

# FROM LOCAL DAIRY TO DELICIOUS CURRY

## A PANEER WORKSHOP

BY PREENA CHAUHAN

A good homemade paneer in curry sauce is one of my favourite things. The satisfying texture of this cheese enrobed in a creamy, cardamom-scented curry sauce coupled with spinach or peas and served with an aromatic basmati pullao leaves me positively rapturous! Using local organic milk and seasonal vegetables, you can make homemade paneer accompanied with curries any time of the year.

India is a vast land with diverse geographical landscapes. From the tropical, coconut-laden southern region to the most northern region of the snowy, mountainous Himalayas, the geography of the country has tremendously influenced the cuisine, forming regional differences in the diet. The north-western state of Punjab, known as the breadbasket of India, is one of these distinctive Indian regions, with fertile agricultural lands, a sizeable percentage of the world's cattle population, and an immense dairy industry. As a result, dairy is a main ingredient in Punjabi cuisine, with milk, ghee (clarified butter), yogurt, paneer or cream present in almost every dish. The art of cheesemaking is part of Punjabi culinary tradition.

India is home to a large population of vegetarians. According to the World Vegetarian Congress, approximately 35 percent of India's population are lacto-vegetarians (who consume dairy products, but no eggs), so with a population of over a billion, that's a lot of vegetarians! Vegetarians in India obtain protein not only from lentils and beans, but also largely through dairy products such as paneer. Any Indian curry sauce used to make vindaloo, korma or butter chicken can be used with paneer as a substitute for the poultry or meat.

Good paneer should have a rich, creamy smooth yet firm texture, farm-fresh cheese flavour, and an irresistible melt-in-the-mouth quality. You can always tell if a restaurant is using paneer made in-house – it's silky, smooth and buttery, a true test of a great Indian restaurant. Often mistaken for tofu (although tofu can be a vegan substitute for paneer), it is usually available in Indian grocery stores in firm block form. For those who have not yet discovered paneer or attempted to make it from scratch, this is a good time to start. With local organic dairy at hand, making your own Indian cheese is only a few easy steps away.

Making paneer at home is simple and requires only a couple of ingredients and a cheesecloth. You can use 2% milk, but full-fat, homogenized milk is favoured to obtain the right texture and add a full body to your paneer. Additionally, an acidic coagulant such as lemon or lime



juice or vinegar is required to allow the paneer to curdle.

If simplicity is your motivation, then this recipe is definitely worth trying. In short, you simply boil milk, add vinegar, strain through a cheesecloth, and form into a block (see recipe at right). The paneer will have a crumbly texture, not as firm as feta cheese but more similar to a softer cheese such as cottage cheese. When pressed with a heavy weight or placed into a mold, the result is a white, firm paneer block, which can be cubed or cut into triangles ready to use for cooking. Small, round paneer molds with holes to drain out excess liquid are used in India to make homemade paneer. When I was in Mumbai last March, a friend insisted on sending me home with one of these gadgets, swearing it would make a perfect little paneer block; but not to worry, a colander or any type of sieve works just as well.

One of the most well-known dishes prepared using paneer is Mattar Paneer (a cream-based curry of paneer and peas). Try this recipe with fresh shelling peas when in season (frozen peas work well, too) and Ontario tomatoes. With tomatoes in season, this is the time to enjoy and savour them, while they're at their peak! Pick fleshy, juicy and ripe tomatoes to

give your curry a bright orange colour. When out of season, substitute canned ground tomatoes for the fresh.

