


Growing up in England, I was exposed to Indian cuisine at a young age.
My knowledge and appreciation have grown considerably over the years, from the familiar assumption that Indian food meant hot food, to discovering the many ways spices can create subtle, delicate flavours as well as chilli-driven powerhouses.
Those early experiences may not have represented the finest examples of Indian cooking, but the flavours were certainly different from the traditional English food I knew — and exciting!
Later, while working at the Dorchester in London, a conversation with one of our room-service runners revealed that his cousin had an Indian restaurant.
A friend and I visited for a couple of evenings, notepads in hand, scribbling frantically as the chef demonstrated his preparations. That experience began the central spice collection in my home kitchen, which I have mentioned elsewhere.
Later still, I worked with some outstanding chefs in India while developing an international cuisine training programme. From the markets to the spice blends and cooking techniques, it was an extraordinary education.
This week, we explore how spices are layered in Indian cuisine — and why understanding their behaviour opens up a world far beyond simply reaching for a packet of curry powder.



**Kitchen Haiku**

Spices meet the flame
Layer by layer flavours grow
Warmth fills every bowl

## This Week's Focus

Indian cuisine offers a remarkable demonstration of how the same spices can produce very different results depending on when and how they are introduced. Whole spices may be roasted to develop their character. Others are bloomed in hot fat to release aromatic compounds. Ground spices become part of a developing sauce, while finishing ingredients provide freshness and contrast. These stages create depth that cannot be achieved simply by adding every spice at once.

The result may be gentle and aromatic, rich and warming, or intensely hot. Indian cooking encompasses all of these possibilities, with considerable variation between regions and households.



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# Flavour Lens

## Profile
Aromatic, warming, earthy, savoury, sometimes sweet, tangy or intensely hot.

## Behaviour
Spices change character through roasting, grinding, blooming, simmering and finishing.

## Balance Role
Builds depth and complexity while balancing heat, acidity, richness, sweetness and freshness.

## Key Partners
Cumin, coriander, turmeric, mustard seed, black pepper, cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, fennel, curry leaves, ginger, garlic, chilli, coconut and tamarind.



## Chef's Insight
One of the most interesting aspects of Indian cooking is the transformation that takes place during preparation.

Take cumin. Its character changes when used whole, toasted, ground or bloomed in hot fat. The ingredient remains the same, but its contribution to the dish changes.

The same principle applies to many other spices.

This is where technique becomes particularly important. A spice blend is only the beginning. How it is handled determines the flavour it ultimately delivers.

Understanding the stages of flavour development gives a chef far greater control than simply following a list of ingredients.

# Five Stages That Change How We Understand Spices

Why does cumin taste different when it is dry-roasted, ground or bloomed in hot fat?
Why do some spices belong at the beginning of cooking, while others are most effective towards the end?
And why can a dish containing relatively few spices have remarkable depth?
The answer lies in understanding how flavour develops.

01 - ROAST: Develop aromatic character.
02 - BLOOM: Release flavour into fat.
03 - BUILD: Deepen the flavour base.
04 - SIMMER: Integrate the ingredients.
05 - FINISH: Lift and balance the result.

Not every Indian dish follows this exact sequence, but the principles provide a valuable professional teaching framework.
Good spice cookery is a sequence of decisions.



## Kitchen Curiosity

### Indian Cooking - There Is Much More to Spices Than Heat

One of the most valuable lessons I learned while working with chefs in India was the importance of technique.

- Spices are not simply measured and added to a saucepan.
- Some are carefully roasted.
- Others are introduced to hot oil or ghee.
- Ground spices may be developed with onions, ginger and garlic.
- Simmering brings the flavours together, while finishing ingredients provide another dimension.
- Each stage changes the character of the finished dish.

🔗India Spice LayersPodcast

# This Week's Infographic

Flavour Notes
Series II

Issue 29
Phase 3: Global Flavour Systems

# INDIA
## The Layered Spice System

AROMA • BLOOMING • BALANCE • DEPTH • FINISH

*Indian flavour is built in layers — whole spices, aromatics, ground spices, fat, acidity and fresh finishing elements working together in sequence rather than all at once.*

### 1. The Layered Spice System

Indian cooking is not simply about heat. It builds flavour through sequence, balance and restraint. Whole spices open the dish, aromatics create body, ground spices deepen colour and warmth, and finishing elements bring lift, freshness and definition.

