

Ammini Ramachandran

Profile photo

Grains, Greens and Grated Coconuts



“**T**here is as much pleasure in anticipating a meal and reminiscing about it afterward as there is in devouring it,” said Plano author Ammini Ramachandran.

When *Plano Profile's* food editor Barbara Walch told me about *Grains, Greens, and Grated Coconuts*, there was as much pleasure in anticipating the read and writing about it afterward as there was in devouring its flavor and zest. Very rarely do you find a cookbook that interweaves the history of cuisine with the traditions and culture in which it is celebrated. Let's just say, *Grains, Greens, and Grated Coconuts* will add a little spice to your slice.

In ancient days, spices drew explorers to the tropical coastline of southwestern India and into the monsoon-soaked rain forests of Kerala, Ammini's home state. Kerala is the harvesting ground for the world's most widely used spice – black pepper. The “black gold of Kerala” brought prosperity to the region.

“Today, spices hold the same magic,” said Ammini. “Understanding spices is the cornerstone of the art of Indian cooking; they provide endless possibilities for flavoring.”

A principle spice in Indian cuisine is the red chili pepper. Said Ammini, “We use quite a bit of red chili pepper. We got it by the 16th century from the Portuguese. Chili pepper has taken over black pepper.”

Pepper, asafetida, cardamom, coriander, cumin, fenugreek, mustard seeds, sesame seeds, and turmeric are essential spices for Indian cuisine. “Asafetida is used as a substitute for onion or garlic because some religions don't use onion or garlic; they associate it with meat,” said Ammini, a vegetarian.

Whether you are boiling, simmering or pan-frying vegetables, Ammini warns, “Don't over spice. You want the taste of the vegetable to come through. Spices should enhance the taste.”

While spices add flair to your fare, they also add medicinal value to your meal. According to Ammini in *Grains, Greens, and Grated Coconuts*, coriander aids in the body's defense against allergies. Chili peppers are the ultimate

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decongestant, and they also lower LDL cholesterol, which is associated with high blood pressure and heart disease. Sesame seeds contain three times more calcium than a comparable measure of milk. And fenugreek is a spice high in protein. Fenugreek is used to treat bronchitis, diabetes, and ulcers, and it promotes lactation in nursing mothers.

Fenugreek, along with asafetida, are two spices you may not find in a regular supermarket. Ammini recommends shopping at Bhatia Mart, an Indian grocery store on Coit Road between Park and Parker roads. She also likes to shop at Central Market and Whole Foods.

Ammini's appreciation for vegetarian cuisine was awakened when she migrated to the United States in the '70s. "We were in Rhode Island for the first three or four years and there was nothing available. I still remember landing in Boston. It was November 1 in the winter, and all you could see were gray trees without leaves. I wrote back to my mom, 'There is nothing green here!'" she laughed.

Ammini grew up in Chittur, a town tucked away in the lush, green Sahyaadri mountains. She was born into a Nayer joint family; the household consisted of 21 family members, two cooks, and several servants. Kerala then was divided into three major kingdoms, and Ammini's grandfather and father-in-law were members of the Kochi royalty. Because of this heritage, she had personal access to the authentic vegetarian recipes of both the royalty and the Nayars. Ammini, however, said she is not royalty. "We trace lineage through the mother. So even though my father's father was from the royal family, my father was not and I am not."

About 15 years ago, Ammini moved to Dallas and called Texas a "welcome change." She received her MBA from Southern Methodist University, and now she lives in Plano with her husband.

As a member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP), Ammini is on the Food History committee where she and IACP members from around the world discuss the history of food from different cultures. Ammini writes about India's cooking and dining customs in her book.

Eating from a banana leaf with your right hand is the traditional way of eating Indian cuisine. Said Ammini, "If you're eating with a fork, you don't know if the food is hot or cold. But when you touch it and feel its texture, you get all the senses [working]." Traditionally, the left hand is considered unclean.

Another custom is not to offer food that has already been served to you. And, the cook does not test taste anything he or she prepares. "Some of these old traditions are so firmly engraved in my mind," said Ammini, "that even after 30 years in the United States, I still hesitate to taste anything I prepare before serving my guests or family."

When she cooks for her family Ammini said even as a vegetarian, she cooks beef. "I raised two boys here and you can't raise a boy in Texas without giving him beef," she laughed. "It's the best quality of beef you can get!"

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"Back home, we are taught to cultivate a sense of smell and color, and we try to accomplish perfection in cooking through exploration. Almost every ingredient is measured only by hand – a handful, a little, a pinch, and so on. Cooking is an expression of the cook's personal tastes and preferences. The joy of it is in experimenting. The delight in cooking is not necessarily derived from the end product alone, but from the endless possibilities available for flavoring a dish. I urge you to use these recipes for ideas and suggestions. Improvise but never let a cookbook order you around."

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