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INTRODUCTION

BY TOM PARKER BOWLES

It started with a drop, beguilingly red and devilishly scented, poured from a small, elegant bottle onto the back of my hand.

'Go on, try it,' my sister implored, her eyes glittering with glee. 'All the grown ups drink the stuff. How dangerous can it be?' So I closed my eyes tight, and plunged my tongue into the unknown. The first taste was sharp but not unpleasant, like the vinegar that we splashed on our chips. I smiled, and sighed with relief. Much ado about nothing. And then it hit, a fierce, brutally burning sensation that started in my mouth before spreading, like a raging forest fire, across my lips and down into my throat.

My eyes brimmed with tears. I tried to scream but to no avail. I'd never felt pain like this. It was worse than stinging nettles and grazed knees and the slap of a cold football on rain-drenched flesh. I fell to the floor, clutching my belly, convinced that this damned liquid was noxious poison, the killer of small boys.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the agony abated. I opened my eyes and looked about. The light seemed brighter, every colour more vivid. Sure, my tongue still throbbed and my lips smarted. But my whole body was enveloped in a warm glow. My sister was sheet-white and trembling, convinced she was the architect of her brother's demise. I, though, was in love. One drop of Tabasco sauce, and I've never looked back since.

Soon, I was splashing this beautiful Louisiana hot sauce over everything that was put before me, from toast and egg to steak and shepherd's pie. And this was just the start: Tabasco was the gateway drug of an addiction that would take over my life. Curries followed, each more potent than the next, madras first, then the great leap to vindaloo. I began to cook with chillies, moving quickly from dull long green things to the fruity insanity of the Scotch bonnet. Before long, I was a subscriber to Chile Pepper magazine, scouring the streets for my next spicy hit.

Visits to Thailand followed, som toms with enough bird's-eye punch to floor a rampaging bull elephant, let alone a rather pasty Brit. Tom yam gungs, fragrant with heat and fish sauce, nam phrik pla flowing like monsoon-bloated rivers. I just couldn't get enough: it was pain, sure, but exquisite pleasure too. There were dhals eaten in India at roadside shops, little more than ten pence a portion, but thick with great lengths of

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dried Kashmiri chilli. And Indonesian sambals, in every hue and pong.

I visited hot-sauce shows in Albuquerque, New Mexico: entire conference centres devoted to fiery foods. And fell in love with the chile con carne of Texas, plus the entire cuisine of Mexico, from birrias and ceviches to tortillas and tostadas. I huffed and puffed my way through incendiary, but impossibly crisp, hot chicken at Prince's in Nashville, Tennessee, breakfast burritos smothered with green chile in Santa Fe, New Mexico. And bought Caribbean hot sauces bottled in old Lucozade bottles from roadside stalls in Antigua. Then there's kimchi in Korea, harissa-spiked couscous, Sichuan chilli hotpots and everything in between.

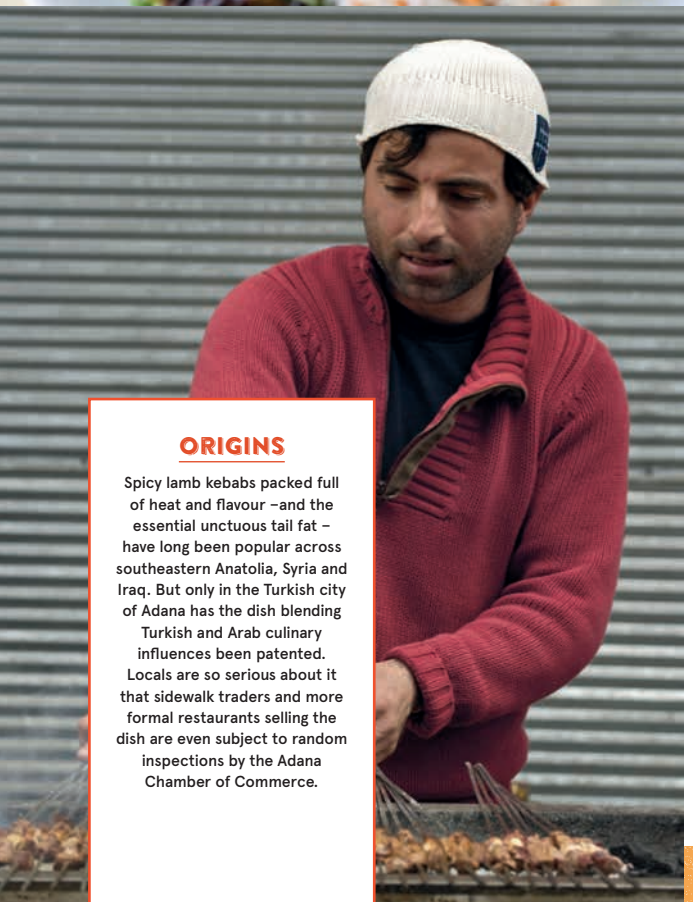
I love the chilli more than any other fruit, pretty much more than any ingredient there is. It's not all about heat, rather, huge complexities of flavour and texture and joy. The smoky heft of a chipotle chilli, the verdant tang of a fresh jalapeno. But the reason why the chilli pepper is so damned addictive lies in its active ingredient, capsaicin, a nasty little irritant alkaloid. The hotter the chilli, the more of this chemical it contains, hitting the taste buds hard, sending them reeling in pain. So the body reacts, and sends in the Special Forces (better known as endorphins). That's why the agony is followed by that blissful state of dreamy joy. As these endorphins flood the system, putting out the fires, we experience a truly natural 'high'.

