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MASALA CHICKEN WINGS

SERVES 6 TO 8

I really love chicken wings and could have easily put a wing recipe in every chapter of this book. But in narrowing down our list, this one, based on tandoori chicken and full of cumin, coriander, and ginger in a yogurt marinade, came out as the winner. Yogurt, and other creamy, fatty spreads like butter, sour cream, and mayonnaise, make excellent conveyors of flavor. Certain flavor compounds in spices are fat-soluble and others are water-soluble. Because a rich, full-fat yogurt contains both, it does double duty, carrying the full range of the spices' flavors. As a bonus, yogurt has lactic acid, which helps to tenderize proteins as they marinate.

Tandoori chicken is technically named for the oven used to cook it—a cylindrical clay oven that looks like a barrel, with the heat source at the bottom. But a grill works well in lieu of a tandoor, and it's really that combination of tangy yogurt, spices, and aromatics that define these wings for me. Cumin and coriander, in the presence of lime juice, ginger, and fresh herbs, triggers an acknowledgment in my brain that I'm enjoying food inspired by India. Raita, a mixture of yogurt, cucumber, and herbs, acts as the cooling dipping sauce that every wing recipe needs.

FOR THE WINGS

1 cup plain yogurt
½ cup Auntie's Masala (*see recipe below*)
1 teaspoon ground coriander
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 teaspoon paprika
1¼ to 2 teaspoons kosher salt 3 pounds chicken wings

FOR THE RAITA

2 cups plain yogurt
2 tablespoons thinly sliced fresh mint
2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
1 large English cucumber, halved lengthwise and seeded
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

TO SERVE

½ pound mild green peppers (such as Anaheim or shishito)
Cilantro, for garnish

1. **Prepare the wings:** In a resealable plastic bag, combine the yogurt, masala, coriander, cumin, cayenne, paprika, and salt. Seal the bag and shake/squeeze until everything is nicely combined. Add the chicken wings, seal, and shake again to coat thoroughly. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours and up to 10.

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2. **Make the raita:** In a medium bowl, whisk together the yogurt, mint, cilantro, and lime juice. Using the large holes of a box grater, grate the cucumber halves. Place the grated cucumber in the center of a clean kitchen towel, bring the corners together, and twist to wring out the excess liquid. Mix the cucumber into the yogurt mixture. Season to taste with salt and pepper, cover, and refrigerate until ready to use.
3. Prepare a very hot grill, creating zones for direct and indirect heat. If you're using charcoal, you can do this by banking all the coals to one side. On a gas grill, use the burners on only one side, at full blast. Pull the chicken wings out of the marinade, letting the excess drip off. Place the wings over direct heat on the grates and grill, turning occasionally, until they are charred on all sides, about 8 minutes. Move the wings to the indirect heat zone and grill until cooked through, about 15 minutes. Meanwhile, place the green peppers in the direct heat zone and grill until softened and charred all over.
4. Serve the peppers mixed in with the wings and cilantro on a large platter, with the raita on the side for dipping.

AUNTIE'S MASALA

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

Pretty much everything I know about Indian food and flavors has come from the Patel family of London Sizzler in Houston. The restaurant, which is loosely modeled after the curry houses that you find in London, is named after the sizzle platters that many of their signature dishes are served on. (If you ever get the chance to visit, don't skip the "brownie sizzler" for dessert—an invention of the American-born son of the family, Ajay.)

The matriarch of the family, Sue, goes by "Auntie." She runs the restaurant's kitchen and has a fierce bark (I've watched her chew out many a line cook as devastatingly as any old-school French chef) but zero bite. She is a generous, funny, brilliant person who has patiently taught me many things in the kitchen.

One such lesson was on the subject of masala. Before working in the kitchen with Auntie, I'd always thought of "masala" as garam masala—a dry spice blend. But for Auntie, masala can resemble a Spanish sofrito—a mixture of finely diced aromatics that serve as a seasoning base to pretty much anything you can think of. Swap out garlic, onion, and tomatoes (a typical sofrito base) for garlic, ginger, chiles, and cilantro, and you've got yourself Auntie's masala.

The ratio of these ingredients varies from chef to chef—masala is a deeply personal thing. Tinker with your version until you get the heat and spice where you like it, then keep some in your fridge to spoon into soups, stews, or braises for extra-rich flavor.

- 15 garlic cloves
- 3 Thai chiles, stemmed
- 1 bunch cilantro (both stems and leaves)
- 2 tablespoons thinly sliced fresh ginger (about 1 ounce)
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- ½ to 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Combine all the ingredients in a food processor and process until smooth. The masala will keep in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

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