

Chapter 8: Food and the Table

Summary

There is no single "South Asian food." What people eat depends on which grain grows near them, how much rain falls, which traders and rulers passed through, and what their faith and family teach about food. This chapter starts with the staple grains and the regional cuisines built on them, then opens up a thali to look at its parts: dal, masala, tadka, breads and rice. It follows biryani, chili peppers and chai through history, visits street stalls and sweet shops, and ends at the table itself, with food rules, eating with hands and the customs of hospitality.

Concepts Covered

1. Staple Grains
2. Regional Cuisines
3. Thali
4. Masala
5. Tadka
6. Dal
7. Roti and Naan
8. Biryani
9. Columbian Exchange

10. Chai
11. Street Food
12. Mithai
13. Dietary Rules and Faith
14. Vegetarianism in South Asia
15. Halal
16. Eating With Hands
17. Hospitality Customs

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?** for the rivers, plains, deltas and monsoon that decide which crops grow where.
- **Chapter 3: Empires and Encounters** for the Mughals and the traders who arrived by sea.
- **Chapter 5: Faiths of South Asia** for the faiths whose teachings shape many food rules.
- **Chapter 7: Festivals Through the Year** for the feasts and fasts that go with the calendar.

Pull up a chair



Food is often the first thing friends ask about, and the last tradition people let go of after they move far from home. If you've ever had to explain your lunch at school, or wondered why your family cooks the way it does, this chapter gives you the words and the history. Every tradition has a story. Let's find it!

8.1 "Your Plate Is Missing Something"

The South Asian Student Association's first potluck is set up on three folding tables in the Prairie Ridge cafeteria. Ben Lindqvist, who has been looking forward to this all week, takes a paper plate and puts a little of everything on it: a piece of naan, two samosas, a spoonful of chickpeas, a scoop of butter chicken, and one gulab jamun soaking through the plate.

He sits down proudly next to Zara Hossain and three other club members. Ayesha Qureshi, whose family is from Lahore, looks at his plate and says, "Where's the raita? And you need a proper biryani, not just bread." Arjun Reddy, whose family is from Hyderabad, shakes his head: "No rice? And no pickle? That's not a meal." Dilan Perera, whose family is from Kandy in Sri Lanka, laughs. "Where's the rice and curry? Where's the coconut sambol?"

Ben looks at Zara for help. She shrugs. "At my Nanu's table it would be rice, dal and fish. Every time." Ben stares at his plate. "Okay. So which one of you has the *real* South Asian meal?"

That's the question this chapter answers.

8.2 Start With the Grain

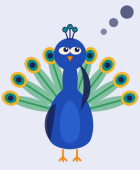
Think about food in the United States. A barbecue in Texas, a crab feast in Maryland, a hotdish at a church supper in Minnesota and a plate of tamales in New Mexico are all "American food," but nobody would call any one of them the only real version. Each grew from what was easy to farm or catch nearby, who settled there, and what they brought with them. South Asia works the same way, on a bigger scale, with about 1.99 billion people (2025, World Bank).

The best place to start is the grain. **Staple Grains** are the grains a community eats nearly every day and builds most meals around. In South Asia there are three big families of them.

- **Rice** needs warm weather and lots of water. It grows best in the wet, low lands that the monsoon soaks every summer: the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta in Bangladesh and eastern India, the coasts of southern India, Sri Lanka's paddy fields, and the terraced valleys of Nepal and Bhutan. In Bangla, cooked rice is ভাত (*BHAHT*), and a meal without it can feel incomplete to many Bengali families.
- **Wheat** prefers cooler, drier winters. It grows on the irrigated plains of the Indus and its tributaries in Pakistan and northwest India, and in Afghanistan. Here bread, not rice, sits at the center of most meals.
- **Millets** are small, hardy grains such as pearl millet (bajra), sorghum (jowar) and finger millet (ragi). They grow in dry places with poor soil and little water, like parts of Gujarat, Rajasthan, the Deccan Plateau and the hills of Nepal. The United Nations named 2023 the International Year of Millets, at India's suggestion, to draw attention to grains that can handle a changing climate.

These lines are not neat. Many families in central India eat both rice and wheat. In the high hills of Nepal, where rice is hard to grow, many people have long eaten dhido, a thick porridge made from millet, maize or buckwheat flour. Still, if you know a family's staple grain, you can often guess a lot about the rest of their meal.

Look back at the map



Remember the monsoon from Chapter 1? Rice country lines up closely with the places that get the heaviest summer rain. Before you read on, guess which grain Zara's family in Chattogram eats most, and which one Ayesha's family in Lahore does.

8.3 Regional Cuisines: One Region, Many Kitchens

A **Regional Cuisine** is the style of cooking that grows up in one area, shaped by its grain, its climate, its coast or mountains, its history of trade, and the communities who live there. South Asia has dozens of them, and borders drawn in 1947 or 1971 often run right through them. Punjabi food is eaten on both sides of the India–Pakistan border, and Bengali food in both Bangladesh and India's West Bengal.

Here are a few regional cuisines from across the eight countries. The table shows only a handful, and every family cooks a little differently.