But this book is not about chillies alone, rather 'spicy' food in its every guise. The pungent, nose-clearing honk of wasabi, mustard and horseradish; pepper's pep (black, white, pink and Sichuan) and paprika's punch; the warming allure of cinnamon and mace, the bracing crunch of piccalilli. These are dishes to make the taste buds punch the air with elation, flavours that kickstart the palate and infuse every sense with joy.

As you'd expect, there are a huge number of dishes from Thailand, India and Mexico, the three great chilli cuisines, alongside Sichuan Chinese and Korean too. But we also feast upon herrings from Norway,

Turkish kebabs, Czech sausages and African chicken. Trindadian souse sits alongside Hungarian goulash, katsu curry shares space with Spanish grilled peppers. This book is a celebration of spiciness in every form: ingredients that turn the bland to the brilliant, the dreary into the divine.

And, like all food, it's the finest way to experience any foreign culture. Forget the funereal silence and air-conditioned gloom of those insipid 'international' restaurants, with their second-rate approximations of dreary Western fare. This is real food, pulsing with vibrancy and delight, bringing a truly happy tear to one's eye. You need nothing more than a healthy appetite, an open mind and a handful of the local currency. Spice. One word, a million different thrills.



SERVES 4–6

TURKEY

ADANA KEBAB

Smoky, spicy and supremely satisfying, it's worth a special trip to the somewhat off-the-beaten-track city of Adana just to taste Turkey's fieriest lamb kebab on its home turf.

YOU'LL NEED

500g (1lb) ground lamb
500g (1lb) ground veal
1 red pepper, seeded and chopped
1 yellow onion, peeled and chopped
2 cloves of garlic, peeled and crushed
2 tsp red chilli flakes
2 tsp ground coriander
2 tsp ground cumin
2 tsp black pepper
3 tsp salt
2 red onions, peeled
1 tsp sumac
2 tsp lemon juice
1 cup (250mL) yoghurt
8 pieces of pita bread
4 tsp olive oil
Handful of parsley leaves

METHOD

1 Mix the lamb and veal together in a large bowl, then stir in the red pepper, yellow onion and one clove of garlic.

2 Stir in the chilli flakes, coriander, cumin, pepper and two teaspoons of the salt, then cover and leave in the refrigerator, ideally overnight, but at least for a few hours.

3 Slice the red onions thinly, mix in the sumac and half the lemon juice; refrigerate overnight.

4 Mix the yoghurt with the remaining lemon juice, garlic and a teaspoon of salt, to create a sauce.

5 When it's time to cook, shape the meat mixture into cylinders around kebab skewers. Your cylinders should measure about 15cm x 6cm (6in x 2in).

6 Place on a hot grill and cook for 3–4 minutes on each side. When the kebabs are ready, they should be slightly spongy to the touch.

7 Baste the pita bread with olive oil and place on the grill to warm through.

8 Place the kebab in the warm pita bread, add the sliced onions with sumac to the parsley, and garnish with the yoghurt sauce. If you like, serve with chargrilled tomatoes and red peppers.

TASTING NOTES

All your senses are aroused as you wend through the busy labyrinth of Adana's old town to dine on the city's signature dish. The call to prayer drifts from mosques and fragrant aromas waft from simple eateries concealed deep within the city's bazaar. Take a window seat with views of the compelling chaos outside and request *bir porsiyon* (one portion). Adana kebab is not a dish to be rushed and don't go making plans for dinner. Tear off some gossamer-thin bread, place some of the smoky, chargrilled lamb inside, and then stuff full of the zesty salad of parsley, onion and sumac. Repeat leisurely until you're satisfied; request a side order of grilled red peppers for an additional fiery hit. ● *by Brett Atkinson*

ORIGINS

Spicy lamb kebabs packed full of heat and flavour –and the essential unctuous tail fat – have long been popular across southeastern Anatolia, Syria and Iraq. But only in the Turkish city of Adana has the dish blending Turkish and Arab culinary influences been patented. Locals are so serious about it that sidewalk traders and more formal restaurants selling the dish are even subject to random inspections by the Adana Chamber of Commerce.

