



## A Shared Plate

**To some, a wedding feast may seem a mere formality. To this writer, it was the secret behind her parents' strangely enduring bond** BY CHITRITA BANERJI

**T**HE TATTO IS HERE, THE TATTO IS HERE!" Bare feet rush down the stairs and out toward the front door as the house resonates with the blowing of conch shells and loud ululation—auspicious sounds believed to scare away evil spirits.

Staying with a friend in Calcutta to attend her daughter's wedding, I am caught up in the excitement. The *tatto* whose arrival is causing such a commotion is a collection of gifts—clothes, cosmetics, decorative objects, food—that the bridegroom's family sends to the home of the bride on the morning of a Bengali Hindu wedding. I haven't attended such an event in many years, but my memory flashes to long-forgotten images of the gifts sent to our house for an aunt's wedding. As a small child, I had been particularly awed by one item—an enormous carp, its silvery scales gleaming with an undertone of pink, its head patterned with turmeric and vermillion, a double garland of tuberose twined round its ample belly. Is such a princely fish still part of the Bengali wedding *tatto*?

I move forward to look at the trays being unloaded from the car. Yes, one does contain a carp, although its dimensions fall short of those I remember. But the family seems pleased, to judge from their gleeful comments about the *muror dal* to

be made with the head at lunchtime. For us fish-loving Bengalis, this is a cherished delicacy. The fish head is fried, broken into pieces, and added to roasted *moong dal*, its copious brain matter (like the marrow from beef bones) giving a baroque note to the redolence of turmeric, ginger, cumin, cinnamon, cardamom, and green chiles.

But amid the happy exuberance, I feel a deep sadness as I think of my own family. My mother was the eldest daughter among many siblings, and her wedding was a lavish affair. The legendary chef my grandfather hired for the occasion transformed the entire roof of the ancestral house into an enormous kitchen for three days. It was said that he prepared an *akhni* water—a stocklike decoction of the various spices used in making pilaf—so fragrant that the entire street was enveloped in its aroma. Every item of the spectacular meal he served was described in excruciating detail whenever any wedding was discussed in our family. It sounded like a golden affair, burnished with each retelling. >

From elaborate costumes to hennaed hands and ritual offerings of sweets, traditions at a Hindu wedding underline the newfound unity of bride and groom (top left and right and, together, bottom left).

By the time I was a teenager, though, these narratives evoked only a bitter irony. The golden couple of the wedding were unrecognizable in the two adults who were my parents. A terrible sense of grievance and letdown seemed to consume them much of the time, and the most unlikely event, topic, visit, or comment could precipitate a marathon session of loud arguments and bitter reproaches, scorching words that walls and doors could not keep out. And then there were the silences—long, throbbing interludes of absolutely no conversation that lasted for hours, even days.

**J**OY, HOWEVER, WAS NOT TOTALLY ABSENT IN OUR FAMILY. My conflicted parents shared one enthusiasm—food. She was a fabulous cook, a true artist, and he had a rare and subtle palate. He also enjoyed shopping for the season's best produce, fish, and meats. Through my school and college years, I took for granted the delectable offerings on our table—slow-cooked potatoes with tamarind and asafetida, carp in yogurt sauce, shrimp with ground coconut and mustard, and so many others.

Despite their constant discord, my parents were also extremely hospitable, and friends and family were frequently invited to our home for meals. Among the many classic dishes for which my mother was justly famed was *muror dal*. Each time she made it, she waited intently for my father's reaction. Even if they were not speaking to each other, the appreciative sniff that greeted the serving of the *dal* on his plate and the zestful way he sucked the juices from the head were the accolades she really looked for.

Not having the maturity to sense the complex emotions that underlaid my parents' endless conflict, I blamed the Indian system of arranged marriage that allowed families to

match incompatible duos for life, since Hindus do not believe in divorce. Never, I resolved, would I be trapped like that. The only way to avoid it was to escape—and I did, as far away as the United States. I also exercised choice in my marriage.

