



Indian Barbecuing

by **MADHUR JAFFREY**

In America, barbecuing is generally a private summer pleasure associated with green lawns, poolside patios, and seashores, alive with the sounds and smells of meat sizzling over charcoal. In India, where summer does not always restrict itself to being a temporary affair, barbecuing is a serious, perennial business, generally left in the secure hands of professional chefs—from the masters who work for top restaurants, clubs, and hotels to small-time entrepreneurs who occupy storefronts in the bazaars.

The restaurant, club, and hotel chefs wear tall toques blanches. If called upon to cater a private wedding at home, as they often are, they arrive with an entourage of menials and immediately begin setting up temporary grills under colorfully appliquéd *shamianas*, or tents. Indoors, the blushing bride is dressed in all her jewelry—from jingling anklets to pendants in the parting of her hair—and then draped in her glittering red wedding sari. Outdoors, the chefs in their toques blanches can be seen leaning grandly over glowing fires, turning and basting skewered meats.

The entrepreneur in the bazaar does not wear a toque blanche. He is usually in a loose shirt and striped pants, perspiring and looking harassed. But he, too, turns and bastes skewered meats, often in the shadow of a popular mosque, in the hope that those returning from their prayers will stop and buy his meats, all nicely wrapped in thin flat breads. But whether this outdoor cooking of skewered meats is done in the garden of a private mansion or in the streets of a busy bazaar, the kinds of meat that are cooked and the methods of cooking remain pretty much the same.

Almost any meat may be skewered and grilled—kidneys, liver, udders (they taste a bit like tongue), whole chickens, boned chicken pieces, whole fish, shrimp, cubed meat from the leg of a lamb or a goat, and even ground meat formed into sausage patties. As Indian goat,

lamb, and chicken tended to be, until about two decades ago, somewhat tough for quick grilling, various techniques were developed to tenderize and flavor the meat at the same time.

Marinades, often containing yogurt or mashed green papaya, both natural tenderizers, are used for whole chickens and for various cubed meat *kababs*. Sometimes the meat from the leg of a kid is ingeniously cut into long strips which are beaten until they become even thinner ribbons, marinated, and then threaded onto skewers to form what could be described as a long series of Elizabethan ruffles. This pretty concoction is called a *pasanda kabab*. Another technique calls for meat cubes to be partially cooked—often with coriander seeds, red pepper, ginger, turmeric, cloves, peppercorns, lime juice, and yogurt—and then put on skewers and browned over charcoal. The savory result is a very popular Calcutta snack called *kati kabab*.

The grilling and roasting of *all* skewered meats is done in two entirely different ways. The first method, used for most *kababs*, probably originated somewhere in Asia Minor and came to India with Arab traders centuries ago. The word *kabab* itself is of Arab origin and, until the 17th century, suggested: "Beef or Mutton cut in small pieces, sprinkled with salt and pepper, and dipt in Oil and Garlick which have been mixt together in a dish, and then roasted on a Spit with sweet Herbs put between . . . and basted with Oil and Garlick all the while." (*A Journey to Surat in the Year 1689*, by the Reverend F. Ovington, London, 1696.) By the 20th century, the seasonings for the *kababs* had been completely Indianized to include ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, poppy seeds, cumin, coriander, turmeric, yogurt—and lots of red pepper. These *kababs* are skewered and then placed horizontally over live charcoal—the distance from the fire varying with the thickness of the meat. They are repeatedly basted, sometimes with the mari-

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nade, sometimes with ghee (clarified butter), and sometimes with "secret" mixtures that prideful and possessive cooks carry with them to their graves.

Kababs of this kind may be served with *pullaos* (rice pilafs), or rolled inside thin breads like the flat, pliable *roomali roti* or the *paratha*, a flat, flaky griddle bread made with lots of ghee. Raw onion slices are a traditional accompaniment. Yogurt relishes, often made with roasted eggplant, as well as salads of white radish, cucumber, and tomatoes, are served on the side.

The second form of skewered cooking is done by pushing the meat-laden skewers vertically inside a very hot clay oven called a *tandoor*. No basting is necessary as small whole chickens cook in less than ten minutes. Great heat builds up inside the portly bodies of the *tandoors* so the meat is instantly seared and all the juices are trapped inside. The quick cooking allows the meat to stay very moist while an earlier marinating process ensures its tenderness.

