Indian cuisine is the most confusing to people, which is why so many people want to try it, but they don’t have any idea what’s what. Well, this newsletter is going to clear up any confusion. Keep it on your phone so you can refer to it when you go into an Indian restaurant!

The first time you ate Chinese food, you didn’t really have an idea what chow mein was, did you? With some help from the waitstaff or a friend, you gave it a shot and now Chinese food is super easy to understand.

Let’s start with understanding the country of India.

India is a huge country and after eating at various Indian restaurants and with the help of this newsletter, you’ll soon be able to discern between the foods in Delhi, Rajasthan, the north near the Himalayas and Mumbai, the food capital of the country. For example, many people don’t know the reason that southern Indian food is generally less spicy than in the north is because the weather is hotter in the south than in the north, so they need to have some spice to heat up their bodies.

Indian street food is fantastic, but because a lot of people don’t know how to determine which stalls are safe, I’m going to go into details with you about that when you call to book a trip to India. This newsletter instead will be about Indian food in a restaurant.

First things first:

Just because it has “curry” in the menu name, that doesn’t mean it will have curry the spice in it. Curry is basically the name for “stew.”

I apologize if I offend any Indians reading this, but personally, I find traditional Indian foods to be unattractive. I’ve had fancy Indian food, and that’s set up beautifully on the plate. And it tastes good. But again, this newsletter is about eating Indian food in your local Indian restaurant. Don’t be put off when you see that some of it looks like baby food. It is one of my favorite ethnic foods, and I don’t care what it looks like.

There are about a million ways to prepare lentils. Ok, maybe not a million, but out of all the Indian lentils I’ve had, no two have been the same. Even from the same restaurant the second day. When you order lentils, it will take a while because it’s never just sitting in a pot waiting to be dished out. The cook will be preparing the final stages of lentils when it’s ordered, so it will take a while to get to the table. But it’s always worth the wait.

Lentil soup, dal soup or mulligatawny are all very similar to each other. Sometimes, there are carrots in mulligatawny, but in all 3 of these soups, lentils will be the main ingredient. They may be with black or green lentils.

The generic Indian word for spices is masala. If you see masala listed in the name for a dish, it means nothing different, because all Indian meals have spices. I remember once asking a cook what was the spice in this one dish. He said, “Masala”. I said, “yes, but what kind?” He looked confused and said, “Masala!” Ok, I get it. You don’t want to share the recipe.

Now there is a seasoning called garam masala is a mixture of various spices. Garam means “hot”, but it’s not necessarily spicy. The name merely refers to the warm flavors of its ingredients. Garam masala has a mixture of cumin, coriander, cardamom, black pepper, cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.

Indian curry is different from Thai curry, but both are flavorful. Indian curry has a flavor explosion in your mouth of red chilies, coriander, garlic, cumin, and salt. And more.

Turmeric is used in Indian food a lot and it is what makes the food yellowish in color. It’s simultaneously bland and earthy-sweet. This is an extremely healthy spice for ridding yourself of inflammation.

Indian food can be soft, subtle and have flavor but no heat (spice). Or it can be something that burns going in and coming out! Tell your server what level you want and of course, it’s better to have less spice than more and you will still have a flavorful meal.

There are over 30 types of bread. Even naan, the bread that looks like pizza crust, can come plain, with butter, garlic, pineapple, onion, and more. The two most common types of bread are naan and roti. Roti is unleavened flatbread and denser than its cousin, naan. It’s cooked on a griddle, and naan is baked in a tandoor (oven) and softer in texture.

I’ve tried to make roti before, in an Indian home on an authentic griddle, but I thought the Indian woman helping me was going to cry. It’s a lot harder to cook than a pancake!

Almost all Indian food will come with long grain basmati rice, which is used to temper the heat in your dish.

Biryani is an excellent dish for those who want to tread lightly in their experiences with Indian food. It isn’t overwhelmingly strong, but there are some flavors for sure. The main ingredient in biryani is rice. You can get it vegetarian, with chicken and sometimes other meats. Plus, there are the seasonings that go in it….and YUM!!! You do have to ask if the chicken is boneless because while most of the time it is, sometimes it’s not and that’s a pain.

I could write for pages and pages about the chicken choices. But first, I want to talk about butter chicken. If you see this on a menu, know that there’s no logical reason why it’s called butter chicken. You’d imagine it’d be soaking in a butter sauce, but it’s made with heavy cream, yogurt, and a tomato base. If you want to show off to your friends why it’s called butter chicken, you can share that it originated in in Punjab (a northwestern state in India) where they added butter to it, but otherwise, it’s not going to be high in butter.

Tandoori chicken is always prepared in a tandoori oven. It also comes with BONES.

Chicken tikka NEVER has bones. The difference between that and chicken tikka masala is the latter has tomato gravy. Normally, chicken tikka is an appetizer, but it’s also large enough to be eaten as a meal and as it’s marinated in yogurt and spices and then grilled or baked, it’s also pretty low in calories.

Chicken curry is a popular dish among people just starting out eating Indian food. The main ingredients are chicken, onions, ginger, chili peppers and other spices.

If you see “cottage cheese” on a menu, don’t think of it as westernized cottage cheese. It’s really got a solid consistency. It’s called paneer. Personally, I don’t think it has much flavor by itself. But it’s pretty tasty when it’s mixed with other things or fried by itself. And if you are ever in India, you have to go to McDonald’s and try the McPaneer. It’s like a grilled cheese sandwich, made with the paneer.

If you’re a vegetarian, you’ll be in (excuse the pun) Hog Heaven. There are a lot of vegetarians in India, and the food reflects this.

My all-time favorite dish is murgh saag. Murgh is the Hindi word for chicken and saag means spinach. Talk about looking like baby food! But it’s very delicious, with creamy spinach and chicken chunks, and just the right amount of flavors.

Desserts in India are more on the non-chocolate side. Gulab juman may be described as cheese balls. Please! They are made with paneer, but the sweetest fried balls in a warm syrup and rose water, and after ½ of a small ball, your mouth will start to ping from the sweetness.

Gajar ka halwa is a carrot dessert. If it’s made from scratch, you need to give the cook a big hug because it takes all day long to make this dessert. It, too, is very sweet and doesn’t taste at all like carrots.

Pistachio ice cream is very common in India, more than chocolate or vanilla.

The most popular and best-tasting fruit, in my opinion, is a mango. Western mangos should be ashamed to call themselves a mango!

Also, you need to try a lassi. It’s a yogurt-based drink and you can get it sweet or salty or a mix.

India has 1,442,000,000 people. That’s a lot of people, and a lot of food is going to come along with that. I can’t possibly mention all the foods, not even if I concentrated on only one region. Please, give me a call and we can discuss a food tour or at least where the safe and best places are in India. And if you’re local, call me and let’s have lunch!