Region	Country	Staple	A few well-known foods	What shapes it
Punjab	Pakistan and India	Wheat	Roti, chickpeas, mustard greens with maize bread, lassi	Irrigated wheat plains, dairy cattle, cool winters

Region	Country	Staple	A few well-known foods	What shapes it
Sindh	Pakistan	Rice and wheat	Sindhi biryani, sai bhaji (greens with lentils)	The lower Indus valley, a hot, dry climate
Bengal	Bangladesh and India	Rice	Fish such as ilish (hilsa), red lentils, sweets made from milk	A wet river delta full of fish
Gujarat	India	Wheat, rice, millet	Sweet-and-sour dal, steamed snacks like dhokla	Dry land, and strong vegetarian traditions
Kerala	India	Rice	Coconut, fish curries, avial, banana-leaf feasts	Heavy rain, coconut palms, the old pepper trade
Sri Lanka	Sri Lanka	Rice	Rice and curry,	Island climate,

Region	Country	Staple	A few well-known foods	What shapes it
			hoppers, pol sambol, kottu	coconut, cinnamon, many trading partners
Nepal hills	Nepal	Rice, maize, millet	Dal bhat tarkari, gundruk (fermented greens), momos	Mountain farming, terraces, trade with Tibet
Bhutan	Bhutan	Red rice	Ema datshi (chili and cheese stew)	Himalayan valleys, dairy from cows and yaks
Maldives	Maldives	Rice, flatbread	Mas huni (tuna, coconut, chili, lime)	Coral islands surrounded by tuna fishing grounds
Afghanistan	Afghanistan	Wheat, rice	Naan, qabili palaw (rice with	Dry mountains and valleys,

Region	Country	Staple	A few well-known foods	What shapes it
			carrots, raisins and meat)	Central Asian trade routes

Notice how often the sea or the river shows up. Bengal, Kerala, Sri Lanka and the Maldives all eat a lot of fish. Bangladesh lists the ilish as its national fish and catches most of the world's supply. In dry, inland places, dairy, lentils and grains carry more of the meal.

8.4 The Thali: A Whole Meal on One Plate

If you want to see a regional cuisine at a glance, look at a thali. A **Thali** (थाली, *TAH-lee*, "plate") is a large round plate, usually metal, holding a complete meal: a staple in the middle and several small dishes around it. The small bowls along the edge are called katori (कटोरी, *ka-TOH-ree*, "small bowl"). The word "thali" means both the plate and the meal served on it.

A typical thali tries to balance flavors and textures: something soft and something crisp, something sour, something salty, something mildly bitter and something sweet. A Gujarati family might call their everyday thali "dal, bhat, rotli, shaak": lentils, rice, thin wheat bread and a vegetable dish. A festive Gujarati thali can hold more than a dozen items.

The same idea shows up across the region under other names.

- In Kerala, a festival feast called a sadya is served on a banana leaf instead of a plate. Rice sits in the middle, and a long row of vegetarian

dishes is placed in set spots on the leaf. Sadyas are cooked for the harvest festival Onam (see [Chapter 7](#)), for Vishu and for weddings.

- In Nepal, the everyday meal is dal bhat tarkari: lentil soup, rice and a vegetable curry, often with a sharp pickle on the side.
- In Sri Lanka, "rice and curry" means a mound of rice with several small curries around it, made from vegetables, lentils, fish or meat, plus a sambol (a fresh relish).
- In Bangladesh and West Bengal, a family meal is often rice with dal, a vegetable dish or mashed vegetables, and fish, with sweet yogurt or a sweet to finish when there are guests.

A thali is a useful tool for comparing cuisines because it has slots. Every region fills the "staple," "lentil," "vegetable," "main" and "sweet" slots, but with different foods. The Thali Builder MicroSim later in this chapter works the same way.

8.5 The Building Blocks: Dal, Masala and Tadka

Open the katori on almost any thali and you'll find three building blocks that most South Asian kitchens share.

Dal

Dal (दाल, *DAHL*) means split pulses, the dried seeds of plants like lentils, peas and beans, and also the soupy or thick dish made from them. Red lentils (masoor), yellow split pigeon peas (toor), split mung beans (moong), black gram (urad) and split chickpeas (chana) are all dals. Pulses are cheap, keep for a long time and are full of protein, which matters a lot in a region where many people eat little or no meat.

Every region makes dal its own way. A Gujarati dal is thin and often a little sweet and sour, with jaggery (unrefined cane sugar) or a squeeze of lemon. A Bengali masoor dal is light and fragrant. Punjabi cooks slow-cook whole black urad; the rich restaurant version, dal makhani, with butter and cream, was created in Delhi in the 1950s by Punjabi cooks who had moved from Peshawar after Partition. In Nepal, cooks flavor dal with jimbu, a dried Himalayan herb fried in ghee. In Sri Lanka, red-lentil parippu is often cooked with coconut milk.

Masala

Masala (मसाला, *ma-SAH-lah*) means "spices" or "seasoning," and it usually refers to a mixture of spices, whole or ground. Garam masala, for example, is a warm blend that often includes cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, cumin and black pepper, though the mix changes by region and by family; in Bengal and Bangladesh it may be just cardamom, cinnamon and cloves. A masala can also be a wet paste of onion, ginger, garlic, tomato and spices that forms the base of a dish.

There's no single correct masala. Cooks change the mix to fit the dish, the season and their own taste. Some families still roast and grind their own; others buy ready-made blends. Notice, too, that a spice mixture is about *flavor*, not just heat. Cumin, coriander, turmeric, cardamom and fennel aren't hot at all.

Curry is not one dish



The English word "curry" probably comes from the Tamil word *kari*, a spiced dish eaten with rice. British traders used it for hundreds of different dishes, and "curry powder" was a blend sold mostly to Europeans. In South Asia, people usually call a dish by its own name: dal, korma, sambar, jhol, karahi.

Tadka

Tadka (तड़का, *TUD-kah*) is a cooking step called "tempering" in English: whole spices, and sometimes garlic, dried chili or curry leaves, are fried for a few seconds in hot oil or ghee (clarified butter) and then poured, sizzling, over a finished dish. The hot fat pulls flavor out of the spices and carries it through the food. It goes by many names: chhaunk in parts of north India, baghaar in Urdu, vaghar in Gujarati, and phoron in Bangla.

