



A NEW TWIST ON A HOME-COOKED MEAL

Indian Meal Kit expands your palate, easily and healthfully.

BY JULIE NELSON
Contributed photos

You love Indian food, but making it at home sounds like, well, just too much. Too many spices that you don't have, too many leftover ingredients you may not use again, too much work. Now one Coulee Region woman has a deal for you: She'll gather and measure all the spices and ingredients for you and provide easy-to-follow directions. All you have to do is cook, assemble and eat.

Puja Mehta is a native of India who now lives in La Crescent with her husband, Pavak, and their two daughters. About a year ago, Puja and Pavak started a small business called Indian Meal Kit, which is pretty much as it sounds. The kit is a small cardboard box filled with premeasured spices and ingredients customers can buy and prepare at home in 30 to 40 minutes. The kits are available at the People's Food Co-op in La Crosse and Rochester and at Woodman's in Onalaska—the Mehtas will even deliver any local orders made via their website, www.indianmealkit.com.

Authentic and healthy

The meals are about as authentically Indian as you can get, according to Mehta, and are slightly different than what you will find in most American restaurants. She says Indian restaurants typically offer foods from the Punjab area of India, which is only a small portion of the country. The Mehtas have lived in several regions of India, and Mehta says the meal kits contain foods you would get if you went to someone's home. "There is a large part of India that needs to be discovered, and that's what I'm trying to bring to people here."

For anyone who shies away from Indian food because they think it will be too spicy, Mehta says fear not. "While some people do eat very spicy food, I grew up in the middle part of the country, where not eating too spicy is common." She prepares the meal kits so that customers can pack their own heat, so to speak. They can add the



Puja Mehta, owner of Indian Meal Kit. Photo by Janet Mootz.

entire chili packet, just a teaspoon, or none at all.

Mehta makes the Indian Meal Kits as healthy and as environmentally friendly as she can. “When my children were born, I started researching the nutritional value of foods more carefully. I offer foods that are just as healthy as what I feed to my own family.” Instead of butter or cream, Mehta prepares her meals with yogurt or ghee (a clarified butter). “I buy my vegetables fresh from the farmer’s market during the summer and get them as fresh as I can during the winter,” she says. A lifelong vegetarian, Mehta’s meals are all meat-free, although she includes instructions on where in the recipe meat could easily be added.

Food for a cleaner world

The packaging of her meal kits is another source of pride for Mehta. A graphic designer by trade, she designed the logo and the sticker for the kits. The box for the kits is made in America and is biodegradable. The small cups that contain the masalas are made from sugar cane. “This is a choice I am making,” she says. “Every parent, every person, wants to make this place not a dirtier place but one where there is less plastic.”

So far, the Mehtas have relied primarily on word of mouth to spread the news about their product. “We wanted to start small and make sure we could handle the demand,” says Pavak, who handles the bookkeeping.

The company is off to a good start, and chances are if you haven’t tried one of the meals already, you’ll soon be hearing from someone who has.

DAL AND RICE

From Puja Mehta

DAL

- 1/3 cup yellow mung beans
- 1/3 cup red lentils
- 5/4 cups water, divided
- 1 onion, diced
- 1 tomato, chopped in small pieces
- 1 T red chili powder (optional, to taste)
- Cilantro, to taste

TADKA MASALA

- 1 T ghee (Indian clarified butter)
- 1/4 tsp. cumin seed
- 1/8 tsp. asafetida
- 1 1/2 tsp. crushed garlic
- 1 bay leaf

DAL MASALA

- 1/2 T salt
- 1/2 tsp. garam masala
- 1/4 tsp. turmeric
- 1/2 tsp. brown sugar

DAL TADKA

- 1 T ghee
- 1/4 tsp. cumin seed
- 1 tsp. garam masala
- 1 tsp. crushed garlic
- 1/2 tsp. mango powder (optional)
- 1 red chili

Place the beans and lentils into a bowl and rinse 4 to 5 times. Add 1 cup water and set aside.

Heat a large saucepan on medium heat for 30 seconds. Add all the **Tadka Masala** ingredients and fry for 1 minute. Add the diced onion and fry for 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Add the chopped tomatoes and cook for 3 minutes. Add soaked beans and lentils and mix well. Add all the **Dal Masala** ingredients and mix well.

Add 4 cups water to the saucepan and mix well. Increase the heat to medium-high and cover the pan partially. Cook for 20 minutes, stirring every 5 minutes.

After 20 minutes, taste the dal. Add red chili powder to taste: for mild spice, add 1/4 tsp. red chili powder; for very hot, add 1 T. You may omit chili powder altogether. You may also add more salt at this stage.

Cook for 8 more minutes at medium-low heat. While the dal is cooking, heat a small saucepan on medium heat and add all the **Dal Tadka** ingredients. Fry for 3 minutes. Remove from heat and add 1/4 cup water to the small saucepan; then pour the mixture over the dal in the large saucepan.

Wash the cilantro and add it to the dal. Remove from heat and cover the dal while the rice cooks, or until 2 minutes before serving.



Dal and Rice, one of Puja Mehta's ready-to-make Indian Meal Kits.

BASMATI RICE

1½ cups basmati rice

3½ cups water

Rinse the rice 3 times and place it in a medium saucepan. Add water to the rice and stir over medium-high heat for 8 minutes or until it starts boiling. Reduce heat to medium-low and cover partially. Cook for 9 minutes, stirring occasionally. Reduce heat to low and simmer the rice for 3 minutes.

Remove from heat and let cool for 3 minutes. Serve with hot dal.

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Julie Nelson, a freelance writer in La Crosse, is a big fan of Indian food and excited to see palak paneer as one of the meal kit choices.