

maine course



## turn up the heat

Spicy foods are a great way to heat up a Maine winter and bring exotic tastes into your kitchen.

by Sally Noble

**F**AR AWAY FROM MAINE RIGHT NOW, SOMEONE YOU KNOW MAY BE sunning herself in some exotic climate—some hot place where palm trees sway and only the occasional rainbow interrupts the sunshine. But hold on: You, too, can put some hot-weather spice into your life. All you need is a pinch of hot red Thai chili, a thimbleful of fragrant Indian cardamom, or a dash of Creole black pepper to warm things up.

We're not talking about the five-alarm stuff that burns your palate, making you gulp glasses of water, but rich, regional recipes that offer flavor as well as kick. "You want flavor, not just heat without spice," suggests Janice Swinton, chef/owner of the Freedom Café, which serves up authentic Southern soul food in Waterville. "You don't want to take a bite and then drop your spoon, because a nice heat is a flavorful heat."

Indeed, the connoisseurs of all things chile agree. While many of us were raised on the jalapeño, the gourmand knows the difference between the chiltepin and the serrano pepper: "The chiltepin is a more complex seasoning, while the serrano pepper has more bite," explains Kyle Yarborough, chef at Havana, the fashionable and popular Cuban restaurant in Bar Harbor.

Hot peppers, which are everyday fare in the places where they grow, are essential to Mexican, South American, Indonesian, African, and Asian recipes. If you want to get technical, know this: The substance that makes a chile hot is called capsaicin—and it's capsaicin that boosts your metabolism and can provide some wonderful health benefits, like lowering your cholesterol. But potential paybacks aside, serving spicy food in the heart of a Maine winter is all about creating excitement.

All three of the following recipes make prodigious use of sophisticated spices. There's an art to blending bold flavors and creating the kind of heat that lingers longer. You'll notice that the spicy-food experts often add sweet and pungent seasonings, like ginger, cloves, or basil, to further complicate matters—and make everything that much more delicious. And the real pros also recommend grinding your own powder from imported whole spice pods—it's labor-intensive, but well worth the results.

"You can use a mortar and pestle to crush the pods yourself," suggests Raj Sharma, chef/owner of Bombay Mahal in Brunswick, which many consider to be the best Indian restaurant in the state. Sharma will gladly sell you a bag of his own special blend if you prefer not to grind your own.

Now's the time to tune into the sounds of Calypso steel drums, Cajun accordions, or even the pluck-string Indian sitar—whatever beat warms your mood—and fill your kitchen with the smells of faraway spices. It's January in Maine, the perfect time to feast on food that comes from one of those balmy places where the hibiscus grows wild and sandals are optional. ♪

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## ISLAND STYLE TUNA AU POIVRE

Chef Kyle Yarborough, Havana, Bar Harbor

au poivre rub (see recipe, below)

6 tuna steaks

¼ cup soy sauce

¼ cup olive oil

2 Tbs. canola oil

sweet chile butter (see recipe, below)

ginger mashed sweet potatoes (see recipe, below)

### AU POIVRE RUB

½ cup coconut (grated)

½ cup sugar

½ cup finely ground black pepper

½ cup coarse-ground pepper

2 Tbs. cumin

1 Tbs. coriander

1 Tbs. ground ginger pepper

1 Tbs. cinnamon

1 Tbs. thyme

1 Tbs. ancho chili powder

1½ Tbs. garlic salt

Combine all of the ingredients for the au poivre rub in a bowl and mix well.

### SWEET CHILE BUTTER

8 Tbs. (one stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature

1 Tbs. cinnamon

1 Tbs. honey

1 Tbs. brown sugar

1 tsp. minced garlic

1 Thai chile, minced

pinch of salt and pepper

Combine all ingredients in a food processor and blend until smooth. Place a sheet of parchment paper or wax paper on a work surface. Arrange the butter along the long side of this paper and form into a roll, or log, about one inch in diameter. Then chill in the refrigerator about half an hour.

### GINGER MASHED SWEET POTATOES

5 sweet potatoes, peeled and dried, diced



▲ ISLAND STYLE  
TUNA AU POIVRE

1 cup heavy cream

1½ Tbs. butter

1 Tbs. thyme

1 Tbs. minced garlic

1 Tbs. minced ginger

1 tsp. garlic salt

salt and pepper to taste

Place the sweet potatoes in a large saucepan and cover with cold water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium, and simmer. In a separate saucepan, sauté the garlic, ginger, and seasonings in the butter for three to four minutes, just to combine the flavors. Add half the cream and remove from heat. When the potatoes are cooked, remove from heat and strain off the water. Transfer the potatoes to a large bowl, add the butter mixture, and mash with a potato masher or spoon. Then, when smooth, add the remaining cream for desired consistency.

### Final Tuna Au Poivre Preparation

Combine soy sauce and olive oil in a separate bowl. Dip each piece of tuna in the soy sauce/olive oil mixture; then, dredge each piece of tuna in the au poivre rub. Coat both sides of the tuna if you like more spice, and only one for a milder flavor. Then, in a large sauté pan, over medium-high heat, sear the tuna in 2 tablespoons of canola oil for two minutes on each

side. The tuna should be medium rare; for medium well-done tuna, put in oven at 350°F for six to eight minutes. Serve each piece over a serving of ginger mashed sweet potatoes. Then, slice the sweet chile butter and place each piece on top of the fish, to allow the butter to melt and form a sauce. Makes 6 to 8 entrées.

## INDIAN CHICKEN CURRY

Chef Raj Sharma, Bombay Mahal, Brunswick

3 tsp. vegetable oil

2 garlic cloves, minced

2 to 4 tsp. fresh ginger root, minced

½ tsp. cinnamon

1 Tbs. plain yogurt

1 large onion, finely chopped

1 tomato, diced (or one small can of tomato paste)

1 to 2 cups of water

2 lbs. of cooked boneless, skinless chicken breasts or thighs, cut in bite-size pieces

¼ tsp. each of cumin seeds, turmeric powder, fenugreek, coriander seeds, cumin powder, ground cloves, green cardamom powder, green jalapeño cilantro, as a garnish

4 to 6 cups of Basmati rice

Sauté cumin seeds in vegetable oil. Add garlic and continue cooking until it is brown (be careful not to burn it). Next, add ginger, cinnamon, yogurt, and onions, and continue cooking until onions are browned. Add tomato and turmeric, and cook for one minute; then add water, cook for two minutes longer, and add chicken. Continue cooking on low-to-medium heat for 20 minutes, stirring frequently, until sauce is thickened. After it comes to a boil, add the remaining spices. Serve over Basmati rice; garnish with cilantro. Makes 4 entrées.

## CHICKEN AND SAUSAGE JAMBALAYA

Chef Janice Swinton, Freedom Café, Waterville

6 chicken breasts

2 smoked turkey drumsticks