Each region has favorite tadka spices:

- Many South Indian and Sri Lankan cooks use black mustard seeds and curry leaves.
- Bengali and Bangladeshi cooks often use **panch phoron**, a "five-spice" mix of whole seeds: fenugreek, cumin, nigella, black mustard and fennel.
- Gujarati cooks often add a pinch of asafoetida (hing), a strong-smelling resin, along with mustard and cumin.
- Punjabi and Pakistani cooks often use cumin, onion, garlic and dried red chili.

Tadka is a good example of how the same technique can taste completely different from one kitchen to the next. Ask anyone who cooks at home what goes into their tadka, and you'll learn a lot about their region.

8.6 Breads and Rice Dishes: Roti, Naan and Biryani

Roti and naan

In wheat country, bread is the staple. **Roti and Naan** are the two names most people outside South Asia know, and they are not the same thing.

Roti (रोटी, *ROH-tee*) is a flat, unleavened bread made from whole-wheat flour (atta) and water and cooked on a flat griddle called a tava. It's also called chapati or phulka, and in Pakistan and Bangladesh a similar thin bread is also simply "roti." For many families in northern India and Pakistan, roti is eaten at nearly every meal, torn by hand and used to scoop up dal and vegetables. "Roti" can even mean "food" or "a living," the way "bread" sometimes does in English.

Naan (नान, Urdu نان, *NAHN*) comes from the Persian word *nan*, which simply means "bread." It is usually made from white flour, leavened (allowed to rise), and slapped onto the inside wall of a tandoor, a very hot clay oven. The earliest mention of naan in South Asia is in the memoirs of the poet Amir Khusrau, in the 1300s. Because few homes have a tandoor, naan in India is mostly a restaurant or special-occasion bread. In Afghanistan and in Pakistani cities, though, naan from a neighborhood tandoor bakery is an everyday bread. So naan is common in some places and rare in others, which surprises many people who only know it from restaurants abroad.

Other breads fill out the picture: paratha (layered, pan-fried bread), puri (puffed, deep-fried bread), bajra rotla (millet bread) in Gujarat, the Maldivian roshi, and the godamba roti of Sri Lanka.

Biryani

Biryani (Urdu بریانی, *bir-YAH-nee*) is a dish of rice layered and slow-cooked with meat (or vegetables), yogurt and spices, often with saffron. The word comes from the Persian *biryān*, "fried" or "roasted." A biryani record appears in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, an account of the Mughal emperor Akbar's court written in the 1590s, which lists it alongside pilau.

Historians don't agree on where biryani was born. Some argue it developed in the Mughal court kitchens, where Persian rice cooking met the spicier rice dishes of the subcontinent. Others think rice-and-meat dishes from Persia

had already reached the Deccan in the south before the Mughals. Either way, biryani spread and changed everywhere it went:

- **Hyderabadi biryani** (India) is one of the best-known styles; in 2009 Hyderabad's biryani makers even tried, and failed, to get an official place-of-origin tag for it.
- **Kolkata biryani** includes potato, a habit linked to the court of Wajid Ali Shah, the last king of Awadh, who was exiled to Kolkata in 1856 with his cooks and musicians.
- **Sindhi biryani** (Pakistan), one of the most popular dishes in the country, adds potatoes, tomatoes and yogurt to meat or fish and rice.
- **Kacchi biryani** with mutton is the classic wedding dish of Old Dhaka in Bangladesh.

Biryani shows how a dish can belong to many places at once, which comes up again in the Whose Story? box below.

8.7 Chili Peppers and the Columbian Exchange

South Asian cooking had no chili peppers until about 500 years ago, which surprises a lot of people.

Chili peppers come from the Americas. So do potatoes, tomatoes, maize (corn), peanuts, cashews, pineapples and papaya. After Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic in 1492, plants, animals, people and diseases began moving between the Americas and the rest of the world. Historian Alfred Crosby named this the **Columbian Exchange** in a 1972 book. It changed diets on every continent: wheat and cattle went to the Americas, and corn, potatoes and chilies went to Europe, Africa and Asia.

The Portuguese reached India by sea in 1498 and took the port of Goa in 1510. Their ships carried chili peppers from Brazil, and by the 1500s chilies were growing in Goa. Chilies were easy to grow and cheaper than black pepper, the region's older source of heat, so farmers and cooks across the subcontinent took them up. Within a few centuries chilies were everywhere.

Think about how deep that change went:

- Bhutan's national dish, ema datshi, is basically chilies cooked in cheese. Before chilies arrived, Bhutanese cooks seasoned food with other local plants.
- Punjab's winter favorite, sarson da saag (mustard greens) with makki di roti, is eaten with a bread made from maize, another American crop.
- Potatoes appear in Kolkata and Sindhi biryani, in Gujarati vegetable dishes and in countless street snacks.
- Tomatoes now form the base of many masala pastes.

None of this makes these foods "less South Asian." Cooks took new ingredients and made them their own, just as Mexican and Italian cooks did.

8.8 Chai: How Tea Became Everyone's Drink

Chai (चाय, Urdu چائے, CHAI) just means "tea." In much of South Asia it means black tea boiled with milk and sugar, and often spiced with cardamom, ginger, cinnamon, cloves or black pepper (that spiced version is masala chai). Today a cup of chai is offered to guests, sold at railway stations and roadside stalls from Karachi to Kolkata, and drunk at nearly every break in the day.

