

BIRBAL KEE KHITCHEREE

By Michelin Starred Chef Suvir Saran

Serves 10-12

When craving comfort food, it is most often dreams of khitcheree that captivate my imagination. The vegetarian one-pot meal of lentils, rice, and vegetables are transported to another dimension via multiple layers of spices—every bite is a new discovery of tastes and textures. The dish includes Panch Phoran a spice blend of whole cumin, fennel, and the wonderfully exotic nutty flavor of nigella seeds that are gently fried in ghee or clarified butter with coriander and tomatoes, and then a second boost of spice from a ghee-bloomed blend of more cumin, some cayenne, and oniony asafetida. It is such an incredible dish that there is even a legend behind it: Hundreds of years ago in the mid-14th century India, Birbal, a court official of Emperor Akbar, made a khitcheree that was so enchanting, the emperor decided to make Birbal a Raja king! At our house, we like to say that if it's good enough for Akbar and Birbal, it's good enough for you. This dish is so lovely that I often just serve it with nothing else except for some Raita, achar if craving spice, and perhaps crispy papadum on the side. Make the recipe a few times and then begin to play with the flavors and simplify it as you like. I promise you won't be disappointed.

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For the topping

- 6 to 8 cups/1.4 to 1.9 l peanut oil
- 4 large red onions, halved and thinly sliced
- 1/4 cup/4 g finely chopped fresh coriander
- 2-inch/5 cm piece fresh gingerroot, peeled and thinly sliced into very thin matchsticks
- 1 -2 green chillies, finely minced (remove the seeds for less heat)
- 1 tablespoon/15 ml lime juice
- 1/2 teaspoon Garam Masala powder

For the khitcheree

- 1 cup/190 g split and hulled (dhuli) mung dal
- 2 tablespoons/30 g ghee or clarified butter
- 10 green cardamon pods (sabut elaichi)
- 8 whole cloves (laung)
- 3 bay leaves (tej patta)
- 2-inch/5 cm cinnamon stick (dal chini)



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1 teaspoon Panch Phoran
3/4 teaspoon turmeric (haldi)
1/8 teaspoon asafetida (heeng)
1 cup/185 g basmati rice
1/2 medium cauliflower, divided into very small florets
1 medium red potato, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
4 medium carrots, peeled and finely chopped
10-ounce/285 g bag frozen green peas

For the first tempering (tarka)

2 tablespoons/30 g ghee or clarified butter
1/2 teaspoon panch phoran
1 large red onion, halved and thinly sliced
1 tablespoons kosher salt or sea salt, or to taste
2 teaspoons ground coriander seeds (dhaniye kee beej)
2 large tomatoes, finely diced
1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Second tempering oil (tarka)

2 tablespoons/30 g ghee or clarified butter
1/2 teaspoon cumin seeds (sabut zeera)
1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
1 pinch asafetida (heeng)

Heat the oil in a large Dutch oven (use enough oil to fill the saucepan to a 2-inch/5 cm depth) over medium-high heat until it reaches 350°F/177°C on an instant-read thermometer. Add the onions and fry until crisp and browned, about 2 minutes, turning the onions occasionally. Use a slotted spoon or frying spider to transfer the onions to a paper towel-lined plate and set aside.

In a small bowl stir the cilantro, ginger, jalapeño, and lime juice together and set aside.

Place the mung dal in a large skillet over medium heat and toast it until it is fragrant and lightly golden, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer the dal to a large plate and set aside.

Place the ghee, cardamom, cloves, bay leaves, cinnamon, panch phoran, turmeric, and hing in the pan & roast it over medium heat until the spices are fragrant, about 2 mins.

Add the rice, toasted dal, the cauliflower, potatoes, and carrots and cook until the rice becomes translucent and the cauliflower sweats, 3 to 5 minutes, stirring often.

Pour in 7 cups/1.65 l water, increase the heat to high and bring to a boil. Add the peas, bring back to a boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer for 20 minutes.



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While the rice and dal mixture cooks, make the first tempering oil. Heat the ghee and panch phoran in a large skillet over medium heat until the cumin in the panch phoran begins to brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in the onions and the salt and cook until the onions are browned around the edges and soft, about 10 minutes. If the onions begin to get too dark or stick to the pan bottom, splash the pan with a few tablespoons of water and scrape up the browned bits. Stir in the coriander and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes, and then stir in the tomatoes and the cayenne, cooking until the tomatoes are jammy, 6 to 8 minutes, stirring occasionally. Turn off the heat and set aside.

Once the rice and dal are cooked, remove the lid and use a potato masher to smash the mixture until only a few carrots and peas remain whole (remove the whole or large spices while mashing if you like). Stir in the first tempering along with the remaining 3 cups/720 ml of water. Return to boil and cook for 2 minutes. Turn off the heat.

Make the second tempering oil. Wipe out the pan from the first tempering oil and heat the ghee for the second tempering oil over medium heat along with the cumin, cayenne, and hing and cook, stirring often, until the cumin begins to brown, about 2 minutes. Immediately stir it into the rice and dal mixture.

Divide the khitcheree between 6 bowls and top with some of the ginger mixture, a pinch of garam masala, and the fried onions *and serve*.