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Food Memoir - South Indian Biryani

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BIRIYANI RECIPE

South Indian Biriyani



Jerry Johny

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MY MEMORIES OF THE SOUTH INDIAN BIRIYANI

It was a very warm day in my hometown back in India, the city of Alappuzha which is known as Venice of the East. The former Viceroy of India George Curzon gave this city that name for a reason. Almost every road in the city in had a canal that was flowing alongside it, these canals were the primary means of transportation before the roads were in place. I remember getting lost in the city as I would often be confused with which road is which since the canals look almost the same always. It was 12pm and I was headed home on my motorcycle to grab lunch and only god knows how hungry I was because I did not get a chance to have breakfast that morning. I was

certain I would not be able to bare my hunger till I reach my home, so I decided to grab something to eat from nearby. So, I was riding around the roads with my head swiveling left and right every ten to twenty seconds. There was not much to find on the right side of the road as that side had the canal and some smaller tea shops that was built on scaffoldings above water.

At last I found what I was looking for, inside a small room of a very large building was a tiny makeshift restaurant. I stopped my motorcycle and took a seat on one of the only two benches inside the room. The bench was very old I think older than the 75-year-old man serving the food at the restaurant. This was no ordinary restaurant I could say from the start due to the lack of facilities inside. There was one big container that was covered with a lid and sealed tight with dough. To start with there was no kitchen, so either this 75 year old man was a wizard and prepared the food with his magical skills or he prepared the food at his home and would bring the final dish to this restaurant at the time of serving. I choose to go with the hypothesis that made the most sense. This was a unique restaurant experience because I did not have to order anything, there was only one item and one item alone on the menu and that was chicken biriyani.

It was time for the grand revealing, the old man started to break the outer dough seal which had not become fully cooked and solidified. He used his steel cooking utensil and started breaking the seal, slowly but carefully the dough seal came of the container freeing the lid of the container. With the help on one other worker or was it his son I couldn't figure, he opened the large container. Steam that had been trapped in it for a long time rushed out and the aroma quickly filled all around the room and soon my own lungs. I could not resist but to peek inside this container, so I did. I saw many different colors, brown from the fried onion, white from the rice, greens of the coriander leaves and yellow from turmeric or clarified butter I could not make out. The aroma was so much satisfying, I could feel layers of spices in my noses and the smell of caramelized onion was heavenly.

I decided to go back to my seat before somebody occupied it because it was starting to get a little bit busy. I got my serving in a steel plate with a thin layer of plasticky paper on it, and on the paper was the mixture of the aromatic rice and chicken. I figured the paper was used to keep the steel plates as clean as possible so that the person washing the dishes would not have their work cut out for them. I started with a taste of the rice and I could taste spices like peppercorn, bay leaf, cinnamon and clarified butter. The chicken was perfectly cooked and was separated from the bones with little to no effort, yet it was infused with so many flavors. The caramelized onions tasted just as heavenly as they smelled, the chicken had a tangy umami flavor, so I thought it was cooked with tomatoes. I could also taste the citrus flavor from lime juice. By the time I finished my plate the thin paper had served its cause, the steel plate was spot less.

I paid Indian money equivalent to 75 cents for that meal and it was the best 75 cents I have spent in my whole life. I have had many biryanis in my life but this one was hands down my favorite. After several visits to the restaurant I asked the man small questions about the recipe, and he was very open to share it with me. I learned that everyone called him "Ikka", which means big brother in the local tongue and some called him "Rafeeq Ikka". One of the tips I received from him was frying the onions in clarified butter, hearing this I was shocked because I started to wonder how he can sell this meal if he is spending so much on the ingredients. Clarified butter was expensive much than oil. On one occasion I asked him, how you can meet the expenses if you are selling at a very low profit margin and his reply was so honest and true to the heart. His answer was that he doesn't run this business for a profit and breaking even is all he expects from it, his profit is the satisfaction that he finds in the peoples faces after eating his biriyani. The following biriyani was my own take on the biriyani that I ate at this restaurant, my mother used to help me with this recipe when I started to learn cooking. This recipe is usually

connected with family gatherings in south India since usually people make them in large quantities so that a lot people can eat together.