Many people assume chai is thousands of years old, but it isn't. Tea plants grew wild in the hills of Assam, but for most of history most people in the

region did not drink tea as an everyday drink. The change came in steps:

1. **The 1830s:** The British East India Company wanted to stop depending on China, which controlled the world tea trade. It began growing tea on plantations in Assam. British planters later spread tea to Darjeeling and the Nilgiri hills, and from 1867 to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), where tea replaced coffee after a plant disease wiped out the coffee estates. Plantation work was hard and poorly paid, and many workers were brought in under harsh labor contracts.
2. **By 1900:** Tea from India and Ceylon had largely replaced Chinese tea in Britain. Almost all of it was grown for export.
3. **The early 1900s to the 1940s:** The Indian Tea Association, run by British planters, set out to sell tea to Indians too. It paid salesmen to visit grocers, set up tea stalls at factories, mines and railway stations, and later sent sellers door to door. The campaign took off in the 1930s.
4. **The result:** People did start drinking tea, but they made it their own way, with lots of milk, sugar and spices, and fewer tea leaves than the planters hoped.

So chai is both a product of colonial business and a very South Asian creation. Sri Lanka still exports "Ceylon tea," Bangladesh grows tea in the Sylhet hills where commercial planting began in 1857, and in Pakistan and Bangladesh the tea stall is a meeting place for friends, workers and arguments about cricket and politics.

8.9 Street Food and Mithai

Street food

Street Food is food made and sold by vendors at stalls, carts and tiny shops, eaten standing up or on the go. It's often cheap, fast, and the thing people

miss most after they move abroad.

One snack shows how street food changes from city to city: a hollow, crisp ball of fried dough filled with potato or chickpeas and dipped in spiced, tangy water. In Mumbai and much of India, and in Nepal, it's called panipuri. In Delhi and Pakistan it's golgappa. In Kolkata and Bangladesh it's phuchka, often sour and very spicy, and in Bangladesh it's filled with chotpoti and topped with egg. Phuchka even crossed oceans: by 2018 a Bangladeshi immigrant was selling it from a cart in Jackson Heights, New York City.

Many other street foods belong to a family called chaat (चाट, *CHAHT*), from the Hindi word for "lick," because they're tangy, sweet and spicy all at once. And street food goes far beyond chaat:

- **Sri Lanka:** kottu roti, chopped flatbread stir-fried on a hot griddle with vegetables, egg or meat. It began as an inexpensive street meal in eastern Sri Lanka in the 1960s or 1970s.
- **Nepal:** momos, steamed dumplings filled with meat or vegetables and served with a tomato-based achar.
- **Pakistan:** nihari, a slow-cooked meat stew whose name comes from the Arabic word for "morning" because it was first a breakfast dish, became a Karachi favorite after 1947, when migrants from north India opened restaurants there.
- **India and Bangladesh:** samosas, pakoras, and endless fried and grilled snacks.

Mithai

Mithai (मिठाई, *mi-THAI*) is the word for South Asian sweets, the kind sold in sweet shops and boxed for guests. In Bangla, sweets are मिष्टि (*MISH-tee*). Many mithai are made from milk: fresh cheese curds (chhena), milk boiled

down until thick (khoa), or sweet yogurt. Others use chickpea flour, nuts, semolina or jaggery.

Some well-known examples:

- Gulab jamun: fried milk-dough balls in rose-scented syrup.
- Rasgulla (roshogolla in Bangla): spongy balls of chhena cooked in light syrup.
- Mishti doi: sweet set yogurt, a specialty of Bogura (Bogra) in Bangladesh and of West Bengal.
- Barfi and laddoo: dense squares and balls of milk, nuts or chickpea flour.
- Sel roti: a ring-shaped sweet bread of rice flour fried for the Nepali festivals Dashain and Tihar.
- Watalappam: a Sri Lankan coconut and jaggery custard linked to the island's Malay community.

Mithai are tied to big moments. Families hand out sweets for good exam results, new babies, weddings, Eid and Diwali, and a box of sweets is one of the most common gifts when visiting someone's home.

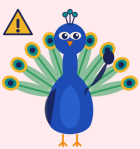
Whose Story?

Who does a dish belong to? In 2017 India's registry of Geographical Indications (labels that tie a product to a place) gave West Bengal a tag for "Banglar Rasogolla," and in 2019 it gave Odisha one for "Odisha Rasagola." Many people in Odisha trace the sweet to offerings at the Jagannath temple in Puri, while many in Bengal credit a Kolkata confectioner, Nobin Chandra Das, in the 1860s, and food historians still disagree about how much evidence supports each story. Biryani's origin is debated in a similar way: some historians credit the Mughal court, others earlier Persian travelers to the Deccan, and Hyderabad, Lucknow, Kolkata, Karachi and Dhaka each defend their own version. The two tags were given to two *different versions*, not to one "true" origin, and that may be the fairest answer.

8.10 Food and Faith

Food in South Asia is closely tied to religion, and many families follow rules about what, when and with whom to eat. **Dietary Rules and Faith** is the name for those rules: the foods a tradition asks its followers to avoid, the ways food must be prepared, and the days for fasting and feasting. Practices vary a great deal, even inside one faith and one family, so the examples below say "many" on purpose.

Ask, don't assume



You can't tell what someone eats from their name, faith or country. If you're hosting, the polite move is simple: ask your guests if there's anything they don't eat, and label dishes at a potluck.

