

Trial by Stove

I opened the lid of my granite-colored, brand new pressure cooker, confident that I would see smoothly cooked split green gram. Undercooked lentils stared insolently back at me. I was taken aback. I had never previously questioned the outcome of putting in the right ratio of green gram to water and pressure cooking it for a specified amount of time. Slightly shaken, I fastened the lid back and set the cooker to whistle twice more. I had done this so many times before, in so many different cooking vessels and cities across India. Wash the split green gram thoroughly with water. Then measure and add twice the quantity of water and pressure cook the gram for three whistles of the cooker, until it becomes a soft mash. Meanwhile, heat some *ghee* in a deep-bottomed pan and when the clarified butter heats up, flavor it with asafetida, cumin, split green chilies, a pinch of turmeric and mustard seeds. Add finely chopped onions and tomatoes after the cumin starts to sizzle and the mustard begins to pop. Next comes ginger and garlic, freshly minced or a bottled paste—depending on how much of a hold you have on your life that day. Pour the mashed goodness of the split gram into this tempering and cook it for two minutes. Lo and behold, you have *dal*.

The butter soaked flavored goodness I had placed to the side, all set and sizzling, waiting for the gram, cooled as I paced around my tiny new American kitchen and wondered if the gram would cook this time. I could hear the ambient noises of the house, dull in the background. My two new housemates were unpacking. Both had arrived today from India. I arrived last night and was already relatively settled in, so I decided to make some *dal* and rice, the closest thing to home food for me, and by generalization, to most Indians.

I was cooking for the first time in my new kitchen and it felt like an awkward first date. I didn't know my way around or how things worked. I was slightly anxious and fidgety – two feelings I associate with romance. I arranged and rearranged my spice rack, sizing up the panels of the baseboard heaters in the kitchen with the natural suspicion of someone who has lived in a warm, tropical climate all her life.

The pressure cooker announced itself with a shrill cry. I turned off the stove, distrusting this new appliance that cooked with coils instead of flames, and opened the pressure cooker lid curiously. The gram had cooked, but the color was duller than it should have been. I transferred the gram into the deep-bottomed *kadai* that held the waiting tempering and stood on my nervous toes, mixing it with a flat, wooden spatula. After a couple of minutes and the addition of fresh coriander leaves, I dipped my India-bought stainless-steel spoon into the *dal* for a taste, ready to feel the familiarity of home zing through me and transport me back.

It didn't. The gram had a raw aftertaste and the texture felt all wrong, as if some chaff had cooked along with the gram. The flavors didn't seem to have mixed well enough; I could taste each strand of flavor separately. The pit of my stomach bubbled with apprehension. I added some more spice, a pinch of sugar and a sprinkling of salt. I repeated the taste test. It was still off. I added some tamarind juice, wondering if that might fix the raw flavor of the gram. I squeezed in a bit of lime. I tested it again. It was edible, but didn't taste like the simple home cooked meal I was aiming for. My housemates and I ate the *dal-chawal* without commenting on how curiously different it tasted. It felt new and alien, just like this New Hampshire town I'd arrived into last night.

The next day my neighbor's *sambhar* turned bitter because the salt he bought was non-iodized and wouldn't thicken to the sauce-like texture he wanted. Another friend's *rotis* turned

out hard as frisbees because the dough didn't achieve the right consistency. As for me, I tried cooking something simple every day and ending up spending three times the amount of time I'd normally spend at home. I tasted my food continuously at every step, trying to see where the flavors veered off course. Even the produce tasted different from home, something that logically made sense, but I did not emotionally prepare for. I felt like this was America's way of telling me that from now on, the rules of the game had changed.

India was home. I'd grown up and spent all my adult life there. A calling to study fiction writing in America pulled me from India, away from my career as a journalist, towards the start of something new here in Hanover, New Hampshire. Having travelled so far to follow this calling, it felt almost cruel that even my smallest, simplest attempts to get my bearings in this new place would elude me. All my trials in the kitchen seemed to mock me and question how I was going to be good at something new, while I was failing at performing my simplest old tricks well.

I didn't give up. A few days later, after settling down further and making a couple of friends, I took stock of my kitchen. We each had brought very few food supplies with us from India, mostly spices and other basics. Hence, every trip to the co-op store around the corner became a task that needed my full concentration. I charged past the huge aisle of cereal and headed towards the international food shelves. I poked about the tiny Indian section, reading and re-reading each label multiple times. One day, my housemate and some friends went to an Asian store in the nearby town of Lebanon. There wasn't room for me in the car they reserved, and because for the first few weeks in America we all measured American dollars in terms of Indian rupees, frugality was more important than a second car. My housemate called from the store and

we went through each shelf slowly and in great detail. She came back laden with groceries. It was uncharted territory of grocery-related happiness for me.

Armed with kitchen shelves full of Indian groceries and many conversations about cooking hacks with my mother, I aimed for small victories in my kitchen. Each small victory made me feel more confident of the ground beneath my feet and my place in this new world. I sautéed my worry, ground my anxiety and roasted my apprehension into submission. I started feeling more like myself, and simultaneously more like a new person too. I felt a transformation from within, a feeling of growing success that came from effectively adapting old, good behaviors a new environment. My friends and neighbors would come to my house to eat, and every gasp of pleasure, every enthusiastic second helping, and each sentimental compliment added a drop of confidence inside me. I became more adventurous and ambitious.

On Diwali, my youngest housemate was upset about being away from her family on the day of the festival for the first time. She had told me once that her mother always made *Bisi Bele Bhath* for lunch on Diwali. I decided to try to make the single-pot rice and vegetables dish to cheer her up. An hour and a few moments of anxiety later, the smile on her face and the tears of joy in her eyes told me that I managed to succeed in my attempt. That day all my neighbors, who knew of the dish thanks to her sappy post on social media, flocked to my house, exclaiming over how good my *Bisi Bele Bhath* tasted and how I had transported them home to their mothers' kitchens.

It has been eight months since those initial days of struggle in my new American kitchen. Since then, all my victories in the kitchen feel like the first steps towards overcoming the bigger

hurdle of making a life for myself in a foreign land. Achieving that will take a long time, but I reckon I am well on my way.