

Delicious Indian Chaat

Spicy fruit and vegetable salads are perfect “fast food” for hot weather

BY BHARTI KIRCHNER



This simple brown powder gives chaat its personality. Chaat powders can contain dozens of ingredients, and the powders you can buy in Indian groceries contain herbs and spices that are virtually unavailable in America. It's relatively easy, however, to find ingredients that will allow you to make your own.



Chaat combines the sweet and the savory. Here, papayas blend with red onions, jalapeños, and lime juice for a zingy fruit salad.

The tangy, fresh salads called *chaats* are wildly popular across Northern India, where I grew up. Mostly known as “fast food,” *chaats* are sold by vendors who line the streets outside school gates, museums, and movie theaters. India is still marked by castes, but rickshaw puller and corporate executive alike gladly line up together for *chaat*.

Unlike American fast food, *chaats* are nothing but fresh. These salads are light, juicy, crunchy, spicy, easy to make, and can serve as appetizers,

snacks, or side dishes. They also require minimal cooking, which is always a bonus when preparing food at home during one of India's blistering summer days.

THE CHARM OF CHAAT

While there are many different kinds of *chaat* (pronounced CHAHT), all take their charm from the same elements: spice, crunch, sweetness, juiciness, and tartness.

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The crunch can be provided by a vegetable (cool chunks of cucumber, shreds of cabbage, or diced sweet red onion), but *chaat* vendors often give their salads crunch with fried *papri*. These small puffs are cut from a wheat dough and deep-fried. But *papri* is something that's best enjoyed at the *chaat* stand, where their constant preparation guarantees crisp *papri* chips. At home, it takes too long to fry a batch of *papri* large enough to serve four people. By the time the last batch is done, the first will have lost much of its crunch. That's why I recommend tortilla chips—the ones you'd use to scoop salsa—as a *papri* substitute. Mexican tortilla chips are not at all traditional to *chaats*, but they provide the right crispness and textural interest.

Water-rich fruits and vegetables make *chaat* a refreshing snack, even a thirst quencher. They also provide a cooling effect that contrasts nicely with the hot spices. Soothing yogurt is also sometimes mixed with spices to top *chaat*.

There's a gentle sweetness that laces many *chaats*. Occasionally its source is simple sugar, but the sweetness usually comes from subtler sources, such as date-rich chutneys, fruits, or even sweet vegetables like corn and tomatoes. The sweetness never has a chance to become cloying; it's always countered by a measure of tartness, often from the lime juice that dresses the salad. Tartness is essential to *chaat*.

THE RIGHT SPICE

Without the right spices, a *chaat* is just a well-composed salad. That's why Indian groceries sell a blend of herbs and spices called *chaat* powder that immediately makes a salad taste like *chaat*. It's hard to define this powder's alchemy; the *chaat* blend seems to have no home other than in *chaats*, and no *chaat* is complete without it. The powder gives *chaat* its distinctively sweet-sour-savory-spicy flavor. All *chaat* vendors know the value of this stuff; each has his own secret blend. I often buy the prepared *chaat* powder because it contains hard-to-find herbs and spices; however, I offer a recipe for making a simpler version (see p. 67).

Since my recipes are adaptations of the street vendor's originals, not all of them use *chaat* powder, but every recipe does contain at least a few elements found in that characteristic blend. The most distinctive of these spices—and probably the ingredient most responsible for making a *chaat* taste like a *chaat*—is black salt. Black salt isn't really black; it's a pinkish-gray rock salt from India. It has a distinct, even slightly sulfurous odor, but it's worth any nose-wrinkling; even a small sprinkling of it adds an appealing earthy flavor to *chaat*. Don't omit it or substitute white salt. The two salts taste nothing alike, and there is no substitute for black salt.

Finally, follow the *chaat* vendor's cue and make *chaats* just before serving. They can be served cold, but this is an American habit. In India, where refrigerators aren't as common, *chaats* are served at room temperature. Although I've lived in America for more than 20 years, I still prefer eating *chaat* at room temperature. Eating cooled salads can numb the tongue, and I want to savor every juicy, crunchy, spicy bite.

LEMONY CORN CHAAT

(*Bhutta chaat*)

This delightful salad of corn, cucumber, sweet onion, and tomatoes is best in the summer, when fresh corn and vine-ripened tomatoes are abundant. Serves four.