But I could not escape destiny. In the late 1980s, I found myself, the first divorcée in my orthodox Hindu family, back in Calcutta, living with my parents in their rambling three-story house. Once again, the erupting arguments and conflicts made me ponder the nature of the marital bond that held them together. But with older eyes, I could see the deep attachment below the surface. How had it developed when they seemed to have disappointed each other right from the beginning?

One evening, when I came home from work and found them bickering viciously over a particularly insignificant matter, I lost my usual restraint. "Why didn't you get a divorce years ago?" I burst out. "At least I would have had some peace!"

Immediately, I was overcome with shame and regret. Didn't I know how impossible it was for people of their generation to even think about divorce? Hadn't I shamed them enough with mine? Guiltily, I fled upstairs. But my mother followed me. With surprising calmness, this habitually no-nonsense, even prosaic woman sat down and explained her conception of marriage.

"You didn't care for our rituals," she smiled sadly, "you married outside our religion, you had a civil marriage in America. But you've seen many Hindu weddings. You know the ceremony requires the couple to feed the fire, and then feed each other. Food is life, and by eating together, the pair bonds for life. We did that. How can you talk to us about getting a divorce?"

She spoke of ceremony and bonds. But looking at her face,

## SAUTÉED SHRIMP WITH COCONUT AND MUSTARD

Adapted from Chitrita Banerji

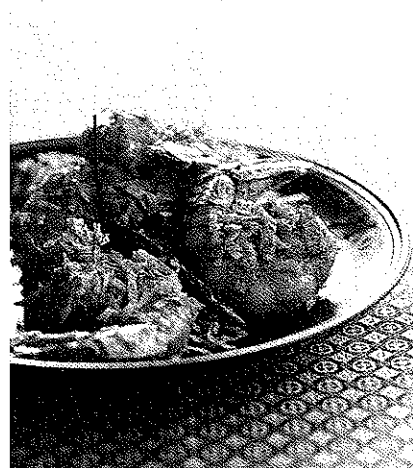
SERVES 4

Active time: 30 min Start to finish: 40 min

- 1 small coconut or 1 cup thawed frozen grated coconut
- 2 tablespoons brown mustard seeds
- 7 small fresh Thai chiles (2 to 3 inches; preferably green), 6 slit lengthwise on one side (not all the way through)
- 3 tablespoons water
- 1 lb large shrimp in shell (21 to 25 per lb), peeled, leaving tail and first segment of shell intact, and deveined
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil

Special equipment: an electric coffee/spice grinder; a mortar and pestle (optional); a wok

► Put oven rack in middle position and



preheat oven to 400°F. ► If using whole coconut, pierce 2 softest eyes of coconut with a small screwdriver or a metal skewer, then drain and discard liquid. Bake whole coconut 15 minutes. Break shell with a hammer and remove flesh, levering it out carefully with screwdriver or point of a strong knife. Finely shred

enough coconut to measure 1 cup using the ½-inch-wide holes of a box grater.

► Finely grind mustard seeds with a pinch of salt in grinder. Finely chop whole chile (without slit) and mash in mortar with pestle along with ground mustard seeds and a pinch of salt until chile is finely ground. Add 1 tablespoon water. Mix to a paste. (Alternatively, very finely chop chile, then stir with mustard seeds and water to form a paste.) ► Toss shrimp with turmeric and salt. ► Heat oil in wok over moderately high heat until hot but not smoking. Sauté shrimp, stirring, until it just turns pink, 2 to 3 minutes. Add grated coconut, mustard paste, remaining 6 chiles, and remaining 2 tablespoons water. Sauté, stirring, until water is absorbed and shrimp are well coated, about 2 minutes more.

**Cook's note:**

Leftover coconut can be frozen in a sealed plastic bag up to 1 month.

