

Diane's Blog 4.15.2009

Tasting India

I'm a visual learner with a keenly sensitive palate. Set a scene, show me an image, let me taste something, experience some place, and I'll never forget it. Hand me a textbook with dates and names, and the information will seep from my brain like water running through coffee grounds. I wish it weren't so, but I've come to appreciate and relish the gifts I've been given. It certainly helps as a food writer.

It has been more than a month since I returned from India. This past weekend two sets of Indian friends joined us for dinner, along with another couple, all whom love to travel. We were peppered with questions about the places we saw, the unique cultural experiences, and, of course, the amazing food. As we shared stories, the images were streaming through my mind as if a video camera were playing: the unbelievably chaotic drivers and roadways with the nearly continuous honking sounds; the startling juxtaposition of wealth and poverty; the villages with wandering cows and produce carts piled high with more varieties of bananas than I have ever seen; towering Hindu temples in the south with scampering monkeys; and the intoxicatingly complex cuisine with its layers of spices and flavors.

If truth be told, I was too intimidated to cook Indian food for these friends. I've dabbled since returning home, using the whole spices I bought, simmering a curry and making a chicken biryani, but just one dish at a time, not a whole meal and certainly not a multi-course meal for company. I haven't even experimented with the breads yet, or any of the fermented batters. I'm busy writing a book and haven't had time to visit the best Indian store in Portland that sells fresh curry leaves, along with all the chiles, condiments, and frozen grated coconut.

However, I've incorporated a few of my Indian culinary discoveries into the recipes I'm developing for my new cookbook, in particular, the delicious tartness of green mango. How convenient! Most of the time when I buy a mango it is underripe, so I set it on the counter for a day or two, or three or four, patiently and eagerly waiting until it ripens. I didn't know until I went to India and tasted green mangoes that you could eat the fruit unripe.

Mangoes are a low-calorie, nutrient-packed, high-antioxidant fruit. Eaten ripe, they are juicy, exotically sweet, yet tart. When eaten unripe, especially paired with ginger, chilies, cilantro, and lime, the crisp mango is delectably tart without being sour. It's perfect for salsa—whether ripe or unripe.

As one of the appetizers for our dinner party, I made green mango salsa and served it with butterflied grilled shrimp. I offered some chips on the side. I suppose you could say I dipped into India. I'll leave the full immersion meal for later in the year when I have more time to experiment and play in the kitchen.