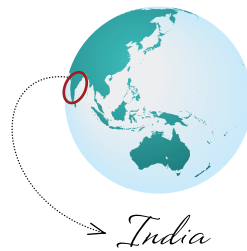


# My Thali

by JOE THOTTUNGAL  
WITH ANNE DESBRISAY

PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN LALONDE



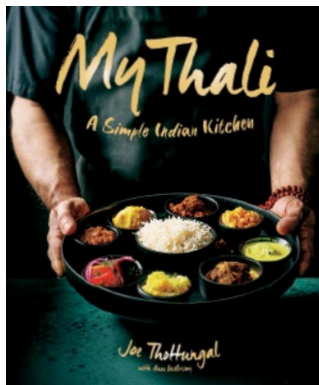
## WHERE ON EARTH

As a Kerala schoolboy my lunch box was a banana leaf, plucked from our garden, filled with food, folded over, and wrapped in a page of yesterday's newspaper. It made a tidy, perfect parcel to tuck into a schoolbag.

**U**NWRAPPED AT LUNCH BREAK, there would be the pleasure of a still-warm meal, its flavour ramped up by the long contact with the fragrant leaf. Inside, perhaps an egg omelette, some cabbage thoran, a curry of black chickpeas in a thick tomato gravy, a piece of last night's fried fish. One of my mum's pickles would always be there, along with a spoonful of raita. And rice, of course, always rice. I would wolf it all down, then toss the leaf on the side of the road to decompose or, more likely, to be eaten by the temple cows that wandered free in our town. No plastic left behind, no food waste, and no bulky tiffin box to lug to after-school cricket practice.

As a kid, I would never have called this tasty muddle of food a *thali* — it was just my school lunch. But that's what it was. Because a thali is a meal of many parts, which makes the contents of that leaf, modest as they were, count as one.

The format of a meal of many parts is simply the way we eat in India, the way we have eaten for centuries. Not to be confused with the more European style of a meal of many courses, but one that involves many elements, served together. The dishes are always hyper-regional and -seasonal, usually culturally or religiously significant, and typically presented on a round, rimmed plate (also »






«called a thali) holding small metal bowls. Or, in my part of India, more often presented on a banana leaf.

Cooking thali might sound like a lot of work. And it sometimes is if the occasion calls for an eye-popping all-out feast in full-on splendour. But everyday thalis can be quite simple. Many dishes can be whipped up in fifteen minutes, recipes can be doubled, allowing leftovers for another day, and almost all can be made ahead, leaving the cook with little to do but make rice while the curries warm up for supper. With one or two anchor dishes, plus rice, the balance of a thali is made up of the small stuff — the condiments and accompaniments and sides that give the meal flavour, character, zing, and balm, usually found in jars or bowls in the fridge. No sweat, really.

As an Indian chef, the tradition of thali dominates my life. It is the way I eat at home, it is the way I celebrate life's big events, and it is the style of cooking we offer at my second Ottawa restaurant, Thali.

My first cookbook, *Coconut Lagoon*, was a tribute to my home state of Kerala, an introduction to its unique cuisine, essential ingredients, and traditional dishes. It was written for all those unfamiliar with the particular pleasures of its particular cuisine.

I wanted this cookbook to showcase south Indian home cooking — the dishes my wife Suma prepares for our family, defined by seasonality, affordability, nutrition, and tradition, recipes passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter — and for the ways we create complete meals, those we serve on thalis at the restaurant. 

## The Art of Tempering Spices

Tempering, blooming, or crackling (called *tadka*) is a cooking method in which spices are added to hot fat, to extract their fragrance, perfume the oil, and add flavour to a dish. Spices are either tempered at the beginning of a recipe for a curry or a stir-fry, or at the end to finish a dish — a dal or a raita — with a flourish of sputtering spices. The process is not difficult, but tempering is a skill requiring a good nose and an eagle eye, best learned through practice and from making mistakes. The biggest mistake being that you may burn the spices. In which case, there is no remedy other than to start again with fresh spices and to be more vigilant. As tempering can take only a few seconds, ingredients are added in rapid succession, and timing and temperature are everything, it's critically important that you have a *mise en place* of measured spices and aromatics at the ready, near the stove. Also important is the right pan. If you are tempering spices at the beginning of a recipe, you'll need a larger pan, preferably with a flat bottom and high sides, to continue building the dish. Tempering spices at the end of a dish will require a small frying pan or a *tadka* pan designed specifically for the purpose. Start with hot oil or ghee and reduce heat to medium before adding the spices to help ensure they don't burn. If spices do burn, toss them and start fresh. You can briefly cover the pan with a splash guard or a lid to keep the spices from popping out of the pan but be prepared to remove it fast to continue with the recipe.