1 cup fresh corn kernels or frozen corn (thawed)

2 Tbs. fresh lemon juice

1 tsp. grated fresh ginger

1 jalapeño, cored, seeded, and minced

1 Tbs. minced cilantro leaves

½ tsp. black salt

Dash cayenne

1 cup peeled, seeded, and diced cucumber

1 cup diced red onion

1 cup seeded and diced tomatoes

Salt to taste

Ground toasted cumin seeds (optional)

Steam or boil the corn just until tender. Cool to room temperature.

Combine the lemon juice, ginger, jalapeño, cilantro, black salt, and cayenne in a large bowl; mix well. Add the corn, cucumber, onion, and tomatoes, and toss gently to coat the vegetables. Add salt to taste. If you like, sprinkle with ground cumin seeds before serving.

(Continued)



This corn salad is great for picnics. Tomatoes and corn are always summertime favorites, but the addition of fresh ginger and black salt makes this combination truly memorable.

A chaat glossary

While you'll be familiar with most of the seasonings used in *chaats*, some will be quite new unless you're well acquainted with Indian cuisine. Take the time to find the unfamiliar spices, which have no substitutes; they're available at most Indian groceries and from mail-order suppliers (see sources at right). This glossary should help you understand the spices, as well as what purpose they serve in the *chaat*.

◆ **ASAFETIDA.** This is the dried gum resin of a plant related to fennel. Asafetida is available in lump form if you want to grind it yourself, and as a powder. To use it, add a small amount to hot oil and sauté the spice to release its flavor. When heated, the scent of asafetida is very similar to that of onions and garlic.

◆ **CUMIN SEED.** You've probably used ground cumin, but the ground cumin used both in preparing *chaat* powder and as a final garnish should be made from whole cumin seeds that you toast and grind yourself. The flavor difference is incomparable. Put the cumin seeds in a dry skillet over medium heat, stirring frequently and watching them carefully. In a matter of minutes, the seeds will turn medium brown and become very fragrant. Immediately remove them from the heat and grind them to a powder in a spice grinder or with a mortar and pestle.

◆ **MANGO POWDER.** This brown powder, also called *amchoor*, is made from dried, unripe mangoes. It adds a pleasant tartness to *chaat*.

◆ **MUSTARD SEEDS, BROWN OR BLACK.** These seeds are smaller than the more common yellow variety. They add crunch and a mild, toasty flavor. Before adding them to *chaat*, quickly sauté them in a little oil until they pop.

◆ **TAMARIND.** The dried pulp of the fruit of the tamarind tree adds a complex sourness to *chaat*. The recipes in this article call for tamarind concentrate, which is available in jars.



Hot oil releases asafetida's flavor. Here, the oil has been heated in a kadhai (an Indian wok) before adding the asafetida, a gum resin that tastes and smells very much like onions and garlic when it's added to hot oil.

SOURCES FOR CHAAT INGREDIENTS

Adriana's Caravan, 409 Vanderbilt St., Brooklyn, NY 11218; 800/316-0820 or 718/436-8565.

Foods of India, 121 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10016; 212/683-4419.

Herb 'n' Lore, 11 Nadine Ct., Thousand Oaks, CA 91320; 805/499-7505. (Checks and money orders only.)

Indian Grocery Store, 2342 Douglas Rd., Coral Gables, FL 33134; 305/448-5869. (Certified checks, money orders, and CODs only.)

Seema Enterprises, 10616 Page Ave., St. Louis, MO 63132; 314/423-9990 or 314/391-5914.

CHICKPEA & ARUGULA SALAD

(*Chhole chaat*)

In a twist on this Indian favorite, I add arugula leaves, which give a distinctively nutty taste. Cool yogurt and spicy tamarind sauces are drizzled on top. *Serves four.*

FOR THE YOGURT SAUCE:

1 cup nonfat or low-fat plain yogurt, stirred until smooth
¼ cup nonfat or low-fat milk, more if necessary
2 tsp. sugar
Salt to taste
Pinch cayenne

FOR THE TAMARIND SAUCE:

8 pitted dates
1 jalapeño, cored, seeded, and chopped
1 tsp. minced fresh ginger
1 tsp. tamarind concentrate
¾ cup water
Salt to taste

FOR THE SALAD:

3 cups home-cooked or canned chickpeas, drained
1 tsp. ground cumin
Black salt to taste
Tortilla chips
1 cup chopped arugula

For the yogurt sauce—Combine the yogurt, milk, sugar, salt, and cayenne in a small bowl. Stir until smooth, adding a little more milk as needed to make a pourable sauce.

