

Photographs PHILIP HOLLIS

# A CHRISTMAS-FREE ZONE

Sick of turkey already? Working all hours and dreading having to prepare festive menus?

**Karyn Miller** cooks up speedy and tantalising alternatives with the country's top chefs

**C**URRY IS one of the few dishes that tastes better when it has been re-heated. The longer it is kept, the more improved is the curry's flavour. Cook it the day before your dinner, leave it overnight and heat it up again when it is required. "Once Indian food has been 'prepped'", explains Namita Panjabi, "nothing will take longer than 20 minutes."

Namita Panjabi is an authority on Indian cookery: she has travelled extensively in India, collecting recipes and regional delicacies for her restaurants in London. Namita's latest venture, Masala Zone in Soho, has been lauded for its Bombay street-style food. Her first restaurant, Chutney Mary, boasts five regional specialist chefs and recipes for dishes that have graced the banquet tables of maharajas.

In Namita's large kitchen at her Marylebone home, handsome trinkets from India sit beside a multitude of electronic gadgets. A hand-blender, she says, is essential for time-starved cooks. No wooden spice racks here; Namita prefers stainless steel spice bowls, available in Divertimenti and other kitchenware shops.

The dinner party menu that Namita has devised for time-starved *Business & Pleasure* readers is simple and speedy – though you will need to set aside an hour the evening before for preparations. Once ingredients are measured, mixed together and stored in the fridge, you can throw them on the stove as soon as you get back from work and present a splendid meal minutes later.

## STARTER: CALAMARI CHILLI FRY

### INGREDIENTS

300g baby calamari, cleaned and sliced into rings  
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped (or 4 level teaspoons of ready-crushed garlic, which is quite adequate)  
1/2" length of ginger, cut into juliennes  
2-3 green chillis, finely chopped  
20-30 curry leaves  
1/2 teaspoon turmeric salt  
2-3 tablespoons vegetable oil  
1 onion, cut into long slices  
1/2 lime or lemon, juiced.

### METHOD

1. Leave the calamari to marinate for at least 25 minutes in a mixture of all the ingredients except the oil, onions and lemon juice.
2. Heat the oil in a wok, add the onions and sauté them until they are transparent but not limp.
3. Throw in the calamari and stir-fry for 2-3 minutes. Add salt to taste.
4. Just before serving, sprinkle some lemon juice over the top.

A signature dish at Chutney Mary, calamari chilli fry originates from Kerala in southwest India. It's very spicy, so the chillis should be

added carefully, according to taste. Namita prepares the calamari herself, but those unaccustomed to taking sad-eyed, squishy squid to pieces should leave it to the fishmonger – it's a lengthy, messy task. A cutting and cleaning service is also available at the fish counters of larger supermarkets.

Calamari will keep for 24 hours and still be in perfectly acceptable condition, so if possible add the spices the evening before the dinner and store the mixture in the fridge. Even though it takes only a few minutes to throw everything into the bowl, this is the most time-consuming part of the recipe. From fridge to plate takes just a few minutes' stir-frying.

"Be careful when frying the calamari," warns Namita. "A low heat lets out all the juices. Cook over a high heat to sear the calamari and keep those juices in. Add the salt last, or the calamari will 'ooze'. Set the kitchen timer, too, as over-cooked calamari tastes like rubber. The dish should be removed from the heat before four minutes are up."

At Chutney Mary the dish is served on a circle of dark green banana leaf, available from Malaysian food shops such as the Tawana Oriental Supermarket on Chepstow Road in Notting Hill (020 7221 6316). But it's perfectly fine without: the riot of colours, of oranges, greens and yellows, and the delicious smell wafting across the kitchen of seafood mingled with ginger, garlic, turmeric and chilli, require little embellishment.

## MAIN COURSE: GRILLED SPICED LAMB CHOPS

### INGREDIENTS

4 large lamb loin chops  
Marinade:  
3/4 cup of Greek yoghurt  
2 tablespoons of balsamic vinegar  
1 level teaspoon of garam masala  
1 teaspoon of red chilli powder, or 2 finely chopped green chillis  
4-5 teaspoons of ginger purée  
1 tablespoon of lemon juice  
1 teaspoon of paprika  
1 tablespoon of olive oil  
3/4 teaspoon of salt  
3/4 teaspoon of garlic purée

### METHOD

1. Mix all the marinade ingredients together.
2. Paste the loin chops with the mixture and leave to marinate 8-12 hours, or overnight.
3. Grill the chops for 5 minutes on each side.