Vegetarianism in South Asia

Vegetarianism in South Asia refers to diets without meat (and often without fish or eggs), which are more common here than almost anywhere else in the world. But "most South Asians are vegetarian" is a myth. A large Pew Research Center survey of nearly 30,000 adults in India, carried out in 2019–2020 and published in 2021, found:

Group (India)	Say they are vegetarian
All adults	39%
Jains	92%
Hindus	44%
Christians	10%
Muslims	8%

The same survey found that 81% of Indian adults limit meat in some way, for example by avoiding certain meats or not eating meat on certain days. People defined "vegetarian" for themselves, and the answers varied by region: among Hindus, vegetarianism was much rarer in the east (18%), northeast (19%) and south (30%) than in the north and west. So most people in India eat some meat, but many have rules about it.

India is only one country, though: in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and the Maldives, where most people are Muslim, meat and fish are everyday foods for those who can afford them, and in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, many people eat fish or meat too.

Rules in different faiths

Here is how a few traditions shape the plate. Remember that observance differs from person to person.

- **Hinduism:** Many Hindu texts praise vegetarianism, and many Hindus avoid beef because the cow is traditionally seen as sacred. Some also avoid onion and garlic; in the Pew survey, about one in five Hindus said they don't eat root vegetables such as onion and garlic.
- **Jainism:** Jains follow ahimsa, non-harm to living beings, very strictly. Their diet excludes meat, fish, eggs and honey, and many Jains avoid root vegetables such as potatoes, onions and garlic, because pulling them up destroys the whole plant and the tiny lives in the soil. Many avoid eating after sunset. Jain families in Gujarat and Rajasthan developed whole styles of cooking without onion and garlic.
- **Islam:** Muslims eat food that is halal (see below) and avoid pork and alcohol. During the month of Ramadan, many Muslims fast from dawn to sunset and break the fast together at iftar, often with dates.
- **Sikhism:** In the same Pew survey, 59% of Sikhs in India said they were vegetarian; others eat meat. Every gurdwara runs a langar (ਲੰਗਰ, *LUNG-gur*), a free community kitchen that serves a vegetarian meal to anyone who comes, of any faith, caste or background, seated together on the floor. Sikh tradition credits Guru Nanak with starting it around 1500, and the third Guru, Guru Amar Das, made eating together a rule. The langar at the Golden Temple in Amritsar serves about 100,000 people a day, cooked by volunteers (2023 report).
- **Buddhism:** Buddhist teaching discourages killing, and some Buddhists are vegetarian, while many in Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Nepal eat fish or meat. Practices differ by community.

Sharing food has also been shaped by caste. For centuries, rules about who could cook for or eat with whom kept people apart. The langar's rule of eating side by side was one challenge to this, and India's Constitution outlawed "untouchability" in 1950. You'll read more in [Chapter 13](#).

Halal

Halal (حلال, *ha-LAHL*) is an Arabic word meaning "permitted." In Islamic law it describes food Muslims may eat. Pork is forbidden (haram), and so are alcohol and blood. For meat to be halal, the animal must be a permitted kind and must be slaughtered in a set way, with the name of God (Allah) said at the moment of slaughter. Most vegetarian food is halal, as long as it has no alcohol or other forbidden ingredients. In Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and the Maldives, halal is the everyday norm, and in the United States, many Muslim families look for a halal butcher or a halal symbol on packages. Halal is a matter of faith and care, much like kosher rules for Jewish families, though the two sets of rules differ in their details.

8.11 At the Table: Hands, Guests and Manners

Eating with hands

In many South Asian homes, people eat with their fingers. **Eating With Hands** is an old and widespread custom, not a sign of having no utensils. Rice is gathered with the fingertips and mixed with dal or curry, and the thumb pushes each bite into the mouth. Roti or naan is torn with one hand and used as a scoop. People usually eat with the right hand only, since the left is used for washing, and wash their hands before and after the meal.

Done well, it's a skill that children learn at the family table, and many people say food tastes better this way. Plenty of families use spoons and forks too,

especially for rice in some regions, at restaurants, or outside the home. Neither way is "more correct."

Hospitality Customs

Hospitality Customs are the expected ways of welcoming and feeding guests. Across South Asia, being a generous host is a matter of family honor. A Sanskrit line from the Taittiriya Upanishad, *atithi devo bhava*, "the guest is like a god," is still quoted in India today. Families in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Nepal have their own sayings and strong traditions of welcoming guests, too.

Some customs that many families share:

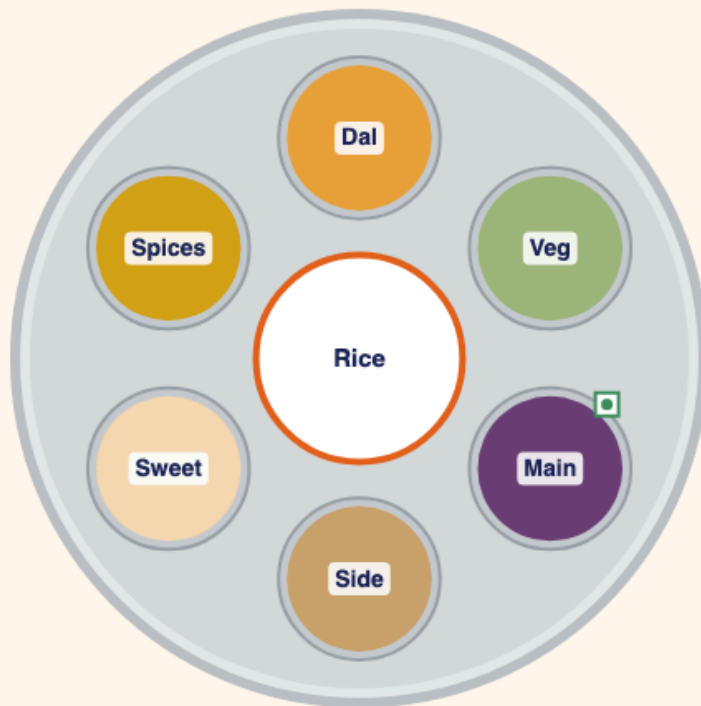
- A guest is offered something right away, usually chai or a cold drink, and a snack or sweet.
- Hosts may offer second and third helpings and insist, even after the guest says no. In many families, a polite guest refuses once before accepting.
- Guests often bring sweets or fruit, and many families never send a guest away with an empty dish: a borrowed container goes back with food in it.
- Elders, guests and sometimes men are served first in more traditional homes, while the cooks (often women) may eat last. Many families have changed this.