For sources for the specialty ingredients and equipment called for in these recipes, see Shopping List, page 238.

and listening to her voice, I heard only the word *love*. I thought back to the long years of conflict, but also to the deep, shared passion for the art of cooking, eating, and offering hospitality. That daily tableau of the table, I now saw, was neither duty nor obligation—it was love, but a tormented version that found no expression except through food.

Soon after, I went away again—back to America. After my father's death, I decided to bring my mother over to join me, and for ten years I watched as time and distance failed to wipe out her regrets and sorrows. In the absence of the one person with whom she had argued and fought and eaten, she totally lost the pleasure she once took in cooking. Even her enjoyment of food seemed sadly diminished.

**T**HE WEDDING I AM ATTENDING IN CALCUTTA—an arranged marriage—is in the evening. By now, I am in a pensive mood. The *tatto* has been put away, the fish consumed by the family. In the large rented hall, a canopied enclosure has been decorated with red cloth and tuberose garlands. In front of the chief actors, seated on a carpet, is an array of items necessary for the complex Hindu ceremony. I see the bowl of snowy white popped rice, the bunch of ripe bananas, the conch-shaped sweets on a terra-cotta plate—and my moth-

er's words ring vividly in my ears: "Marriage is a lifelong undertaking to eat together."

First the bride's father has to give her away. The priest guides him through the Sanskrit mantras, while he holds his daughter's hand and places it on top of the groom's. It is a solemn undertaking, since the "gift" is not simply a daughter but also a woman now endowed with her share of the family property. The pinched look on the father's face demonstrates the effects of a daylong fast. Earlier, I had seen him at home, closeted with the household gods and one of the priests, making sacred offerings to both gods and ancestors, asking them to bless his daughter and son-in-law.

In my mother's time, the bride, too, had to fast all day. But this 21st-century bride had been allowed a little snack in the middle of the day. Wrapped in a gold-embroidered red silk sari (red being an auspicious color in Hindu culture), decked out in intricate gold jewelry, her forehead decorated with patterns of sandalwood paste, she seems an icon of happy expectation. Had my mother, too, looked like that on her wedding day?

Once the bride has been given away, the father leaves the scene—a symbolic gesture of renunciation. Now it is the couple's turn to wind their way through further intricate rituals, guided by two priests. Several times they make offerings to

## CHOLAR DAL

*Yellow Split Peas with Coconut Chips*

Adapted from Chitrita Banerji

**SERVES 4**

Active time: 30 min Start to finish: 9½ hr  
(includes soaking peas)

*This dal, a sweet version served at festive occasions, is the best we've ever tasted.*

- 1½ cups yellow split peas (½ lb)
- 1 small coconut
- ½ cup plus 1 tablespoon ghee (page 164)
- 1 teaspoon finely grated peeled fresh ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 6 small fresh Thai chiles (2 to 3 inches long; preferably green), slit lengthwise on one side (not all the way through)
- 1 tablespoon garam masala (Indian spice mixture)
- 2 to 4 teaspoons sugar
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- 2 dried hot chiles (about 3 inches long), stems removed
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
- 3 Turkish or 1½ California bay leaves
- 1 (1-inch) piece cinnamon stick, broken in half
- 2 whole cardamom pods
- 2 whole cloves

Special equipment: a wok; an adjustable-blade slicer

- ▶ Rinse and drain peas, then transfer to a bowl and cover with cold water by 1 inch. Let stand at room temperature at least 8 hours or overnight. (Alternatively, cover with boiling water and let stand 30 minutes.) Drain peas.
- ▶ Put oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 400°F.
- ▶ Pierce 2 softest eyes of coconut with a metal skewer or a small screwdriver, then drain and discard liquid. Bake coconut 15 minutes. Break shell with a hammer or back of a heavy cleaver and remove flesh, levering it out carefully with screwdriver or point of a strong knife. Cut one fourth of coconut into thin slices (1 to 2 inches long and ¼ inch

thick) with adjustable-blade slicer or a vegetable peeler.