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Cook  
to

SERVES 4

## Dal Makhani

*MAKHANI MEANS “buttery” in Hindi and, for vegetarians, this dal dish is the closest thing to the seduction of butter chicken... all those soothing, creamy and rich flavours minus the meat. This is our family’s Friday night supper, with a side of raita and a stack of parathas for sopping up every drop of sauce.*

**Black Gram** (urad) 1½ cups, washed and soaked overnight

**Red Kidney Beans** ½ cup, washed and soaked overnight

**Salt** 1 Tbs

**Butter** ¼ cup (½ stick), plus extra for garnish

**Green Cardamom Pods** 8

**Black Cardamom Pods** 3

**Cloves** 5

**Indian Bay Leaves** 4

**Indian or Thai Green Chiles** 3, finely chopped

**Cinnamon Stick** 1

**Ginger-Garlic Paste** 3 Tbs

**Onions** 2, coarsely chopped

**Kashmiri Chili Powder** 2 Tbs

**Red Chili Powder** 1 tsp

**Tomatoes** 4 large, pureed (3 cups)

**Ground Cumin** ½ tsp

**Whipping Cream** (35%) 1 cup

**Dried Fenugreek Leaves** (kasuri methi) 1 Tbs

**Chopped Cilantro** ¼ cup

- 1 DRAIN** and rinse the soaked beans, then add them to a large saucepan. Add salt and enough cold water to cover by an inch. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to medium-low and simmer for 1 hour, or until beans are very soft. If necessary, top up with more water.
- 2 HEAT** butter in a heavy-bottomed frying pan or wok over medium heat until sizzling. Add cardamom, cloves, bay leaves, chiles, cinnamon, and ginger-garlic paste. Roast for 2 minutes, or until fragrant and softened. Add onions and sauté for 3–4 minutes, until onions are brown. Add chili powders and cook for 1 minute, until the smell of raw spice disappears.
- 3 POUR** in tomato purée and simmer for 2–3 minutes, until the oil from the spices rises to the surface. Add the cooked beans along with their cooking water and ½ cup hot water. Simmer, stirring occasionally, for 10 minutes. Add cumin and cream and simmer for another 5 minutes.
- 4 GARNISH** with fenugreek leaves and cilantro, and serve with parathas and raita.

Cook  
to

SERVES 4

## Mint-Lime Rickey

*A REFRESHING drink on a hot summer day.*

**Limes** 2

**Mint Leaves** a small bunch

**Ginger** 1" piece, peeled and coarsely chopped

**Sugar** ½ cup

**Ice Cubes** to serve

- 1 USING** a sharp knife, remove skin and white pith from the limes.
- 2 COMBINE** limes, mint leaves, ginger, sugar, and 2 cups water in a blender and blend until smooth. Pour into chilled glasses over ice.

INDIA

## Try Traditional!

Considered one of the Punjab’s most beloved dishes, the keys to a great dal makhani are to never skimp on the butter or cream and to cook it low and slow — in fact, the more it simmers, the more fabulous the flavour. If you have time, and to really make the most of this dish, after adding the cumin and cream, simmer for another 30 minutes to 1 hour on low heat, stirring occasionally and adding more glugs of cream and butter. To serve, garnish with fenugreek and cilantro and add another dollop of butter to melt slowly in the heat.

Cook  
to

SERVES 4

## Roasted Beet Salad

*ROASTING IS not an Indian thing. Ovens simply weren't available, so everything was boiled, steamed, or fried. But when Suma's mother was visiting our Canadian home, she discovered her favourite beet salad recipe took on an entirely new depth of flavour when the beets were roasted. We often serve this for a late summer lunch, when young beets are abundant, with a stack of chapatis.*

### Small Beets

8 assorted (ruby red, golden, Chioggia, and/or rainbow), scrubbed and patted dry

**Salt** 2 tsp, divided

**Vegetable Oil** 2 Tbs

**Curry Leaves** 15, thinly sliced

**Indian or Thai Green Chiles** 3, finely chopped

**Red Onions** 2, coarsely chopped

**White Wine Vinegar** 3 Tbs

**Coconut Oil** 1 Tbs, melted

- PREHEAT** oven to 400°F.
- IN** a bowl, combine beets, 1 ½ tsp salt, and vegetable oil and mix well. Transfer to a large piece of aluminum foil and wrap them tightly. Roast for 45 minutes, or until they can be easily pierced with a knife. Set aside until cool enough to handle.
- PEEL** off beet skins, then slice into wedges. In a serving bowl, combine beets and the remaining ingredients. Season with the remaining ½ tsp salt and mix well. Chill in the fridge.
- SERVE** with jeera rice and chapati.