Although it probably originated somewhere in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea, the *tandoori* style of cooking has been preferred for centuries in the Punjab and in India's former North-West Frontier Province. Villages used to have centrally located, communal *tandoors* where housewives could take their marinated meats and their freshly risen dough for cooking.

Tandoors are shaped like vats with an opening at the top and another at one side of the bottom, through which charcoal or wood is thrust for fuel. Restaurant *tandoors* are about waist high and are usually embedded in a brick structure to further conserve their heat. Home *tandoors*, sold in India and in some parts of the United States (see Note), are much smaller and, in India at any rate, need to be constantly "refreshed" with layers of fresh clay.

The first time I made *tandoori* chicken for James Beard, he took one bite and said casually, "This has two marinades, how interesting." With his sharp palate, he knew immediately. A properly made *tandoori* chicken does, indeed, have two marinades—one of just salt and lime juice and another containing yogurt, onion, garlic, ginger, green chilies, and *garam masala* (an aromatic spice mixture containing cardamom seeds, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, peppercorns, and black cumin seeds). In India, *tandoori* chicken is either served whole, to be torn up and eaten with a *tandoori* bread called *naan* (baked by slapping it onto the inside wall of a *tandoor*), or cut into serving pieces and doused with a quickly made sauce containing butter, tomatoes, cream, ginger, and roasted cumin. The latter is known as *Chicken Makhani*.

Not all outdoor grilling is done with skewers, however. In Goa's fishing villages, for example, freshly caught mackerel is laid directly over a smoldering fire of dried rice stalks. As the outside skin blackens, the inside

is permeated with a delicate "smoked" flavor. The skin is then peeled off, and the now pristine fish is served with a dressing of mild palm vinegar flavored with salt, onions, and red chilies. In Bombay, steaks of the local, pompano-like pomfret are smothered in a fresh green chutney containing Chinese parsley and coconut, wrapped in banana leaves (most of Southern Asia is convinced that banana leaves are far superior to aluminum foil, wax paper, and kitchen parchment), and then "baked" over a charcoal grill. These steaks, served with rice, are a favorite at banquets. I have tried making this Bombay dish with swordfish and find that it works exceedingly well. Of course, I do compromise by using aluminum foil.

The following recipes will introduce you firsthand to both schools of Indian "barbecuing."

(NOTE: Ron Levy, a noted ceramicist who builds *tandoors* for restaurants, has designed a small home *tandoor* that should be in production by late fall. Price range: \$75 to \$125. For information, write: Ron Levy Ltd., 238 Mulberry St., New York, NY 10012.)

Boti Kabab (Skewered Lamb Marinated in Yogurt and Spices)

SERVES 6

Marinade:

- ¼ cup plain yogurt
- 1 Tablespoon whole coriander seeds
- 1 Tablespoon whole cumin seeds
- 1 Tablespoon whole white poppy seeds
- ¼ cup fresh lemon juice
- 1 small onion, peeled and quartered
- 6 cloves garlic, peeled
- 1-inch cube fresh ginger, peeled and quartered
- 1 Tablespoon *garam masala* (see Note following step 5)
- ¼ to 1 teaspoon Cayenne
- 1½ teaspoons salt, or to taste
- 4 Tablespoons vegetable oil

The Lamb:

- 2½ pounds of lamb, from the leg, cut into 1-inch cubes
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted (for basting)

1. Prepare the yogurt for the marinade by spooning it onto the center of a 10- to 12-inch square of doubled cheesecloth. Bring corners of the cloth together and tie to form a loose little sack, the purpose being to thicken the yogurt by letting it hang and drip for 30 minutes (the faucet of a sink makes a handy, mess-free hook for this procedure).
2. Meanwhile, dry roast the coriander, cumin, and poppy seeds in a small ungreased skillet over medium heat until spices turn a shade or two darker and emit a pleasant roasted aroma. Stir as you do this. With a mortar and pestle, or in an electric blender or spice grinder (I use a coffee grinder), pulverize the seeds until fine.
3. **Prepare the marinade:** Blend the lemon juice, onion, garlic, ginger, and the "hung" yogurt in a food processor or blender to form a smooth paste. Add the *garam masala*, Cayenne, salt, vegetable oil, and ground spices; blend just long enough to combine. Check the seasoning (I taste for salt, hotness, and sourness) and

