

Cooking up mind and body balance

Ayurveda puts the spice back in life — and the kitchen

YOU'RE cooking with massage oils?" a friend quips when I mention I'm off to an ayurvedic-cooking class. Clearly ayurveda is clearly best-known for things other than its cuisine. Native to India, the 5000-year-old tradition is, at heart, a self-care system of preventative medicine that meshes nutrition, meditation, massage, yoga, tailor-made herbal remedies — and the odd tantra and mantra.

Practised by a string of celebs including Madonna, Gwyneth and Demi, ayurveda's no longer just a lifestyle of the rich and famous. With its in-vogue aim of balancing mind and body, it's become Miss Popularity in the Western world this millennium.

"Five years ago, no one could spell or say ayurveda, but they can now," says Auckland ayurvedic practitioner Perry MacDonald. She has that radiant glow (but not in an irritatingly zen way) that most of us crave. Though she's cagey about her age, it's hard to believe she has two grown-up children.

Having turned her lifestyle into a career, Perry holds health consultations and retreats, teaches yoga and meditation, and practises massage through her company Ayurveda Health (www.ayurvedahealth.co.nz). She also runs an ayurvedic-cooking course — three classes held weekly — at her Milford home every couple of months.

As I'm doing the downward dog at her yoga class one Monday, MacDonald mentions her next round of classes, saying they'll help people who struggle with adding taste to their food — especially vegetarian food.

This hits a nerve. Instead of emptying my mind on the mat, I've been pondering what to make for dinner. I've never had much of a cooking mojo. Vegetarian for 18 years, I've never learned how to cook tasty, healthy meat-free meals despite stacks of cookbooks and good intentions. The kindest adjective my partner can come up with for my stir-fries is "pedestrian". I'd say soggy, tasteless, bland.

It turns out MacDonald runs the course for love, not money (\$150 barely covers food costs), because she wants to spread the word about how to use spices, which add taste and aid digestion, in everyday cooking.

Sold. A few weeks later I turn up in her kitchen, with its oven big enough to house Hansel and Gretel and its Buddha statue. I know ayurveda involves diagnosing doshas (physical constitutions/bioenergies), but you can take or leave that side of things.

Five others press the doorbell. Tim, a hairdresser with a booming laugh; his real-estate agent girlfriend Bernadette, whose lightning quips belie her corporate attire; wistful-looking hospice manager Janine; and mother-of-three Sue, whose daughter's health problems spurred the family to cook differently. Then there's project manager Mary, who has IBS, which Perry informs us can be cured by ayurvedic cooking. The jury's out on that, but there's consensus that spices (particularly hing and arjwan) aid digestion and reduce bloating.

Apart from the "place in bowel" directive, the

recipes look pretty straightforward. Don't be daunted, MacDonald tells us, by the long ingredient list: most are just a teaspoon of cumin here, a few arjwan seeds there. First up we're making ghee, which looks much as you'd imagine: like a jar of lard, just yellower. The equivalent of olive oil to Italian cuisine, this clarified butter's the building block of ayurvedic cooking. You simply heat unsalted butter until the milk sinks to the bottom and the water evaporates, leaving a rich, golden oil. "Ghee brings food alive," MacDonald says. "A small amount goes a long way, and like whisky it gets better with age."

We move on to two other ayurvedic-cooking bastions, vegetable subji and dahl, as Tim quips "Hey Dahl, what's for dinner?" and Bernadette rolls her eyes. "If there's nothing else in the house you can make subji," MacDonald says, whipping out "something I prepared earlier", Alison Holst-style. When I ask if it's frozen veg, MacDonald shoots me a look of horror. She doesn't do frozen — or leftovers — and shops fresh every day.

There's a lot of stirring. Ayurvedic cooking is also about bringing awareness and mindfulness to your cooking and eating, says MacDonald, so you're not just slapping it in the pot and shovelling it down while glued to *The Bachelor*. As she relays tidbits about each spice's health-and-medicinal benefits, she reminds me of Ayla, the healer from the *Clan of the Cave Bear* book series — all she needs is a totem and medicine bag.

I haven't looked forward to a meal this much in ages — and not just because aromas are wafting, it's nearing 9pm and my stomach-gurgling has become alarming. Dinner, followed by spiced rice pud, is delicious. I chew slowly, relish the food, enjoy the company.

At class two, we make chutneys — one tomato, one cilantro-coconut — which go nicely with dahl or fish. And who knew my favourite takeaway — palaak paneer — could be so made easily and healthily? (Vegans can substitute tofu for cheese.) Dessert, semolina halva, is substantial enough to double as breakfast.

At the last lesson, Sue informs us that, to her shock, her three fussy-eater kids liked her paneer. There's another surprise in store. We're expecting to make another subji or curry, so we're thrown when MacDonald, who's trying to break down the myth that ayurvedic cooking is always Indian, announces tonight's main is ayurvedic fish 'n' chips.

Baked fish is coated in a spicy paste that's also good for meat and tofu; served with wilted veges, crispy potatoes, and cilantro-coconut chutney; followed by spicy fruit crumble and washed down with a little chai. Because I eat slowly, appreciating each bite, I don't leave the table over-full, but MacDonald insists we leave her with the dishes. She even makes us up a basic spice tin for me.

After stocking up on every imaginable spice from Mahadeo's and buying the requisite mortar and pestle, I try flying solo. I can now turn out a decent dahl, vegetable subji, even palaak paneer. It doesn't taste like MacDonald's cooking — yet — but it's good. And as those mustard seeds pop, for the first time in years I'm having fun in the kitchen.

Mung Dahl

1 cup of split Mung Dahl
3-4 cups of water
1 tsp mustard seeds
1 tsp cumin seeds
4 Tbs ghee
1 pinch of hing (Indian spice, also known as asafoetida)
2 clove of garlic
2 tsp grated ginger
10-12 curry leaves
1/2 tsp turmeric
1 tsp coriander powder
2 tsp cumin powder
1/2 tsp chilli powder (optional)
Salt to taste
Handful of chopped coriander leaves
Lime juice to taste

Rinse the lentils until water runs clear. Mung dahl needs no pre-soaking. Cook dahl on medium heat and skim off any foam that builds at the top. Add cumin, coriander, turmeric, salt, ginger, chilli, to the dahl. Continue boiling on low heat.

Seasoning

Heat ghee in a small saucepan. Add mustard seeds and once they have popped add cumin seeds, a pinch of hing, chopped garlic and curry leaves and fry for a few seconds. Add the seasoning to the boiling dahl.

Boil for a further 3-4 minutes, then garnish with chopped coriander leaves. Add a dash of lime and serve hot with steamed rice or roti.



Perry MacDonald has turned her lifestyle into a career.

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