"Welsh lamb is very good at the moment," says Namita. "Use any cut. These are loin chops, but I'm fond of shoulder chops, too."

Once again a lengthy marinade is required: the ingredients should be mixed together on



**Overnight sensation:** if you do the bulk of the work the previous evening, you can assemble this three-course Indian feast in half an hour



the morning of the dinner or, if possible, the night before. The marinade does not take long to prepare, however, because the ingredients are all measured in spoons and cups.

I ask Namita about the balsamic vinegar and olive oil – they aren't traditional Indian ingredients, surely? "In India they use lemons," she confesses. "But I like the vinegar and oil – they are light and healthy and taste good."

Namita uses her hands to coat the chops with marinade. She scoops handfuls of spicy white mixture out of the bowl and pastes all four chops liberally, taking only seconds.

While the chops are grilling, we whip up a side dish of new potatoes and young spinach.

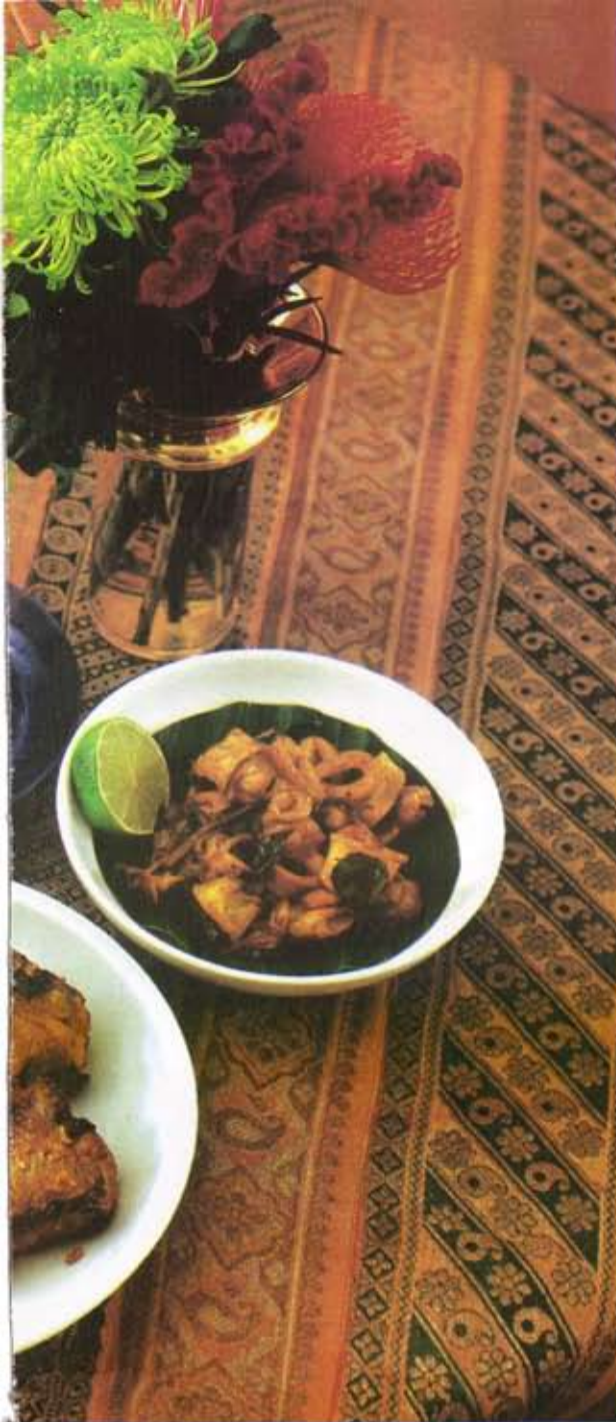
## NEW POTATOES AND YOUNG SPINACH LEAVES

### INGREDIENTS

16-20 small new potatoes  
4 large handfuls of young spinach leaves  
1 tablespoon of olive oil  
1 teaspoon of mustard seeds  
1 tablespoon of ginger/garlic purée  
2 shallots, sliced into rings  
1/2 teaspoon of turmeric  
1 teaspoon of red chilli powder  
A dozen cherry tomatoes