*Layering creates depth without losing clarity.*

### 2. The Indian Flavour Foundation



**Cumin**
Earthy, warm foundation



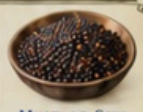
**Coriander**
Citrus, spice and lift



**Turmeric**
Colour, warmth and earthiness



**Chilli**
Heat and brightness



**Mustard Seed**
Nutty sharpness when bloomed



**Cardamom & Clove**
Fragrant sweet spice



**Ginger & Garlic**
Pungent aromatic base



**Onion & Tomato**
Body, sweetness and acidity



**Ghee**
Carries aroma and richness



**Tamarind / Yogurt / Lemon**
Sour balance and freshness

### 3. Featured Dish

## Chicken Chettinad

*A clear expression of the layered spice system.*



- Aromatics (onion, ginger, garlic) create the initial flavour base.
- Dry toasted spices give Chettinad its distinctive, complex depth.
- A rich, spiced body develops through cooking, coating the chicken.
- Heat from pepper and chillies builds in layers.
- Finishing with curry leaves and a touch of acidity brings balance and lift.

*One dish, built in layers rather than all at once.*

### 4. Flavour Lens

**Profile**
Warm • Aromatic • Savoury • Layered • Balanced

**Behaviour**
Blooms • Deepens • Rounds • Lifts • Finishes

**Balance Role**
Builds depth while controlling heat, richness, acidity and freshness.

### 5. Why It Works


Whole spices release opening aroma.


Aromatics give sweetness and body.


Ground spices add continuity and colour.


Fat carries flavour and helps blooming.


Acidity prevents heaviness and sharpens focus.


Fresh finishing herbs or garam masala restore lift.

### 6. Applications in Cooking



**Dal & lentils**
steady, layered depth



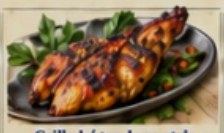
**Curries & gravies**
body and complexity



**Vegetable dishes**
spice, sweetness and contrast



**Rice dishes & pulao**
fragrance through the grain



**Grilled / tandoor-style cooking**
marinade and char



**Chutneys, pickles & condiments**
lift and contrast

### 7. Pairing / Layering Logic


Cumin + coriander = earthy citrus foundation


Turmeric + chilli = warmth, colour and energy


Mustard seed + curry leaf = sharp aromatic opening


Ginger + garlic = pungent savoury body


Tomato / yogurt / tamarind = balancing acidity


Garam masala + fresh coriander = late aromatic lift

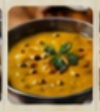
### 8. Kitchen Practice / Technique Tips

- Bloom whole spices in hot fat, not burnt fat.
- Cook onions patiently for depth and sweetness.
- Add ground spices briefly, then control with liquid.
- Layer seasoning and taste repeatedly.
- Use acidity and fresh herbs to keep clarity.
- Finish with precision, not excess.



### 9. Texture & Contrast


Fluffy rice


Silky dal


Crisp papad


Cooling raita


Fresh coriander


Sharp pickle

### 10. Chef's Reminder

*Indian flavour is not about adding every spice. It is about knowing when each layer belongs, so warmth, aroma, acidity and freshness arrive in balance.*

*"Layered well, spice does more than heat the dish — it gives it direction, depth and memory." — MJF*

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## Featured Application - Black Pepper

Long before chilli became widespread in Indian cooking, black pepper was an important source of pungency.

Its flavour is more complex than heat alone, offering woody, earthy and aromatic characteristics.

In South Indian cooking, particularly in Chettinad preparations, black pepper contributes a distinctive warmth and intensity.

Its treatment matters. Freshly crushed pepper, whole peppercorns and pepper roasted with other spices can each produce a different effect.




### India's Regional Flavours

Indian cuisine is far too diverse to describe through a single spice blend or cooking style.

North India - Tandoor cooking, aromatic gravies, dairy and warming spice combinations.

South India - Curry leaves, mustard seeds, tamarind, coconut, rice and regional spice traditions.

Western India - Considerable variation, including coastal seafood, vegetarian dishes and sweet-sour contrasts.

Eastern India - Mustard, fish, rice and distinctive regional spice preparations.

Central and Northeastern India - Diverse indigenous ingredients, preservation methods and regional flavour identities.

