

MUSSEL MASALA WITH COCONUT, GINGER AND GREEN CHILLIES

The Keralan Backwaters are stuffed full of good things to eat: karimeen, the very pleasant-tasting, flat, round fish prone to boniness; lots of other fish which like brackish water; shrimps; prawns the size of lobsters; and lots of clams. This dish is based on a clam masala, but I've used mussels instead as they're easier to get hold of. The Keralans like to boil their clams and then cook them again in the rich, red coconut and chilli masalas they serve them up in, a firm favourite in the toddy shops – the scruffy bars where the locals go to drink fermented coconut flower sap. I visited one such bar in the early afternoon. It's extremely rude not to down the first drink without drawing breath, and actually it was rather nice and not particularly alcoholic, but apparently as the day progresses the fermentation gets stronger and by the evening there are quite a few pissed Keralans around. Two things are banned at the toddy shops – talking politics and singing. I kept pinching myself because it reminded me so much of the Farmers' Arms in St Merryn in the early 1960s. 1.5 kg live mussels, cleaned and debearded (discard any with broken shells or any open shells that don't close tightly when tapped firmly)

SERVES 2–4

30ml coconut oil

1 tsp black mustard seeds

50g fresh or frozen coconut, grated or
blitzed in a food processor

1 small onion, finely chopped

30g/6cm ginger, finely grated

20g/4 cloves garlic, finely crushed

2 green chillies, seeds removed, thinly
sliced

Handful of fresh curry leaves

1 tsp fennel seeds

1 tsp ground black pepper

1 tsp *Garam masala* (page 303)

½ tsp Kashmiri chilli powder

½ tsp turmeric

1 tsp salt

Put the mussels into a large saucepan, cover with a lid and cook over a high heat, shaking the pan every now and again until all the mussels have opened and are cooked; it takes 3–4 minutes.

Heat the coconut oil in a large sturdy pan or karahi over a medium heat. Add the mustard seeds and fry for 30 seconds until they start to pop, then stir in the coconut and fry for 1 minute. Add the onion, ginger, garlic, green chillies and curry leaves and fry for a further 5 minutes.

Add the mussels and their cooking liquor to the pan, followed by the fennel seeds, black pepper, garam masala, chilli powder, turmeric and salt. Cook for a further 1–2 minutes, then serve.

GARAM MASALA

This is my own garam masala recipe, which is essentially a balanced combination of the most popular spices. Even more important than the mix is having them freshly roasted and ground. I can't stress too strongly how much better it is to make your own garam masala than to buy it. You may be astonished about the number of times garam masala turns up in the book; sometimes it's the only spice in a dish. But this mixture represents perfect balance to me, and the reason it appears so often is because once you've made it, it's easy to knock up a large number of recipes without resorting to teaspoons of this and that. It's important to make this regularly; I would suggest renewing it every month. Keep it in an airtight container.

Makes 50g - Keeps for about 1 month

1 tbsp black peppercorns

2 tbsp cumin seeds

2 tbsp coriander seeds

2 tsp cardamom seeds (from 30–40
green pods)

4 tsp whole cloves

7cm piece of cinnamon stick

1 whole nutmeg

Roast all the spices apart from the nutmeg in a dry frying pan over a medium heat for a couple of minutes until toasted and aromatic. Cool. Grate the nutmeg and add to a spice grinder along with whole spices (you might want to break up the cinnamon stick) and grind everything to a fine powder. Store in a sealed container out of the sunlight; it will keep its most aromatic condition for a month.