Cook  
to

SERVES 4

## Food for Thought Curry

*WHEN THE pandemic first shut us down, we were left with fridges filled with fresh produce. We called our friends at the Ottawa Mission and their response was to donate many bags of red lentils. What else to do but feed people? This was the curry that launched the Food for Thought charitable initiative, serving the food insecure in our community, who suffered so much from the lockdowns.*

**Red Lentils** 1 cup, rinsed

**Salt** 1 Tbs, plus extra to taste

**Ground Turmeric**

1 tsp, divided

**Vegetable Oil** 3 Tbs

**Black Mustard Seeds** 1 ½ tsp

**Cumin Seeds** 1 ½ tsp

**Dried Red Chiles**

3, snapped in half

**Curry Leaves** 15

**Garlic** 5 cloves, chopped

**Indian or Thai Green Chiles**

2, finely chopped

**Onion** ½, chopped

**Carrot** 1, cut into ½" cubes

**Red or Yellow Bell Pepper** 1, seeded and cut into ½" cubes

**Chinese or Japanese Eggplant**

½, cut into ½" cubes

**Zucchini** ½, cut into ½" cubes

**Cauliflower**

¼, cut into small florets

**Lemon** Juice of ½

**Cilantro** coarsely chopped, for garnish

- IN** a heavy-bottomed saucepan, combine lentils, salt, and ½ tsp turmeric. Pour in 4 cups water and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium and simmer, uncovered, for 8–10 minutes, until lentils are soft but still hold their shape. Remove from heat and set aside.
- WHILE** lentils are cooking, prepare the seasoning. With measured spices and aromatics nearby, heat oil in a large frying pan or wok over medium-high heat, until oil is shimmering. (To test the heat, add a couple of mustard seeds. If they start to sizzle, the oil is ready.) Reduce heat to medium, add mustard seeds, and crackle them for just a few seconds until popping subsides. Immediately add cumin seeds, red chiles, and curry leaves and sauté for another minute. Add garlic, green chiles, and onions and sauté for 7 minutes, or until onions are softened and translucent. Add the remaining ½ tsp turmeric and mix well.
- ADD** vegetables and sauté for 8–10 minutes, or until softened. Add mixture to pot of lentils and heat through over medium heat. Stir in lemon juice and cilantro and season to taste.
- SERVE** with parathas and chutney.



Cook

MAKES 20 BALLS

## Cashew Balls

*IN HONOUR* of my late aunty Mary, a treasured recipe for an addictive sweet. These nutty confections, known also as unda, are an anytime pleasure and lovely served with an afternoon chai or a coffee. The crunchiness comes from roasted rice, the flavour from the cashews, and the sweetness from jaggery. (Demerara or your everyday brown sugar is an acceptable substitute.)

**Parboiled or Matta Rice**  
½ cup, washed well and soaked for an hour

**Fresh Grated Coconut**  
1 cup

**Roasted Unsalted Cashew Nuts**  
3 cups

**Grated Jaggery or Dark Brown Sugar**  
1 cup

- 1 DRAIN** rice and pat dry with a paper towel, removing as much moisture as possible. Add rice to a heavy-bottomed frying pan and dry-roast over medium heat for 8 minutes, stirring frequently, until lightly browned, slightly crisp, and puffed up. Remove from pan and set aside to cool.
- 2 ADD** coconut to the pan and stir until lightly toasted. Remove from pan and set aside to cool.
- 3 USING** a food processor, grind rice into a coarse powder, then transfer to a large bowl. Add cashews to the food processor and pulse to a fine powder. Transfer to the rice bowl. Add jaggery (or brown sugar) and coconut to the food processor and process into a fine powder. Add it to the bowl. Using your hands, mix well.
- 4 SHAPE** the mixture into firm, lime-sized balls. Serve immediately. (Cashew balls can be refrigerated for up to 3 days. To freeze them, place balls on a baking sheet to freeze individually, then store in an airtight container in freezer for up to a month.)



