



Whole and ground cardamom.

Searching for

C a r d a m o m



Biryani with yogurt.

BY VARU CHILAKAMARRI

Around 4 p.m. is when it usually hits me. After hours of hunching over my keyboard in a windowless office, I start daydreaming. Not about anything intriguing or X-rated, just about what I'm going to make for dinner that night. Recently, I had a hankering for chicken biryani, a traditional Indian rice dish. This was a rather troublesome craving, however, because I'm a vegetarian, and I've never made biryani. However, I convinced myself that these were minor concerns and began perusing the web for ideas.

After a few minutes of research, I settled on a few biryani basics. First, while there are many ingredients in a biryani, the main ones are basmati rice and vegetables such as onions, potatoes, and tomatoes. After deciding that tomato paste qualified as tomatoes, I was feeling pretty good about making this biryani with what I had on hand. But just as I was ready to declare this dinner a slam dunk, I discovered that biryani's distinct flavor is derived from sweet, aromatic spices including cloves, cinnamon, and cardamom. I had the cloves and cinnamon but no cardamom. I was tempted to leave it out, but every biryani description, recipe, and legend seemed to cast cardamom as an irreplaceable character. It seemed like cardamom—as opposed to my fledgling culinary skills—was the only thing standing between me and my biryani. Where would I find you, cardamom . . . and what do you even look like anyway?

By 7:15, I finally began making my way home. While I often pick up odds and ends from my local corner grocery, "Capital Supreme Market," at 4th and E Streets, SE, I couldn't imagine that the store would have such an exotic spice—it only had three aisles! There are many similar-looking stores peppered around the Hill, but walking into this particular one always makes me think of what a neighborhood market must have been like in the olden days. The store has been owned and run for many years by the Yi family—Lee, Cindy, and their son, Tom, who is often manning the register. Tom knows many of the customers' names by heart, although to my dismay, I'm still just greeted with a friendly "hey sweetie!"

I became a loyal customer after winning a bet with my husband that the store (or "Tom's" as we like to call it) would have fresh cilantro. They had it—in the back, of course. But on biryani day, I was all but certain that I would walk out empty-handed. I scanned the aisles and saw no trace of cardamom. I circled the aisles again, in case cardamom had evaded me the first time. Seeing my frustration, owner Cindy asked me what I needed. I furtively whispered my purpose, "Cardamom . . . do you have it?" She hurried off to the back, and quickly emerged with a bottle of premium ground cardamom. I was shocked. For a moment, I panicked—ground cardamom? Could I use that? But I quickly snapped out of it, recognizing my good fortune, because ground spices are easier to use than whole spices.

I expressed my surprise and gratitude that the small store would have such a unique ingredient, and Cindy explained that if they didn't have something a customer requested, they'd make a note and add it to their next order of stock. Perhaps others before me had made a similar quest in search of the elusive spice.

I arrived home a few minutes before 8 p.m. I had some experimental cooking ahead of me, but I smiled, knowing that soon, we'd be devouring bowls of hot biryani, with cardamom safely tucked away in my pantry . . . ready to satisfy my next craving.

Cindy of Supreme Market



Biryani for Beginners

Oil (around 2 tablespoons)
 2 medium potatoes, chopped
 2 onions, thinly sliced
 2 tablespoons of minced garlic
 1 teaspoon of ginger paste
 4 tablespoons of tomato paste
 1 cup of chopped fake chicken, optional (e.g., Morningstar chik'n strips)
 1 tablespoon of curry powder
 ½ teaspoon of red pepper powder
 1 cup of plain yogurt
 1 cup of basmati rice
 ¾ teaspoon of ground cardamom
 ¼ teaspoon of ground cloves
 ½ teaspoon of cinnamon
 2 tablespoons of raisins
 1 teaspoon of salt
 ¼ teaspoon of turmeric

1. In a medium pot, brown the potatoes in 2 teaspoons of hot oil. Remove the potatoes and then, in the same pot, brown the onions, garlic, and ginger in 1 teaspoon of oil and with ¼ teaspoon of salt. Stir in the tomato paste, fake chicken, curry powder, red pepper powder, and about 4 tablespoons of water; cook over medium heat for about 4-5 minutes. Remove from heat and then stir in 1/3 cup of yogurt and set aside.

2. In the microwave, combine the rice with the cardamom, clove, cinnamon, and 2/3 cup of water. Cook until all the water is absorbed (about 4 minutes), the rice should still be hard and crunchy.

3. Layer the browned potatoes over the tomato-onion mixture in the pot, then, layer the aromatic rice, raisins and nuts over the potatoes. Finally, in a separate bowl, stir in the remaining yogurt with 2/3 cup of water and ¾ teaspoon salt; pour the mixture over the rice. Sprinkle the turmeric over half of the rice. Cover, and cook over medium heat for about 15 minutes or until the rice is fully cooked. (Periodically check to ensure that the rice isn't too dry and the bottom isn't burning; and add more water if necessary). After the rice is fully cooked, thoroughly toss. Serve plain or with a side of yogurt with freshly chopped mint. ■

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