## Kitchen Practice

**Technique:** Roast whole spices carefully, grind as required and bloom suitable spices in fat. Build the sauce in stages rather than adding everything together.

**Timing:** Whole spices, ground spices and fresh aromatics require different treatment. Understand when each should be introduced.

**Common Mistakes:** Burning spices, using stale ground mixtures, adding excessive chilli or failing to cook out raw spice flavours.

**Professional Approach:** Develop the spice base deliberately, taste throughout cooking and use finishing ingredients to restore freshness and balance.



## Pairing Logic

- Cumin - Lentils, potatoes, lamb, yoghurt.
- Coriander Seed - Vegetables, chicken, pulses, citrus.
- Turmeric - Rice, lentils, vegetables, coconut.
- Black Pepper - Chicken, seafood, coconut, warming spice blends.
- Mustard Seed - Curry leaves, vegetables, coconut, pickles.
- Cardamom - Rice, dairy, desserts, aromatic meat dishes.
- Tamarind - Seafood, lentils, coconut, chilli.
- Curry Leaves - Mustard seed, coconut, lentils, South Indian curries.

The guiding principle: Each spice should contribute a recognisable purpose to the developing flavour.




A practical application of this week's flavour system

# Chicken Chettinad

Chicken Chettinad is a robust South Indian preparation associated with the Chettinad culinary tradition of Tamil Nadu.
Its distinctive character comes from freshly roasted spices, black pepper, fennel, curry leaves and coconut, with kalpasi — stone flower — contributing an earthy aromatic note.





## What This Dish Teaches

Chicken Chettinad demonstrates the importance of developing flavour before the principal ingredient has finished cooking.
Roasting changes the character of the whole spices. Grinding creates a blend that can be incorporated into the sauce.
Aromatic ingredients and curry leaves establish another layer, while simmering allows the flavours to integrate with the chicken and coconut.
Black pepper contributes warmth and pungency, and kalpasi introduces a distinctive earthy character.
The finished dish should have depth, definition and balance, with no single spice overwhelming the others.
The lesson is not simply which spices are used, but how their flavours are developed and brought together.

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🔗 **Recipe: Chicken Chettinad**

## The Liquid Counterpoint

A cooling salted or lightly spiced lassi can provide a refreshing contrast to a richly seasoned Indian meal.

For a lighter alternative, consider chilled lime water or a refreshing yoghurt-based drink.

## From the Kitchen

Fresh spices are essential, but technique is equally important.

Roast carefully. Control the heat when blooming. Give the developing sauce sufficient time, and consider what the dish needs before finishing.

Taste at every stage.



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Professional Uses

The layered-spice approach extends far beyond curries.

Vegetable preparations, lentil dishes, marinades, soups, braises and even contemporary sauces can benefit from understanding how spices behave during cooking.

For chefs seeking vegetarian inspiration, Indian cuisine offers particularly valuable examples of transforming simple ingredients through skilful seasoning and technique.



## Chef's Reflection

My early experiences of Indian food were exciting because the flavours were unfamiliar.

What I learned later, particularly from working alongside chefs in India, was that the real fascination lay in the techniques behind those flavours.

A collection of spices is a starting point.

Knowing how to use them is what makes the difference.

### This Week's Reference Chart

🔗Indian Chutneys & Raitas

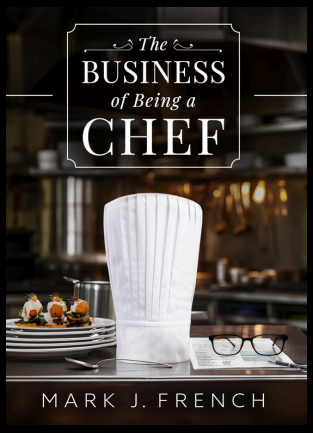
# Further Reading & Resources

## From the Library

See flavour balance charts and acidity mapping in the ChefsNotebooks archives.

## The Business of Being a Chef

For a deeper understanding of flavour structure and kitchen systems, The Business of Being a Chef provides useful operational context alongside culinary insight.
🔗https://chefsnotebooks.com/books




The Business of Being a Chef is the result of more than 30 years of experience in hotels and restaurants throughout the world. It is a guide to managing the multiple business demands of today's executive chef, encompassing diverse areas including cooking, taste, food safety, human resources, finance, and sales & marketing, amongst others. It is also a great resource for operations managers.

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### About the Author

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