Cook

INDIA

SERVES 4

## Steamed Clams in a Mango Coconut Sauce

*MY MUM* knew how to stretch an expensive ingredient like the small clams (kakka) that flourished in the waterways of Kerala: she'd simply bulk up the dish with more affordable stuff — like mangoes! Here, green (young, unripe) mango gives the sauce a sour note, while coconut milk smooths and sweetens. You could easily substitute shrimp, mussels, or scallops for the littlenecks.

**Green, Unripe Mango**  
1 cup, diced

**Lime** Juice of ½

**Coconut Oil** 1 Tbs

**Black Mustard Seeds** ½ tsp

**Curry Leaves**  
10–12, plus extra for garnish

**Garlic** 3 cloves, chopped

**Indian or Thai Green Chiles**  
2, finely chopped

**Indian or Small Shallots** 2, coarsely chopped

**Ginger** peeled and coarsely chopped, 2 Tbs

**Coconut Milk**  
2 cups

**Ground Turmeric**  
1 tsp

**Salt** 1 tsp

**Fresh Littleneck Clams** 4 lbs, scrubbed

- 1 COMBINE** mango and lime juice in a small bowl and set aside to marinate.
- 2 WITH** measured spices and aromatics nearby, heat oil in a medium frying pan over medium-high heat, until oil is shimmering. (To test the heat, add a couple of mustard seeds. If they start to sizzle, the oil is ready.) Reduce heat to medium, add mustard seeds, and crackle them for just a few seconds until popping subsides, taking care they don't burn. Immediately add curry leaves, garlic, chiles, shallots, and ginger and sauté for 2 minutes.
- 3 TRANSFER** this mixture to a large saucepan with a lid. Add a splash of coconut milk to the frying pan and deglaze, getting every scrap of oil and spice. Pour into the saucepan, then add the remaining coconut milk, turmeric, salt, and the marinated mango and bring to a boil. Add clams, cover, and reduce heat to medium-low. Simmer for 5–8 minutes, until clams have steamed open. (Discard any that don't open.)
- 4 SERVE** on basmati rice with a garnish of curry leaves.

Cook  
to

SERVES 4

## Oats Puttu

*MY FAMILY* eats this variation on the classic south Indian rice puttu pretty much every morning, topped with banana slices and a bit of jaggery or brown sugar, or sometimes as a savoury late-night snack with a leftover black chickpea curry. Our twist is to use Canadian oats in lieu of rice flour. Fresh grated coconut will make a big difference to the flavour and texture. Every Kerala kitchen has a puttu maker — a steamer attached to a cylindrical metal tube, which makes puttu's traditional log shape — but the recipe can easily be made without one. See below for instructions. If using a puttu maker, this recipe will fill the cylinder twice.

**Large Flake Oats** (not instant)  
2 ½ cups

**Salt**  
¼ tsp

**Fresh Grated Coconut**  
1 cup, divided

- 1 COMBINE** oats and salt in a bowl. Slowly sprinkle in about  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup water, mixing it in with your fingertips, until the mixture begins to form a clump when you squeeze it in the palm of your hand, then un-clumps when you release the squeeze. (The amount of water required will vary depending on the quality and cut of the oats.) Set aside to soften for 10 minutes.
- 2 TRANSFER** oats to a food processor and pulse two or three times, just to break down the oats to a coarse meal. Transfer to a bowl, then stir in half the coconut, reserving the other half in a separate bowl. For the first puttu, you will use about half of each component.
- 3 USING** a puttu maker, add the thin metal perforated disk to the bottom of the cylindrical tube (called a puttu kutty). Then fill the tube with alternating layers of grated coconut and the oats-coconut mixture, beginning with a thin layer of coconut, then a thicker layer of the oats-coconut mixture, a thin layer of coconut, a thicker layer of oats-coconut mixture, and finishing with a final layer of coconut.
- 4 FILL** the steamer a quarter full with water. Attach puttu kutty and its perforated lid and set the puttu maker over high heat. Once water is boiling, reduce heat to medium and cook for about 5 minutes more, or until steam rises from the holes in the top, indicating the puttu is cooked. Using a towel or oven mitts to protect your hands, push the steaming oats puttu out of its cylinder using the puttu 'stick' (or the handle of a wooden spoon). Repeat with remaining coconut and oats-coconut mixture to make a second puttu. This will take less time as the water is already steaming hot.
- 5 SERVE** oats puttu sweet, topped with banana slices and your preferred sweetener, or savoury with a curry.



### No puttu maker? No problem!

Simply combine all of the soaked oats with all the grated coconut and use a steamer with a lid or a double boiler with a perforated steamer insert to cook the mixture for about 10–12 minutes. When the puttu is light and fluffy, it is cooked.