When Ben finally sits down with a second plate at the potluck, Zara puts a spoonful of her mother's dal and a piece of fish on it. "Rice in the middle," she says. "Now you're eating like my Nanu." Ayesha adds raita, Arjun adds a little mango pickle, and Dilan brings coconut sambol. Ben looks at the crowded plate. "So there's no one real South Asian meal," he says. "There's a whole map of them." Zara grins. "Now you get it. Every plate is somebody's real meal."

Diagram: Thali Builder

Thali Builder: Regional Plates of South Asia

Pick a region, then click the center or any bowl to learn what is in it.



Bengal Bangladesh and India (West Bengal)

Why here?

Rice and fish country: the wet, warm delta of the Ganga and Brahmaputra floods every monsoon. Rivers and ponds are full of fish.

Staple grain: Bhat (boiled rice)

Rice grows well in the flooded fields of the delta and is eaten at almost every meal.

On this plate

Staple: Bhat (boiled rice)

Dal: Masoor dal

Veg: Shukto

Main: Begun bhaja and mixed vegetables

Side: Bharta and pickle

Sweet: Mishti doi or roshogolla

Spices: Panch phoron, mustard and mustard oil, turmeric

One common example per region. Real families cook many more dishes.

Bengal ▼

Previous

Next

☐ Non-vegetarian version

[Back to Thali Builder Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch08-thali-builder/main.html>

Open the Thali Builder fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Thali Builder

sim-id: ch08-thali-builder

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Analyze

Bloom Verb: compare

Learning Objective: The learner will compare the thalis of seven regions and connect each region's staple grain, dal, vegetables, main dish, sweet and spices to its climate, crops and trade history.

Canvas: responsive width; 560 px drawing area plus 90 px control area.

Controls: Region menu (Punjab, Bengal, Kerala, Gujarat, Sindh, Sri Lanka, Nepal), "Non-vegetarian version" checkbox, Previous and Next region buttons; click or tap any katori on the plate.

Behavior: A round thali with a staple in the center and six katori around it (dal, vegetable, main, side, sweet, spices). Selecting a region refills the plate and shows a "Why here?" note about grain, climate and trade. Clicking a katori shows a short note about that item. The checkbox swaps the main katori between a common vegetarian dish and a common non-vegetarian dish from the same region, with a green or brown marker. No map or borders are drawn.

Start with **Bengal**, then switch to **Punjab**. Click the center of the plate each time and read the "Why here?" note. What changed in the middle of the plate, and why? Then try **Kerala** and **Sri Lanka** and look for the ingredient they share in almost every katori (hint: it grows on palm trees).

Next, tick **Non-vegetarian version** and step through all seven regions with the **Next** button. Notice which main dishes are fish and which are meat, and connect that to whether the region sits on a coast or a delta. Finally, look at **Gujarat**: what does its non-vegetarian note tell you about why that thali is

usually vegetarian? Every plate in the sim is one common example, not the only one. Real families cook many more dishes.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about food: a dish only your family makes, who taught them to cook it, what an ordinary weekday meal looked like when they were young, and the food rules in their house. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Try to do the interview in the kitchen while they cook, or over a cup of chai. Ask if it's okay to take notes or photos of the dish.

Questions to ask

1. What did you eat on an ordinary weekday when you were my age? Who cooked it?
2. Is there a dish that only our family makes, or makes in a special way? Who taught you to make it?
3. What spices go in your tadka or your everyday masala, and why those?
4. Were there food rules in your house, like foods we don't eat, days we fast, or how to serve guests? Where did those rules come from?
5. What ingredients or dishes were hard to find after you moved, and what did you use instead? Has the way our family cooks changed?
6. Which recipe do you most want me to learn and keep making?

Listen for: the family's Staple Grains (rice, wheat or millet), signs of their Regional Cuisine, the spices in their Tadka or Masala, and Dietary Rules and Faith or Hospitality Customs that shape how they cook and serve food.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

? Your turn: compare two answers ✓

Compare your elder's everyday meal with the thali for their region in the Thali Builder, or with the regional table in Section 8.3. What matches, and what's different? If a friend interviewed someone from another country or region, list two differences in staple grain, spices or food rules between the two families, and one thing they have in common.

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: "Curry" is one dish that people eat all over South Asia.

Reality: "Curry" is an English umbrella word, probably borrowed from the Tamil *kari*, that British traders applied to hundreds of different dishes. In South Asia people call dishes by their own names, such as dal, korma, sambar, karahi or jhol, and they taste very different from one another.

Myth: All South Asian food is fiery hot.

Reality: Many dishes are mild, sweet, sour or tangy. Spices like cumin, cardamom, cinnamon and turmeric add flavor, not heat, and many everyday dishes, like a Gujarati dal or Bengali mishti doi, are not spicy at all. Heat levels also vary by region and family.

Myth: Most South Asians are vegetarian.

