What if you want to jazz it up? Nuts in the sauce, pureeing the sauce, cream in the sauce, dried mushrooms