For the tamarind sauce—Process the dates, jalapeño, ginger, tamarind, water, and salt in a food processor until smooth. The sauce should be the texture of warm preserves; add a little water if the mixture is too thick.

For the salad—Heat the oven to 350°F. Combine the chickpeas, cumin, and black salt in a bowl and mix well. Spread the mixture on a baking sheet and bake for 15 min., or just until the tops of the chickpeas are lightly browned.

Crush a few tortilla chips and put them on individual serving plates. Arrange the chickpeas and arugula over the chips. Drizzle the yogurt and tamarind sauces over the salad and serve immediately.



Tortilla chips make a good substitute for traditional Indian papri chips in chhole chaat, one of India's favorites. Spice-tossed chickpeas are dressed with two sauces—one made with yogurt, the other with tamarind. The author adds arugula to her version.



Delicious chaat or fat-free potato salad? Cilantro, jalapeños, and lime juice create a spicy paste that's tossed with warm boiled potatoes. The potatoes quickly absorb the tangy dressing, ensuring intense flavors in every bite.

FRUIT SALAD WITH CHILE-LIME DRESSING

(Pepe chaat)

I like to use firm, ripe papayas for this dish, but apples also work well. Serves four.

- 3 Tbs. fresh lime juice
- 2 jalapeños, cored, seeded, and minced
- ½ tsp. sugar
- ¼ tsp. black salt
- 3 cups cubed, firm, peeled papaya or unpeeled apples
(Gala or another firm, sweet apple)
- 1 cup coarsely chopped red onion
- 1 tsp. canola oil
- ¼ tsp. asafetida powder
- ¼ tsp. black mustard seeds

Combine the lime juice, jalapeños, sugar, and black salt in a large bowl. Add the papaya and onion; toss until well coated.

Heat the oil in a small skillet over medium-low heat until sizzling. Sprinkle the asafetida powder over the oil. Add the mustard seeds and cook until the seeds begin to pop. Pour this mixture over the fruit and stir.

Taste and add more black salt if necessary. You can serve this *chaat* immediately or chill it for up to 3 hours.

TANGY POTATO CHAAT

(Alu chaat)

For those concerned with the fat content of most potato salads, this *chaat* is ideal. Potatoes are steeped in a fat-free lime dressing and tossed with chiles, cilantro, and fresh ginger. The result is a tangy blend of diverse and complementary flavors. Serves three to four.

- ¼ cup coarsely chopped cilantro
- 1 Tbs. cored, seeded, and chopped jalapeño
- 8 to 10 fresh mint leaves
- 1 Tbs. coarsely chopped fresh ginger

- 1½ lb. waxy potatoes (preferably Yellow Finn or Yukon Gold), peeled and cut into 1½-in. cubes
- ¼ cup freshly squeezed lime juice
- ½ tsp. chaat powder (see recipe below)
- ½ tsp. salt

Put the cilantro, jalapeño, mint, and ginger in a food processor and process until finely chopped. Set aside.

Steam or boil the potatoes until they can be pierced easily with a fork, 15 to 20 min.

Meanwhile, mix the lime juice, *chaat* powder, and salt in a large bowl. Add the cooked, drained potatoes and toss gently to coat; they will absorb the juice quickly. Add the herb paste and toss again. Taste and adjust seasonings. Serve immediately or chill for 45 min. and serve cold.

CHAAT POWDER

This is the most basic version of the spice mix that gives a *chaat* its distinctive flavor. I like to make it in small amounts to preserve the spices' freshness. Yields about 1 tablespoon.

- 2 tsp. mango powder
- Scant ¼ tsp. whole cumin, toasted and ground
- ¼ tsp. ground ginger
- ¼ tsp. black salt
- ½ tsp. asafetida powder
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Dash cayenne

Combine all ingredients. Grind to a fine powder in a mortar and pestle or a spice grinder. Store in a tightly covered jar.

Bharti Kirchner is the author of Indian Inspired and The Healthy Cuisine of India. Her third cookbook, The Bold Vegetarian, was published this year by HarperCollins. ♦