Reality: In India, the most vegetarian country in the region, 39% of adults said they were vegetarian in a 2019–2020 Pew survey, though 81% limit meat in some way. In Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and the Maldives, most people eat meat or fish, and many people in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan do too.

Myth: Chili peppers are native to India.

Reality: Chilies come from the Americas. Portuguese traders brought them to India in the 1500s, through Goa, as part of the Columbian Exchange. Before that, heat came from black pepper and other local spices.

Myth: Naan is the everyday bread of every South Asian family.

Reality: Naan is baked in a tandoor, which most homes in India don't have, so there it's mainly a restaurant or special-occasion bread. Everyday bread in northern India and much of Pakistan is roti, and in Bengal, Kerala, Sri Lanka and Nepal, rice is the everyday staple. In Afghanistan and many Pakistani cities, though, bakery naan is everyday bread.

Check Yourself

? 1. What is a staple grain, and what are the three main staple grains of South Asia? ✓

A staple grain is the grain a community eats almost every day and builds meals around. In South Asia the three main ones are rice, wheat and millets.

? 2. What is a thali, and what is a katori? ✓

A thali is a large round plate holding a complete meal, with a staple in the middle. Katori are the small bowls around its edge that hold dal, vegetables, a sweet and other dishes.

? 3. What is tadka, and what is panch phoron? ✓

Tadka (tempering) is frying whole spices briefly in hot oil or ghee and pouring them over a dish to add flavor. Panch phoron is a Bengali and Bangladeshi five-seed mix (fenugreek, cumin, nigella, black mustard and fennel) often used for it.

? 4. How did chili peppers reach South Asia? ✓

Chilies are native to the Americas. After 1492 they spread as part of the Columbian Exchange, and Portuguese traders brought them to India through Goa in the 1500s.

? 5. What does halal mean? ✓

Halal is Arabic for "permitted." It describes food Muslims may eat, which excludes pork and alcohol and requires that meat be slaughtered in a set way.

Exercises

Remember

1. Name the five seeds in panch phoron.

 Answer

Fenugreek, cumin, nigella, black mustard and fennel.

2. What share of Indian adults described themselves as vegetarian in Pew's 2019–2020 survey, and what share limit meat in some way?

 Answer

39% said they were vegetarian, and 81% said they limit meat in some way.

Understand

1. Explain why rice is the staple in Bangladesh while wheat is the staple in Punjab.

 Answer

Rice needs heat and lots of water, which the monsoon and the wet Ganga-Brahmaputra delta provide in Bangladesh. Wheat prefers cooler, drier winters and grows well on the irrigated plains of the Indus and its tributaries in Punjab.

2. Explain how chai can be both a result of British colonial business and a South Asian creation.

Answer

British companies grew tea on plantations from the 1830s and ran campaigns in the early 1900s to get Indians to drink it. But people made tea their own way, boiled with lots of milk, sugar and spices, turning it into a drink that is now part of daily life across the region.

Apply

1. Use the Thali Builder to plan a meal for a friend from Kerala who is vegetarian. List what goes in each katori, and explain one choice using what you learned about the region's climate or crops. *Hint: keep the non-vegetarian box unticked and check the "Why here?" note.*
2. Your club is planning a potluck. Write a three-sentence note for the sign-up sheet that helps guests with different dietary rules feel welcome. *Hint: think about labels, halal meat and vegetarian dishes.*

Analyze

1. Compare the thalis of Sindh and Gujarat in the Thali Builder. Which parts are similar, and which are different? Connect at least one difference to faith or food rules and one to geography. *Hint: both regions are dry and both border the Arabian Sea.*
2. Pick one food from the Columbian Exchange (chili, potato, tomato or maize) and trace how it shows up in at least three South Asian dishes from three different countries. *Hint: Section 8.7 has examples; the regional table has more.*

Evaluate

1. West Bengal and Odisha each received a Geographical Indication tag for their own version of the rasgulla. Do you think giving tags to both was a fair decision? Support your view with evidence from the Whose Story? box. *Hint: think about what a GI tag is for.*
2. A restaurant near your school advertises "Authentic Indian curry and naan." Evaluate the phrase using at least two ideas from this chapter. *Hint: what does "curry" mean, and how common is naan at home?*

Create

1. Design a thali for your own family (or an imagined family from a region in this chapter). Draw or describe the plate, name each katori, and write one sentence explaining why each item is there. *Hint: start with the staple grain.*
2. Write a short guide (150 to 200 words) titled "How to Be a Great Guest at a South Asian Home" for a friend like Ben, using what you learned about eating with hands and hospitality customs. *Hint: include what to do when the host offers a third helping.*

Key Takeaways

- What people eat in South Asia depends on staple grains (rice, wheat, millet), which depend on rain, rivers and soil.
- Regional cuisines often cross modern borders: Punjabi food is shared by Pakistan and India, and Bengali food by Bangladesh and India.
- A thali puts a whole meal on one plate. Dal, masala and tadka are building blocks that almost every region uses in its own way.

- Roti is the everyday bread of wheat country, while tandoor-baked naan is everyday bread in some places and a restaurant food in others. Biryani's origin is debated, and every region has its own version.
- Chili peppers, potatoes, tomatoes and maize came from the Americas through the Columbian Exchange, and chai became a daily drink only in the 20th century.
- Faith shapes food: vegetarianism is common in India but not universal (39% of Indian adults in Pew's 2019–2020 survey), halal rules guide Muslim families, and Sikh langars feed everyone together.
- Eating with the right hand and generous hospitality to guests are widely shared customs, though every family does them differently.

Everyone's plate is real



You can now read a thali like a map of grain, rain, trade and faith. Next, in Chapter 9, we listen to South Asia: the ragas, rhythms, qawwalis and film songs that fill the air at those same family gatherings.