MAKES 600ML

ENGLAND

MUSTARD

Medicine to the Greeks, a spread to the Romans, beloved by Gallic monks – mustard's been popular for millennia, across continents. But it's in England that it's at its fiery best.

YOU'LL NEED

125g (4½oz) brown mustard seeds
30g (1oz) yellow mustard seeds
1 cup (275mL) white-wine vinegar
1 cup (250mL) beer
125g (4½oz) mustard powder
1 cup (250mL) cold water
1 tsp sugar
1 tsp salt

METHOD

1 Combine the mustard seeds, vinegar and beer in a bowl. Cover and leave for 48 hours. It does not need to be refrigerated.

2 Transfer the mix to a food processor; add the remaining ingredients.

3 Process until smooth (about 5 minutes).

4 Decant into a glass jar; seal and refrigerate.

5 Allow the flavours to develop for 3-4 weeks.

TIP *You can buy it in a jar, but making your own mustard means you can control its kick. Plus, mix in a few extras to give your mustard extra punch – the addition of beer seems especially England-appropriate...*

TASTING NOTES

English mustard has a colour akin to the contents of a newborn's nappy. But get over that, this stuff is a taste sensation. Picture the scene: you've rocked up for lunch at a traditional boozer – one that hasn't gone gastro – and a limp ham sandwich has appeared. Your stomach starts to sink, but then... stuffed amid the sticky sachets you spot it: Colman's English Mustard. A quick squeeze and your snack's transformed. Your nose starts to burn, your eyes to glisten, your taste buds declare 'thank you!' Mustard is the soul-mate of quality produce and the elevator of the mediocre. For the most satisfying combo, eat it with pork pies or cold cuts. Just remember, it's hot! ● *by Sarah Baxter*

ORIGINS

Northern-hemispherians have used mustard for 2000 years – adding a palate-punch before Eastern spices arrived. The Romans made it a condiment, grinding seeds with young wine ('*must*') took it to France and, in 1777 created mild Dijon mustard. Jeremiah Colman, a miller from Norwich, restored mustard's fire – in 1814 he devised a way to powder the seeds without evaporating their heat-giving oils. He was appointed mustard-maker to Queen Victoria.

ORIGINS

Said to be the most ancient among Thai dishes, this paste was, and still is, made with the pestle and mortar. Early versions mixed peppercorns with fermented soy beans and charred shallots, providing heat and salt, alongside a souring agent, such as lime juice or fresh tamarind. As the Thais moved south, they discovered and added coconuts, palm sugar and fermented fish. And as chillies arrived in the 16th century, they too were thrown in.

TASTING NOTES

The classic *nam phrik gapi* is both pungent and delicate, a wonderful mix of raw garlic, shrimp paste, palm sugar, fish sauce, lime juice… and a mind-blowing quantity of bird's-eye chillies. The first taste is deep, before the tiny fruits kick in and get the heart beating faster. But as in all Thai food, balance – between the salty, sweet, sour and hot – is everything. A bitter version is made with pea eggplants, while in the south it's made with coconut. Some have pork as a main ingredient, others green pepper, tamarind, minced prawns and salted duck egg. But remember… *nam phrik* is never, ever eaten alone. ● *by Tom Parker Bowles*

SERVES 8

THAILAND

NAM PHRIK

In Thailand, you're never more than a few feet from *nam phrik*, a pungent, spicy shrimp-and-chilli relish that's eaten alongside everything from omelettes to fish cakes, deep-fried prawns and pork.

NAM PHRIK GUNG

YOU'LL NEED

4 cloves of garlic, peeled
Pinch of salt
2 coriander roots
4 shallots, grilled or roasted
8 bird's eye chillies
½ tsp shrimp paste
Some chicken stock
1–2 tbs palm sugar
½ tbs lime juice
Dash of fish sauce
2 tbs pea eggplants
Handful of small prawns

METHOD

1 Grind the garlic, salt and coriander roots into a paste with a mortar and pestle.

2 Peel the grilled (or roasted) shallots and add them, with the chillies and shrimp paste. Pound the mixture, adding stock to keep it moist.

3 Mix in the palm sugar, lime juice and fish sauce to taste.

4 Finally, add the pea eggplants and prawns and crush with the pestle so both are bruised. This coarse, hot, salty condiment can be served with meat or raw/blanched vegetables.

TIP *There are dozens of varieties of nam phrik in Thailand. This one, adapted from the master Thai chef David Thompson, of Nahm restaurant in Bangkok, features pea eggplants and prawns.*