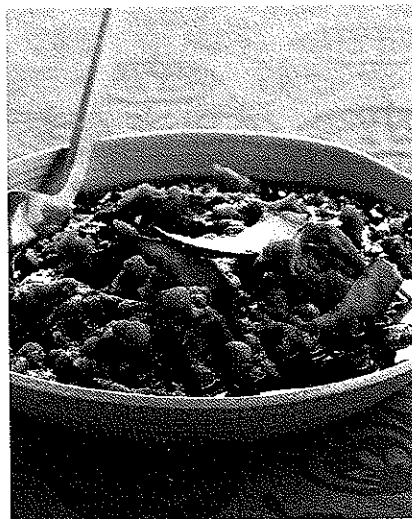
- ▶ Heat ½ cup ghee in wok over moderately high heat until hot but not smoking. Fry coconut slices in 2 or 3 batches, stirring occasionally, until golden brown, 2 to 4 minutes per batch. Transfer coconut chips with a slotted spoon to paper towels to drain. Discard ghee from wok, then wipe out wok and set aside.

- ▶ Boil 5 cups water in a 3-quart heavy saucepan, then add soaked split peas, ginger, and turmeric. Simmer, covered, stirring occasionally, until peas are just tender, about 20 minutes. Add fresh chiles, garam masala, 2 teaspoons sugar, and ½ teaspoon salt and cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until *dal* is thickened (resembling a thick soup), 30 to 35 minutes.

- ▶ Heat remaining tablespoon ghee in wok over moderate heat until hot but not smoking, then cook dried chiles, cumin seeds, bay leaves, cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves, stirring, until fragrant and chiles turn just a shade darker, about 1 minute. Stir into *dal*, along with remaining ¼ teaspoon salt, more sugar if desired (up to 2 teaspoons), and coconut chips. Discard bay leaves.

**Cooks' notes:**

- Leftover coconut can be frozen in a sealed plastic bag up to 1 month.
- If not serving *dal* right away, add coconut chips just before serving.



the gods: flowers, leaves, unmilled rice, a type of grass called *durba*. But the crucial—and most spectacular—part of the ceremony comes later. The pair rise and stand, she in front. His arms come around her and he places his palms underneath hers so that they can jointly hold a plate laden with foods. One of the priests quickly builds a fire in a large copper vessel and the couple pour offerings into it. The popped rice is the first. As it falls, the flames rise up with a whooshing sound, as if Agni, the god of fire, is welcoming the tribute. Item by item, all the food is submitted to the flames. Finally, the two walk around the fire seven times, the shoulder end of her sari knotted to his shawl; reciting the Sanskrit couplets that express the undertaking of a lifelong bond. But this first day's ceremony (weddings are not complete until the end of the third day) is not over yet. Tradition requires them to feed each other sweets from the same plate. As they do so, I am struck by the tenderness with which he brushes the crumbs from her mouth.

Throughout the long ceremony, guests have come and gone, sampling the wedding feast in another room. When most people have left, the bridal pair sit down to dinner at a

large table with a group of friends. I wish them happiness and say good-bye to the family. From the landing, I look back one last time. Amid the laughter and chatter of the friends, the groom is placing a spoonful of pilaf on the bride's plate. She, still feeling shy, looks down, but the flush of pleasure on her cheeks and the upward curve of her mouth are unmistakable.

Suddenly, I imagine my parents in place of this couple. In my vision, their faces are fresh, expectant, and youthful, instead of marked with half a century's wear and tear. I see my father, his handsome face topped by the conical groom's hat, serving portions of food onto his new bride's plate. I watch my habitually stern mother transformed into a bashful bride who smiles with happiness under cover of her veil.

I walk away, but as I go I wish for the young couple that today's shared communion will be allowed to blossom, that the shining bride will have the uninhibited freedom to say she loves her husband and children every time she serves a meal, and that the groom will find a way to reciprocate. I wish for them a home where two people live an ordinary life, its disappointments made bearable by the leavening of laughter and the communion of food. It does not seem too much to ask.