INGREDIENTS

Ingredients to marinate the chicken:

Chicken (cut into large pieces) – 1 Kg

Yogurt – 1 Cup

Ginger garlic paste – 2 tsp.

Garam Masala – 2 tsp.

Chili powder – 1 tsp.

Salt

Ingredients for Biryani:

Onions (thinly chopped) – 7-8

Cashew nuts & raisins (fried in clarified butter) – 10-15

Basmati rice – 500 grams

Oil – 4-5 tbsp.

Turmeric powder – ½ tsp.

Cloves – 6-7

Cinnamon – 2

Cardamoms -10

Bay leaf – 2

Tomato chopped into cubes– 2

Coriander powder – 1 tsp.

Red chili powder – 2 tsp.

Turmeric powder – ½ tsp.

Green chili chopped – 2-3

Ginger (finely chopped) – 1 tbsp.

Garlic (finely chopped) – 1 tbsp.

Clarified butter – 2 cups

Coriander leaves chopped – 1 cup

Lemon juice- 1 tbsp.

Utensils

Large Sause pan- 2

Small Sause pan- 1

Aluminum foil

“It is easy to fill people’s stomach, but one should always try to win other’s hearts with food”- Rafeeq Ikka

METHOD

- *Marinate the chicken in 1 cup of yogurt, Chili powder – 1 tsp., Garam Masala – 1 tsp., 2 tsp. of ginger garlic paste & a little salt for 2 hours (use your hands and mix the marinate evenly)*

- *Wash the rice multiple times and soak it in water for about 2 hours. After this drain the water and using one of the large saucepans boil rice in water for 5-7 minutes, add 1 cinnamon, 3-4 cloves, 5 cardamoms, one bay leaf and half tsp. salt into the boiling water. (my mom always says, "don't use the same water for the soaking and boiling", rice boiling is all these spices will get the aroma of the spices.) Around the 5-minute mark check how much the rice has been cooked, look for it to be al dente meaning it should be only 90% cooked the rest of the cooking process takes place in a later stage, once al dente drain the rice and do not remove any of the spices.*
- *Heat the small saucepan and add 1 cup of clarified butter, once the clarified butter is hot fry 3-4 onions till golden brown. After the onions in the same clarified butter fry cashew nuts till golden brown followed by the raisins. (do not let these fry too much, especially the cashew nuts and raisins may only need 10 to 15 seconds to change their color to the expected golden brown.) keep these aside for garnishing.*
- *Heat one of the saucepans and add 4 tbsp. oil, once oil is hot add rest of the chopped onions, followed by one bay leaf, 3 cloves, one cinnamon stick that's broken into pieces, 4 cardamoms, ginger chopped, garlic chopped, 1 tsp. garam masala, 1tsp turmeric powder, 1 tsp. coriander powder and chopped green chili. Sauté this till the onions start to change color. To this add the chopped tomatoes followed by the chicken and mix properly. Evenly pour the lemon juice and again mix for even distribution.*
- *Once the chicken is seared pour water until the chicken pieces are halfway submerged in water. Close the saucepan with its lid and cook on medium flame for about 20-30 minutes or till the gravy thickens up.*
- *Open the lid and on top of the chicken add half of the rice and make a even layer of rice, on the top add half of the fried onions, half of*

fried cashew nuts, half of fried raisins and half of chopped coriander leaves leave other half for the next layer.

- *Add the next half of rice on top of the previous one and repeat the same process with the remaining fried garnishes and coriander leaves. At the end the whole thing should look like a layered cake like my mom used to say from bottom to top, chicken, rice, garnish, rice and garnish.*
- *Final step is to close the lid and make a tight seal because no steam should escape. Use the aluminum foil to cover the top of the saucepan and close it with the lid this should ensure a tight seal. Place this on the lowest heat for about 5 minutes, once done it is ready to serve. (Make sure every serving receives even amount of rice, chicken and garnish)*