The hallmark of paneer lies in its versatility, and it's not limited to use in curries. Paneer's most interesting quality is that it does not melt when cooked and can therefore be used in many different ways. Try paneer crumbled and spiced to be stuffed in samosas or in potato cutlets; or dip cubed paneer into a chick pea flour batter and deep fry to make paneer pakoras. Paneer marinated in a spicy tikka masala with yogurt, threaded onto skewers and baked in the oven or tandoor (round clay oven) results in paneer tikka, another popular appetizer. I enjoy crumbled paneer with a sprinkling of flaked sea salt and crushed black pepper on top of salad greens. Chinese-Indian cuisine, known as Hakka, incorporates paneer into many of its dishes; one dish in particular immerses paneer cubes in a soy-sauce-based, sweet-and-sour sauce with minced shallots and chopped cilantro, a delicious way to eat paneer that has now left me salivating! The possibilities are endless. Once you've tried making paneer in your home you'll discover many ways to enjoy the homemade cheese in your seasonal dishes. □

**Above: Preena Chauhan squeezing excess moisture from paneer**



## HOMEMADE PANEER (INDIAN CHEESE)

*By Arvinda Chauhan*

*Choose local organic milk to make your own organic paneer at home. This recipe yields approximately 3/4 cup of cubed paneer, enough for the Mattar Paneer recipe at right.*

4 cups homogenized milk  
1/4 cup white vinegar

Line a colander with a thin muslin or cheesecloth. Place colander over a large bowl.

In a medium saucepan, bring milk to a boil. Turn off heat. Add vinegar and stir until the milk curdles. Pour and strain curdled milk through cheesecloth. Twist cheesecloth tightly to extract as much moisture from the paneer as possible.

Line a plate with another cheesecloth. Place paneer ball in centre of plate and apply a heavy weight on top to form it into a block.

Allow paneer sit for 6 to 8 hours to drain out excess liquid. Remove cheesecloth and gently cut paneer into cubes. Add to your favourite Indian curry and enjoy!

Note: If not using immediately, place the block of pressed paneer into an airtight container and refrigerate for up to 4 days.

Mother-and-daughter duo Arvinda and Preena Chauhan are experts in Indian cuisine and have been teaching healthy regional Indian cooking since 1993 through Arvinda's Healthy Gourmet Indian Cooking school. In 2005 Preena, along with her brother Paresh, launched Arvinda's, a line of Indian cooking ingredients, as part of her masters degree in environmental studies. Check out the schedule of classes at Arvinda's, including one on cooking with paneer, by visiting [www.hgic.ca](http://www.hgic.ca). For information on the Arvinda's line of products, visit [www.arvindas.com](http://www.arvindas.com).

## MATTAR PANEER

*By Arvinda Chauhan*

*Indian cheese and peas complement each other in a creamy, mildly spicy sauce. The cardamom pods and curry leaves are optional in this recipe, but add a beautiful fragrance to your sauce. Cardamom pods, curry leaves, Indian chili powder and garam masala are available in most supermarkets and in Indian grocery stores.*

2 to 4 servings

1 tbsp	grapeseed or sunflower oil
3 to 5	whole green cardamom pods (optional)
5 to 6	dried curry leaves (optional)
1	medium onion, finely chopped
1/2 cup	puréed fresh tomatoes OR 1/4 cup canned ground tomatoes
1 tsp	finely minced garlic
1 tsp	finely minced gingerroot
1 1/2 tsp	ground coriander
1/2 tsp	ground cumin
1/2 tsp	Indian chili powder or ground cayenne (add less for a milder curry)
1/2 tsp	ground turmeric
1 tsp	sea salt, or to taste
1 tsp	granulated sugar
1 1/2 cups	fresh or frozen peas
3/4 cup	cubed paneer
1 cup	light cream
1/4 cup	water
1 tbsp	chopped cilantro
1/2 tsp.	garam masala

In a large sauté pan, heat oil over medium heat. Add cardamom pods and curry leaves (if using). Cook until golden brown. Add onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until caramelized, about 10 to 15 minutes.

Add tomatoes and cook for 2 to 3 minutes. Add garlic, ginger, ground coriander, cumin, chili powder, turmeric, salt and sugar. Stir and cook for 2 to 3 minutes. Add peas and paneer. Stir well.

Stir in cream. Cover and cook for 10 minutes. Add water, stir and simmer, uncovered, until the sauce is thick and creamy, about 8 to 10 minutes. Transfer to a large bowl and garnish with cilantro and a sprinkling of garam masala. Serve with naan and basmati rice.

