

Matar Panir (Peas and Cheese in Tomato Sauce)

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I love how certain combinations of ingredients pop up in diverse cuisines- in this case, if I said, "tomato sauce and cheese," you'd probably think Italian. But it's also the heart of a classic Indian dish from the Punjab region, Matar Panir, a restaurant staple. This is a very simple version that rivals the best I've tasted. It may seem intimidating to make your own cheese, and the recipe reads long, but it's really pretty easy and definitely worth the effort.

- 6 c whole milk
- 3/4 c plain yogurt
- 1 lemon
- 1 c neutral vegetable oil (e.g., canola)
- 1-2 tbs ghee
- 1 medium onion, finely minced
- 1 tbs fresh ginger, finely minced
- 3 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 1/2 c tomato, finely chopped (out of season, use crushed San Marzano or Muir Glen)
- 1 tsp ground coriander
- 1/4 tsp turmeric
- 1 tsp garam masala
- 1 tsp salt cayenne to taste
- 1 cup peas
- 2-3 tbs cilantro, chiffonade

First, prepare the panir. Heat the milk, stirring occasionally to keep it from scorching. Juice the lemon and mix the juice thoroughly with the yogurt. When the milk comes to a frothy, rising boil, turn off the flame and stir in the yogurt/lemon mixture. You should see curdling begin in just a few seconds; if the milk is stubborn, heat it again, then remove from flame and add a little more lemon juice if necessary. Strain the cheese curds through a doubled layer of cheesecloth, reserving the whey.

After the curds have drained for a few minutes, tie the cheesecloth into a ball, putting pressure on the cheese. Let the ball hang and drain for an hour. Remove the cheese from the cloth and knead it for a few minutes until it hangs together. It needn't be as "tight" as a mozzarella ball- it will remain somewhat crumbly. Pat into a 1/2 inch thick disc, then fold it up in some cheesecloth and weight it for a few hours.

Put the cup of oil into a small saucepan, then heat it to medium-hot (bubbles should come off a wooden chopstick or skewer stuck in the oil, but it shouldn't be so hot as to roil; 350 degrees F is about right). Cut the panir into 1/2 to 3/4 inch chunks, then fry them a few at a time until covered with brown spots. This should take about 30 seconds for each batch. Put the chunks aside to drain and cool.

Now, the tomato sauce. Add a tablespoon of the used canola oil and a tablespoon of ghee to a pan over medium-low heat. Toss in the onions and saute with stirring until they're medium brown- get a good caramelization, but it shouldn't be as far gone as for onion soup. The onions will first absorb the oil, then as they start to brown, they release it. If it all still looks too dry, add the other tablespoon of ghee. Add the ginger and saute with stirring a few more minutes. Add the garlic, and saute with stirring until

the garlic smell is slapping you upside the head, maybe 20-30 seconds. Then add the tomato and sautee with stirring until the tomatoes have started to brown, have largely collapsed, and are starting to dry out.

Stir in the coriander, and wait for the smell to hit you, maybe 10 seconds. Then stir in the turmeric and blend thoroughly. Add the garam masala (use a good one!) and stir until the smell hits you. Then add salt, cayenne, and stir in 1/2 cup of the reserved whey. Simmer for 5 minutes or so, then add the peas and one cup of the whey.

Bring back to a simmer, then cover and cook until the peas are almost done (NB: If fresh peas are out of season, use frozen and reduce cooking time). If the sauce looks like it's drying out, add a little more whey.

Stir in panir chunks, then cover and simmer for five more minutes. Uncover, check seasoning (add salt or cayenne if necessary- if it's too sharp, a little sugar will tame it), stir in half the cilantro, then serve over basmati rice. Garnish with the remaining cilantro.

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