

Saag Paneer

(Spinach with Indian Cheese)

NOTE: This recipe includes cayenne and a Serrano pepper that are to be omitted for the MCCW dinner. They were left in the recipe for those who want to prepare it at home with more heat.

Also: Instructions for making the cheese and Garam Masala are also included in this recipe. Both the cheese and the Garam Masala will be provided, so they will not need to be made for the dinner. The instructions are included for completeness.

Ingredients:

1 tsp turmeric

~~OMIT THIS: 1/4 tsp cayenne~~

Kosher salt

3 tbsp plus 1½ tbsp vegetable oil

12 oz Paneer, (Indian cheese, either store-bought or made from my recipe, recipe follows),
cut into 1-inch cubes, see **Cook's Note***

1 (16 oz package) frozen chopped spinach

1 medium white onion, finely chopped

1 (1" thumb) ginger, peeled and minced (about 1 tbsp)

4 cloves garlic, minced

~~OMIT THIS: 1 large green Serrano chile, finely chopped (seeds removed if you don't like it spicy!)~~

½ tsp store-bought or homemade Garam Masala, recipe follows

2 tsp ground coriander

1 tsp ground cumin

½ cup plain yogurt, stirred until smooth

Directions:

In a large bowl, whisk together the turmeric, ~~cayenne~~, 1 tsp salt and 3 tbsp oil.

Gently drop in the cubes of Paneer and gently toss, taking care not to break the cubes if you're using the homemade kind.

Let the cubes marinate while you get the rest of your ingredients together and prepped.

Thaw the spinach in the microwave in a microwave-safe dish, 5 minutes on high, then purée in a food processor until smooth.

Alternatively, you can chop it up very finely with your knife.

Place a large nonstick skillet over medium heat, and add the Paneer as the pan warms.

In a couple of minutes give the pan a toss; each piece of Paneer should be browned on one side. Fry another minute or so, and then remove the Paneer from the pan onto a plate.

Add the remaining 1½ tbsp oil to the pan. Add the onions, ginger, garlic ~~and chile~~.

Now here's the important part: sauté the mixture until it's evenly toffee-colored, which should take about 15 minutes. Don't skip this step - this is the foundation of the dish! If you feel like the mixture is drying out and burning, add a couple of tablespoons of water.

Add the Garam Masala, coriander and cumin. If you haven't already, sprinkle a little water to keep the spices from burning. Cook, stirring often, until the raw scent of the spices cook out, and it all smells a bit more melodious, 3 to 5 minutes.

Add the spinach and stir well, incorporating the spiced onion mixture into the spinach. Add a little salt and ½ cup of water, stir, and cook about 5 minutes with the lid off.

Turn the heat off. Add the yogurt, a little at a time to keep it from curdling. Once the yogurt is well mixed into the spinach, add the Paneer.

Turn the heat back on, cover and cook until everything is warmed through, about 5 minutes.

Serve.

Paneer: Homemade Indian Cheese

***Cook's Note:** Paneer is very easy to make at home, and my recipe is quick, easy, and delicious. I also think homemade has a better texture than anything store-bought. If you'd like to buy it, this cheese is available in better supermarkets as well as specialty Asian markets.

Ingredients:

Cheesecloth

8 cups whole milk

¼ cup freshly squeezed lemon juice, plus more as needed, see **Cook's Note** below*

Directions:

Line a large colander with a large double layer of cheesecloth, and set it in your sink.

In a large wide pot, bring the milk to a gentle boil over medium heat, stirring frequently to avoid burning the bottom (a nonstick pot works really well for this purpose).

This will take a little while so be patient!

Add the lemon juice and turn the heat down to low. Stirring gently, you should almost immediately see the curds (white milk solids) and whey (the greenish liquid) separate. Don't fret, this is perfect!

***Cook's Note:** If the milk doesn't separate juice some more lemons and add another tablespoon or two. Boost the heat again and the milk should separate. Stir in a motion that gathers the curds together rather than breaks them up.

Remove the pot from the heat and carefully pour the contents into the cheesecloth-lined colander. Gently rinse with cool water to get rid of the lemon flavor. At this point, you could squeeze out some of the liquid, and serve with some honey and some nuts, almost like a fresh ricotta!

Grab the ends of the cheesecloth and twist the ball of cheese to squeeze out the excess whey. Tie the cheesecloth to your kitchen faucet and allow the cheese to drain for about 5 minutes.

Twisting the ball to compact the cheese into a block, place it on a plate with the twisted part of the cheesecloth on the side (this will ensure your block of cheese is nice and smooth!) and set another plate on top. Weigh the second plate down with cans of beans or a heavy pot. Move to the refrigerator and let it sit about 20 minutes.

Yield: Makes 12 ounces of cheese.

Aarti's Hot (not heavy!) Homemade Garam Masala

Ingredients:

3 large cinnamon sticks (if you have the kind you get at Indian stores, it's about 3 tbsp of cinnamon bark bits)

3 tbsp whole cloves

¼ cup green cardamom pods, shelled, husks discarded (about 2 tbsp of seeds)

4 large black cardamom pods, shelled, husks discarded (about 1 tbsp of seeds), optional

Directions:

Combine the cinnamon sticks, cloves, green cardamom seeds, black cardamom seeds, if using into a spice grinder or coffee grinder and grind until fine.

Store the spice mix in an airtight container away from direct sunlight.

Yield: about 1/2 cup.