## POTATO CURRY WITH TAMARIND

Adapted from Chitrita Banerji

**SERVES 4**

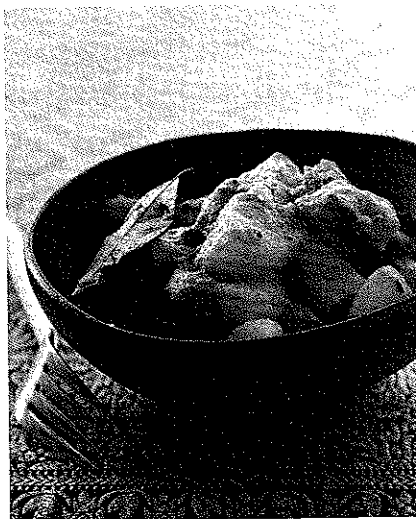
Active time: 30 min Start to finish: 40 min

*This spicy vegetarian curry is hearty enough for a comforting fall dinner. It's great simply ladled over steamed rice.*

- 3 dried hot red chiles (about 3 inches long), stems removed
- 1 tablespoon cumin seeds
- 1 lb medium boiling potatoes (about 5), scrubbed well
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 Turkish bay leaves or 1 California
- ¾ teaspoon *panch phoron* (Bengali spice mix)
- ⅛ teaspoon asafetida powder
- ½ teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1 cup water plus ¼ cup boiling water
- 1½ teaspoons tamarind concentrate
- ½ teaspoon salt

**Special equipment:** an electric coffee/spice grinder; a wok

- ▶ Toast chiles and cumin seeds in a dry small heavy skillet, shaking pan occasionally, until fragrant and just a shade darker, about 1 minute. Remove from heat and cool mixture, then finely grind in grinder.
- ▶ Cover potatoes with salted cold water by 1 inch in a 2½- to 3-quart saucepan. Bring to a boil, then simmer, partially covered, until potatoes are just tender



- when pierced with a small sharp knife, about 12 minutes. Drain. Once cool enough to handle, peel potatoes with a small sharp knife or a vegetable peeler and cut into 1-inch pieces.
- ▶ Heat oil in wok over moderately high heat until hot but not smoking. Add bay leaves, *panch phoron*, and asafetida and cook, stirring frequently, until seeds from *panch phoron* stop sputtering, about 1 minute. Add potatoes and turmeric and sauté, stirring, until potatoes are pale golden brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Add 1 cup water and bring to a boil, then simmer briskly, stirring occasionally, 5 minutes.
- ▶ While potatoes are simmering, whisk together boiling water and tamarind.
- ▶ Add salt, 2 teaspoons cumin chile powder, and tamarind mixture to potatoes

and simmer, stirring occasionally, until sauce is slightly thickened, 2 to 3 minutes. Season with salt. Discard bay leaves.

**Cook's note:**

Leftover cumin chile powder can be kept in an airtight container at room temperature up to 3 months.

## GHEE

*Indian Clarified Butter*

**MAKES ABOUT ¾ CUP**

Active time: 25 min Start to finish: 30 min

- 2 sticks (8 oz) unsalted butter, cut into 1-inch pieces

**Special equipment:** cheesecloth

- ▶ Bring butter to a boil in a 1- to 1½-quart heavy saucepan over moderate heat. Once foam completely covers butter, reduce heat to very low. Continue to cook butter, stirring occasionally, until a thin crust begins to form on surface and milky white solids fall to bottom of pan, about 8 minutes. Continue to cook butter, watching constantly and stirring occasionally to prevent burning, until solids turn light brown and butter deepens to golden and becomes translucent and fragrant, 16 to 18 minutes.
- ▶ Remove ghee from heat and pour through a sieve lined with a triple layer of cheesecloth into a jar.

**Cooks' note:**

Ghee keeps, covered and chilled, 2 months. □