

Courtesy of Chai Pani Decatur

MAINS Chai Pani

Chai Pani's achari baingan

By Sarra Sedghi · Rough Draft Atlanta, 8/20/2025

Ingredients

- [ ] 1/2 cup neutral oil, such as canola or grapeseed
- [ ] 1.5 lbs Asian, Indian, or fairytale eggplant, divided with the stem on, then cut into 2-inch pieces
- [ ] 1.5 lbs Yukon gold potatoes, cut into 2-inch cubes (skin on)
- [ ] 3 cups red onions, small diced
- [ ] 1 cup diced Roma tomatoes
- [ ] 1/4 cup minced garlic
- [ ] 1/4 cup minced ginger
- [ ] 1/2 cup fresh curry leaves
- [ ] 3 to 4 Thai bird chilis, split in half (less or more depending on heat preference)
- [ ] 2 Tbsp cumin seeds
- [ ] 1 Tbsp fennel seed
- [ ] 1 Tbsp nigella seed (kalonji)

Directions

1. Heat oil in a wide rondeau pan over medium-high heat. Once hot, add cumin seeds, nigella seeds, and fennel seeds, and let the seeds crackle and sizzle for 30 seconds.
2. Add curry leaves and Thai bird chilis, and let them pop, and immediately add onions. Reduce the heat to medium and let onions sweat until almost translucent, about 7 minutes. They should not brown.
3. Increase heat to medium-high, add diced potatoes, stir with the onion mixture, and let brown and cook for 5 minutes.
4. Add diced tomatoes, ginger, and garlic, and 2 Tbsp salt. Mix and cook until the tomatoes have broken down and are soft.
5. Next, add eggplant, remaining salt, and stir. Let everything cook until the eggplant starts to soften. Add 2 cups of water and decrease heat to medium-low. Cover and let cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking, until the eggplant is soft and the potatoes are 90 percent cooked through.
6. Add yogurt, mix, increase heat to medium, and cover again. Let simmer for 5 to 7 minutes, until the potatoes are cooked, eggplant is tender, and oil has separated out.

- [ ] 3 Tbsp salt
- [ ] 2 cups water
- [ ] 1/2 cup whole milk plain yogurt
- [ ] 1 lemon, juiced
- [ ] Cilantro to garnish

7. Turn heat off, add juice of 1 lemon and a handful of chopped cilantro. Serve with Basmati rice.

The story

This week, we're bringing you the recipe for Chai Pani's achari baingan (eggplant with pickling spices).

For Executive Chef Sahar Siddiqi, searing eggplant is synonymous with summertime.

"Achari baingan is very much a dinner my mother would make when it was too hot to make anything that involved standing in front of a hot stove for too long," Siddiqi said. "My sisters and I loved this dish so much we dubbed it 'bangin' baingan' and were often caught eating it cold out of the fridge."

Like most South Asian recipes, this recipe begins with blooming, or heating spices in warm, neutral oil. Don't skip this step. In addition to fully dispersing the aromatics, blooming spices provide a toasty, and if using seeds, delightfully crunchy texture.

"You can really tell if the spices and aromatics are cooking well by the way they smell," Siddiqi said. "Don't be afraid of keeping the heat on the higher side so everything gets a chance to bloom."

Siddiqi likes to shop for produce, meat, and bread at Grant Park Farmers Market on Sundays. But for South Asian ingredients, she heads to Cherian's in Decatur. Siddiqi also enjoys having lunch at Cherian's, often ordering idli sambar (steamed rice cakes in lentil stew).

Although the Chai Pani's achari baingan recipe was written with fairy tale eggplant in mind, it will also work with Indian (aka baby) eggplant, Italian eggplant, or long, skinny varieties such as Chinese and Japanese.

"Steer clear of globe eggplants as they tend to be seedy and watery and don't hold their shape as well as other varieties," Siddiqi said. You can salt your eggplant before cooking to remove excess moisture and cut the bitterness.

And if you can't find Thai bird chilis, opt for Serranos instead. Simply dice one to two peppers, depending on your heat preference, and use accordingly. Siddiqi said nigella seeds and fresh curry leaves can be omitted, although they lend a unique flavor to the dish and are worth the drive to Cherian's.

This recipe calls for a rondeau pan, a two-handled, flat-bottomed sautéing pan with straight sides. A rondeau pan is deeper than a typical frying pan or skillet, but shallower than a Dutch oven or cocotte. You can also use a 12-inch stainless steel braiser, a 12-inch sauté pan with a lid, or even a six-quart Dutch oven.

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