

Chicken Biryani

Proper Biryanis do not have hot spice in them. Why, then, do most of the recipes out there in Internet-land toss in chillis of one colour or another?

Madhur Jaffrey is usually a reliable source of recipes which approach genuine. This is one from her that I tried and enjoyed. A relatively involved process using a daunting list of ingredients but worth the effort.

(Timings do not include the marinading.)

Planning

serves:	6
prep time:	30 mins
cooking time:	2 hrs

Ingredients

6 medium onions, peeled
4 garlic cloves, peeled & coarsely chopped
2 inch piece ginger, peeled & chopped
6 whole cloves
20 whole black peppercorns
seeds from 8 whole green cardamom pods
¼ tsp ground cinnamon
1 tsp ground coriander
1 tsp ground cumin
1 tsp poppy seeds
¼ tsp mace, ground
3 tbs lemon juice
8 oz plain yogurt
2 fresh bay leaves
4 large black cardamoms
2 x 1¼-ish kg chickens, breasts and legs of
1 tbs saffron strands,
2 tbs milk
500g Basmati rice
2 tbs golden raisins (optional)
3 tbs flaked almonds (optional)
2 eggs (optional)
Salt & pepper

Method

First make the marinade for the chicken. Peel and coarsely chop 3 of the onions. Place chopped onion, garlic, and ginger in an electric blender, along with the cloves, peppercorns, the seeds only from the 8 cardamoms, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, poppy seeds, mace, 1 1/2 teaspoons salt, and the lemon juice. Blend all of these at high speed until you have a smooth paste. Place this paste in a large bowl. Add the yoghurt and mix well.

Now for the remaining onions. Peel the remaining onions three and halve them. Slice each half onion finely. In a heavy-bottomed skillet, heat the oil over a medium flame. Once hot, add the bay leaves and 4 black cardamoms, frying these for about 10 to 15 seconds. Now put in the half onion rings and fry them, stirring, until they get brown and crisp (but not burned). Remove them carefully with a slotted spoon, squeezing out as much of the oil as possible. Reserve all the onion-flavoured oil, the black cardamoms, and the bay leaves; you will need them later. Mix two-thirds of the fried onions into the marinade paste. Place the rest of the onions on a paper towel to drain and set aside for garnishing the final dish.

The chicken. Remove the skin from the chicken legs and breasts. Madhur leaves the bone in the legs and divides them into thighs and drumsticks; I cut the meat off so my guests weren't messing with bones. You go whichever way you prefer. Quarter the breasts. Pierce the chicken pieces with a fork and place in the bowl with the marinade paste. Mix well. Cover the bowl with cling film and refrigerate for at least 2 hours turning occasionally. (I left mine for four hours.)

Begin cooking. Remove the bowl from the refrigerator and place all its contents into a large heavy-bottomed pot. Bring slowly to a simmer, cover, lower heat, and cook gently for 15 minutes. Remove only the chicken pieces, place them in a large casserole dish (you need room for all the chicken topped with all the rice), and cover. Set aside. On a medium flame, reduce the marinade paste, stirring frequently, until you have a reasonably thick, stiff paste left. Spoon the paste over the chicken. Cover again.

Chicken Biryani

Preheat oven to 150°C/gas 2.

The rice. Soak the saffron in 2 tablespoons hot (not boiling) milk. Bring to the boil a good sized pan almost filled with water. Add three teaspoons of salt then add the rice. Bring it back to the boil again and cook for 5 minutes, timing very carefully (the rice must not cook through).

Drain the rice in a colander, then place it on top of the chicken in the casserole. Streak the rice with the saffron milk. Sprinkle the reserved onion-flavoured oil over the rice, together with the reserved black cardamoms, and bay leaves. Cover the casserole dish with aluminium foil cut 2 inches wider than the rim of the dish. Now put the lid on and use the protruding foil edges to seal the dish as best you can by crinkling it and pushing it against the sides. Bake 1 hour.

Preparing the garnishes. (Use as many of these as you wish in addition to the fried onions which are essential.) If you wish to use raisins, fry them in a tablespoon of the onion-flavoured oil just after you have fried the onions. Hard boil two eggs, peel and quarter them. Lightly toast three tablespoons flaked, blanched almonds in a dry frying pan over moderate heat.

Serving. Lift the cover off your casserole dish and spoon the rice and chicken out onto a large platter. Sprinkle over the fried onions together with the raisins and almonds, if you are using them. Nestle the quartered eggs around the side of the mound and serve hot.

I served this accompanied by blanched cauliflour, browned together with some more fried, finely sliced onions - sort of a cauliflour bhaji.