### METHOD

1. Peel and boil the potatoes. Drain.
2. Heat the oil in a wok and add mustard seeds. Cook for about 40 seconds, until they splutter.
3. Add the ginger/garlic purée; sauté 2 minutes.
4. Add the shallots, potatoes, turmeric and



**Hands on:**  
Namita Panjabi directs Karyn Miller in her kitchen (above) and coats lamb chops in a spicy yoghurt marinade (left)

2 cups of blackberries, raspberries and currants, or other berry fruits  
A little milk, heated

#### METHOD

1. Hang the yoghurt in a muslin cloth over the sink for 8-9 hours, or overnight. After this it can be kept in the fridge until the evening.
2. Infuse the saffron in 1 tablespoon of hot milk for 10 minutes.
3. Mix the saffron mixture and the sugar into the yoghurt to create the srikhand. Serve with the berries piled on top.

Srikhand (pronounced 'Shree-karnd') is yoghurt flavoured with saffron, a simple but sumptuous dessert. In Bombay and Gujerat it is reserved for celebrations and eaten during Diwali, the Hindu religious festival held over the New Year.

Muslin is available from larger kitchen shops such as Habitat. At this time of year you will find it wrapped around Christmas puddings – even ready-steamed puddings come packaged in the stuff these days. If you don't have any muslin, use a cotton handkerchief instead.

Dollop the yoghurt into the cloth, knot the ends together and, with string if necessary, suspend it over the sink before you go to bed. By the next morning the yoghurt should be

chilli powder. Sauté for 3 minutes.  
5. Add the tomatoes and salt, and cook for 2 minutes until the tomatoes soften.  
6. Add the spinach leaves and give the dish one quick toss. Serve.

This recipe isn't as complicated as it looks, if you measure out the ingredients beforehand. Give the potatoes a good scrub and you won't have to peel them.

Set the potatoes to boil at the beginning of your preparation. Once they are cooked, this dish will take only about eight minutes more and will be ready to serve alongside the chops.

Do beware of the flames that will leap from the pan when the tomatoes are added. These will flambé the tomatoes a treat; as I discover, they can flambé your eyebrows a treat too.

#### DESSERT: SRIKHAND WITH FRESH BERRIES

**INGREDIENTS**  
3 cups of Greek yoghurt  
2-3 tablespoons of caster sugar (according to taste)  
A large pinch of saffron

dry and tart to the taste – not like yoghurt at all. If you don't like Greek yoghurt, use a low-fat variety in its place.

When the dish is ready, dollop it into bowls, smooth with a spoon and arrange the fruits on top. Berries are fetching, but any fruits will do – candied fruits are especially pretty.

Namita garnishes the srikhand with a sliver of silver leaf. This is optional, but sheets of silver leaf can be purchased from Indian food shops, such as those on Brick Lane.

#### ESSENTIAL STEP-BY-STEP TIMING GUIDE

- 30 minutes**  
Remove everything from the fridge.  
**Dessert:** warm the milk and infuse it with saffron.  
**Main:** cook the potatoes.  
**25 minutes**  
**Main:** measure out and prepare the ingredients for the side dish. The chops should be ready to go under the grill.  
**20 minutes**  
**Dessert:** mix up the srikhand, spoon into bowls and garnish with berries.  
**15 minutes**  
Lay the table.  
**10 minutes**  
**Starter:** sauté the onions.  
**5 minutes**  
**Starter:** add the calamari and stir-fry. Transfer to plates.  
**0 minutes**  
Mission completed: the stir-fry and the srikhand are both ready to serve. The chops and the potatoes are ready to be cooked between courses. Pour yourself a glass of wine!

#### SHOPPING LIST

All but some of the optional ingredients are available from supermarkets.  
Balsamic vinegar; Banana leaves (optional); Berries; Calamari; Caster sugar; Cherry tomatoes; Curry leaves; Garam masala; Garlic; Garlic purée (optional); Ginger purée (optional); Greek yoghurt; Green chillis; Lemon or lime; Mustard seeds; New potatoes (small); Olive oil; Onions; Paprika; Red chilli powder; Saffron; Shallots; Silver leaf (optional); Stem ginger; Turmeric; Vegetable oil; Young spinach leaves.