Quiz: Food and the Table

Test your understanding of Chapter 8. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

What is a thali?

- A. A spice blend that always includes cinnamon and cloves
- B. A large round plate holding a full meal, with small bowls around a staple
- C. A clay oven used to bake naan
- D. A sweet made from milk boiled down until thick

 **Show Answer**



The correct answer is **B**. A thali is a round plate, usually metal, holding a complete meal: a staple in the center and katori (small bowls) of dal, vegetables, a sweet and more around it. The clay oven is a tandoor, and the spice blend described is a masala.

Concept Tested: Thali **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

Where did chili peppers originally come from?

- A. The Western Ghats of India

- B. The hills of Assam
- C. Persia, by way of the Mughal court
- D. The Americas, carried by Portuguese traders

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. Chili peppers are native to the Americas. They spread around the world in the Columbian Exchange, and Portuguese traders brought them to India through Goa in the 1500s. Many people assume chilies are native to India because they are now used so widely there.

Concept Tested: Columbian Exchange **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

In a 2019–2020 Pew Research Center survey of Indian adults, about what share said they were vegetarian?

- A. 39%
- B. 81%
- C. 92%
- D. 8%

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. 39% of Indian adults said they were vegetarian. 81% is the share who limit meat in some way, 92% is the figure for Jains only, and 8% is the figure for Muslims only.

Concept Tested: Vegetarianism in South Asia **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

Why is rice the staple grain in Bangladesh while wheat is the staple in Punjab?

- A. Religious rules in Bangladesh forbid eating wheat
- B. Wheat was brought by the British and only reached Punjab
- C. Rice needs heat and lots of water, which the delta provides, while wheat grows well in Punjab's cooler, drier winters on irrigated plains
- D. Rice is cheaper to import by sea than wheat

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. Staple grains follow climate and water. The monsoon-soaked Ganga-Brahmaputra delta suits rice, and the irrigated plains of the Indus and its tributaries, with cool winters, suit wheat. No faith in the region forbids wheat, and wheat was grown in South Asia long before British rule.

Concept Tested: Staple Grains **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

Which statement best describes tadka?

- A. Whole spices fried briefly in hot oil or ghee and poured over a dish to add flavor
- B. A ready-made curry powder sold mainly in Europe
- C. A way of slow-cooking rice and meat in layers
- D. A rule about which hand to eat with

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. Tadka (tempering) means frying whole spices for a few seconds in hot fat and pouring the sizzling mix over dal or another dish. Layered rice and meat describes biryani, not tadka.

Concept Tested: Tadka **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

Why is naan less common as everyday home food in India than roti?

- A. Naan is forbidden by several faiths
- B. Naan is usually baked in a tandoor, which most homes don't have
- C. Naan can only be made from millet flour
- D. Naan was invented in the United States

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. Naan is a leavened bread slapped onto the wall of a very hot tandoor oven, so in India it is mostly a restaurant or special-occasion bread. Roti is cooked on a simple flat griddle at home. In Afghanistan and many Pakistani cities, though, bakery naan is everyday bread.

Concept Tested: Roti and Naan **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

Ben is hosting a club movie night. Ayesha keeps halal, Simran's family is vegetarian, and Arjun eats everything. Which plan is most respectful of

everyone's dietary rules?

- A. Order pepperoni pizza, since most people like it
- B. Order only chicken wings and tell everyone to pick off what they can't eat
- C. Order one vegetarian dish and assume it covers everyone
- D. Ask guests about food rules ahead of time, include clearly labeled vegetarian food, and get any meat from a halal source

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. Asking ahead and labeling dishes is the chapter's advice, and halal meat plus vegetarian options covers both guests. Pepperoni usually contains pork, which isn't halal. A single vegetarian dish without asking could still miss other rules, such as avoiding alcohol in sauces.

Concept Tested: Dietary Rules and Faith **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

Zara's Nanu is making dal and starts by frying fenugreek, cumin, nigella, black mustard and fennel seeds in oil. Based on the chapter, which region's tradition is she most likely following?

- A. Punjab
- B. Kerala
- C. Bengal, using panch phoron
- D. Gujarat, using hing alone

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. Those five whole seeds make panch phoron, the five-spice mix used in tadka in Bangladesh and eastern India. That fits Zara's family from Chattogram. Kerala cooks more often temper with mustard seeds and curry leaves.

Concept Tested: Masala **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

West Bengal received a Geographical Indication tag for "Banglar Rasogolla" in 2017, and Odisha received one for "Odisha Rasagola" in 2019. What does this best show?

- A. Two places can each have a real, distinct version of a sweet, and its single origin may stay debated
- B. The government decided Odisha invented the rasgulla
- C. Rasgulla is no longer made in Bengal
- D. Mithai can only be sold where they were invented

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. The tags were given to two different versions of the sweet, not to one "true" origin, and the history of where rasgulla began is still debated. The 2019 tag did not cancel West Bengal's tag or declare an inventor.

Concept Tested: Mithai **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

Which comparison best explains why Bhutan's ema datshi and Punjab's makki di roti are both examples of the Columbian Exchange?

- A. Both were invented by Portuguese cooks in Goa
- B. Both depend on crops from the Americas: chili in ema datshi and maize in makki di roti
- C. Both are sweets served at festivals
- D. Both use wheat brought from Europe

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Ema datshi is built on chili peppers and makki di roti on maize, and both crops came from the Americas after 1492. Local cooks, not Portuguese ones, created these dishes from the new ingredients.

Concept Tested: Columbian Exchange **Bloom's Level:** Analyze