

# Kitchen Ritual

You'll leave Radha Lakshmi's house with your heart (and belly) full. —ALYSSA BRANDT

→“I LOVE RITUALS,” SAYS RADHA LAKSHMI, WHICH makes sense, since her Introduction to South Indian Cooking classes have quietly built a word-of-mouth following over the last year. Conducted in groups of six to eight in the kitchen of the Walnut Hills home she shares with her partner, Joel Mellon, Lakshmi's cooking workshops don't follow a traditional step-by-step model; participation means sharing food, but also history, culture, and stories. Like this one: “When my daughter was pregnant, I got a garland made with all jasmine flowers and I called some of my friends, some of her friends [to] bless her,” Lakshmi recalls. “She falls on her knees and bows down to them and they all touch her back to bless the baby. It's a ritual of community, women, and everyone wanting this child to be safe. Cooking is a ritual, too. It's like thanking Mother Earth for her abundance.”

An evening in Lakshmi's kitchen is not about making perfect ghee—although she can certainly show you how. It's more of a food happening; an evening to absorb aromas, like mustard and cumin seed dry frying in a cast iron skillet, and explore unfamiliar flavors, like the smoky bite of a raw curry leaf, or the complexity of a garlic and green chili chutney. The object is to share and make memories. Many of Lakshmi's recipes were handed down from her grandmother to her mother in Kerala, and then to young Radha, growing up in Chennai. Experience is not required, only a sense of adventure. Forget about taking notes—there are too many stories crackling through the air. And besides, Lakshmi sends you home with a printed recipe recap so you can try your hand at the toothsome vegetarian dishes you eat together at the end of the workshop: crispy yet tender potato curry with peas, crunchy Indian slaw with tamarind sauce, impossibly fluffy, delicately seasoned rice, and creamy onion-tomato raita.

Lakshmi is also a print maker and mixed media artist who came to the States in 1987. She earned her BFA at the Art Academy of Cincinnati and her MFA at The University of Wisconsin, Madison. Her most recent commission was a series of mandalas for the new Proton Therapy Center at the Children's Hospital Liberty campus. She's always cooked for friends, but when she and Mellon saw the newly installed kitchen in their Walnut Hills rental, Radha knew she'd found the right space for classes. “It's like an art form,” she says. “When people come here, I want them to have that sense of family. That sense I feel when my heart is so full. They leave with their hearts full and it's a win-win situation.”



 Radha Lakshmi,  
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**RECIPE**

**RADHA'S GRANDMOTHER'S SPICE BLEND**

(MAKES ABOUT 4 SERVINGS)

**INGREDIENTS:**

- ½ CUP CURRY LEAVES (AVAILABLE AT ANY INDIAN GROCERY STORE)
- ½ CUP RED WHOLE CHILIES
- ¼ CUP YELLOW SPLIT PEAS
- ¼ CUP CORIANDER SEEDS
- 2 TBSP CUMIN SEEDS
- 1 TBSP MUSTARD SEEDS
- 1 TBSP PEPPER CORNS
- ½ CUP FRESH OR UNSWEETENED COCONUT FLAKES

- 1** Combine all ingredients in a heavy-bottomed sauté pan. Lakshmi prefers cast iron.
- 2** Toast the spices over low to medium heat until golden brown and extremely fragrant, stirring constantly. This process should take 15-20 minutes. If the spices begin to turn overly brown, lower the heat.
- 3** Remove the spices to a plate to cool.
- 4** Once completely cool, grind the spices to a powder in a spice or coffee grinder. The spice powder will warm during the grinding process. Allow to cool completely before storing in a tightly sealed glass jar. Spices will keep, at room temperature, for 2-3 months.



**Spice Island**

Cooking classes in Radha Lakshmi's kitchen (top left) are always filled with stories and laughter. Lakshmi demonstrates toasting her grandmother's spice blend in a cast-iron pan (center), which she uses on roasted heirloom potatoes (center right). Participants help assemble dishes, including Indian broccoli slaw with tamarind sauce (center bottom), before sitting down to share the meal together (bottom right).