

# Recipes work in ‘The Complete Indian Regional Cookbook’

By **T. Susan Chang** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | MAY 28, 2014

ARTICLE



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**Mridula Baljekar.**

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It's a sad fact that there are fewer Indian cookbooks than other ethnic cookbooks. So while you might find lots of subcategories of, say, Italian cookbooks — slow cooker, easy, vegetables, grilled, desserts, regional — you're lucky to find even a couple types of Indian volumes. Happily in recent years, we've seen easy-accessible Indian well covered. And now, with "The Complete Indian Regional Cookbook," by TV chef Mridula Baljekar, we have a working regional Indian cookbook.

The United Kingdom-based author organizes the 300 recipes by area (north, northeast, east, central, south, and

west). You can sense some of the differences as you browse: rice here, bread there; vegetarian here, meat-eating there, variations in the use of dairy. But most recipes display a basic shared vocabulary: cilantro, tomatoes, garlic, ginger, and a dozen spices combined in a thousand ways.

Indian cheese curry in milk is a simple, easy paneer with the representative flavors of ginger, garlic, and green chile. The milk makes a clingy sauce that's almost overwhelmingly rich, even if you don't try subbing in cream (as a footnote suggests). South Indian dishes put rice through every variation you can imagine, including one tinted golden with turmeric and laced with fried onion.

With so many recipes, there are a lot of siblings. A pair of mixed vegetable dishes both rely on a classic five-spice mix (fennel, nigella, cumin, mustard seed, fenugreek). The one that's mixed with roast split mung beans (moong dal) has a grainy, somewhat monotonous feel. But the other, mixed vegetables with five-spice mix, is shockingly complex, an extra dose of chiles and tomatoes and a pinch of ground spices lending intrigue, character, and depth.

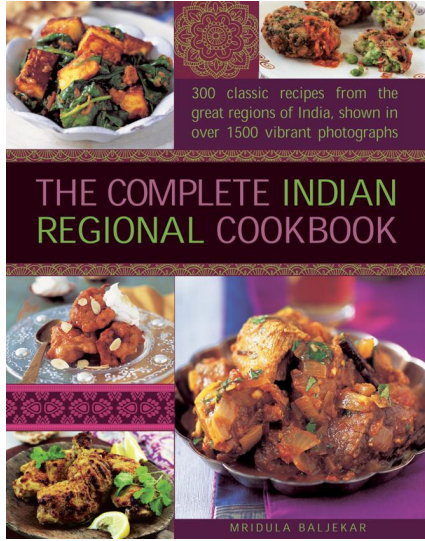
There's similar layering of flavors in a Goan pork vindaloo, which is hot, acidic, sweet, pungent, fruity, and almost tropical in flavor because of vinegar. Ginger and garlic purees and dark, assertive spices make a paste that would rouse the dead. A fairly involved rendition of butter chicken is rich and seductive, cinnamon, cloves, and tomatoes in a veritable bath of butter. Mustard greens also take a turn in rich, spiced butter, pureed into pillowy softness, the result like creamed spinach.

But there are misfires. The liquid proportions are off for a batch of naan dough, leaving it so dry it crumbles to bits on the counter. A dish of shrimp in poppy seed and "cashew" sauce is filled with small errors, from puzzling misprints (like 14 pounds instead of 1.4) to cooking the shrimp a total of 6 or 7 minutes, far more than necessary. Still, if you tweak, you can end up with something truly wonderful.

A slow-cooked chicken over rice is, I guess, not slow enough, as the boneless pieces overcook in the oven. Still, the saffrony, oniony rice, and a thick spice paste make up for it. Minced lamb in yogurt sauce would have been a lot better if it had called for draining the lamb fat midway through (there was so much fat it curdled the yogurt); afterward, it occurred to me that perhaps the author had leaner lamb than I used.

Because Baljekar is based in Britain, many of her measurements were converted to US volumes from metric weights. There are many slips between a test kitchen and the printed page, particularly when conversions are involved. Even with the abundance of step-by-step color photographs, you'll have to make some judgment calls, and some frustration may ensue. But this slightly uneven, generous volume amply rewards the extra effort.

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**THE COMPLETE INDIAN REGIONAL COOKBOOK**

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