

'Ignore the recipe, cook with your heart'

There's more than just heat in a Goan kitchen. Rachel Foster visits a cookery school in southern India where pride and passion are on the menu

Cook like a ninja! I'm frying onions under the watchful gaze of Judy Cardoza in her kitchen in Goa. I'm not sure how ninjas cook but Judy's frown tells me they probably don't burn their onions. 'It will ruin the flavour, the dish will be too bitter,' she warns and I have to start all over again.

Fortunately her attention is diverted from my efforts by the sight of another of her pupils stirring his biryani in a cold, unloving manner. 'Cook with your heart!' she yells. 'Food just HAS to be delicious.'

Judy Cardoza is passionate about Indian cuisine. She has been cooking since the age of 14, when she would sneak into her mother's kitchen, which was strictly off limits, and spend hours secretly experimenting with different flavours and spices. The thrill of the prohibited made it all the more enjoyable for her. Now her passion has found a legitimate outlet teaching five-day cookery courses specialising in the food of southern India.

Every day a taxi-van arrives at 9am to pick me up from my hotel in Calangute. It's a 30-minute drive to Judy's heavily gated Portuguese-style colonial mansion overlooking the Mandovi river in Betim and we pick up my fellow novice chefs en route. There's twenty-something Nick who is taking time out in nearby Anjuna and wants to learn how to cook to impress a female friend; Sandee from Scotland, a mother of two, who is now on her third visit to Goa and wants to convert her husband to the joys of curry; and Australian Morag who works on a luxury yacht owned by a wealthy businessman, who wants her to learn how to cook his favourite Indian dishes.



As a child, Judy Cardoza would sneak into her mother's kitchen and experiment with flavours.

On our first day Judy instils her philosophy into us. Her style is rigorous – vegetables must be chopped into perfect neat slices; vessels need to be HOT! before anything enters the pan; timing is everything – and yet instinctive.

'Don't follow a recipe book word for word, go by your feeling instead,' she tells us. 'Cook with an open mind, make it a unique and individual experience. No two masalas will be the same. If you cook a masala on a Tuesday, it will be different to one you cook on a Thursday.'

Judy is a quietly imposing figure, but occasionally she throws down her utensils in disgust when we get it wrong. She doesn't flinch when the flames of my chicken cafreal go gushing up to the ceiling.

Our recipe books are divided into three sections: the north, the south and sweet north. During the week we learn some recipes from the north, which tend to be heavier, meat-based dishes such as softian biryani and chicken tikka. Dishes from the south of India are more likely to be vegetarian and tend to involve a lot of coconut and local spices (masalas).

My favourite recipe has to be the Goan fish curry. Coconut oil is used instead of olive oil and Judy shuns American long grain rice in favour of basmati every time. (Apparently it's also better for your digestion.)

'Indian cooking in the west is



Tourists shopping at a market in Goa where there is a vast choice of herbs and spices to flavour the local dishes. Photograph by AFP



often very artificial,' says Judy as she shows us how to achieve what she calls 'eye appeal', using colourful spices such as Kashmiri chilli powder. She insists on making everything from scratch – even the cardamom tea we have on our well-earned break.

As the week unfolds it becomes clear that much of the Indian food served in restaurants in the west is a distortion. The pakoras and bhajis we make in class are tiny, dainty little things, unlike the humongous bloated ones served up back home in Britain.

Goan cuisine has been influenced from a blend of cultures throughout the centuries. But it was refreshing to discover the basic components of Goan cooking are local products, such as the coconut, which is used not just for cooking but also as a material for building roofs.

A trip to the colourful and chaotic Mapusa market halfway through the five-day course provided us with the opportunity to purchase a vast range of local herbs and spices, cooking utensils, fish, vegetables and fruit at bargain prices.

Sandee felt her approach to Indian cooking had been revolutionised: 'I have learnt so much and what sticks in my mind most is that we must always use fresh produce – my spice cupboard is now officially binned.'

Lessons finish at lunchtime, with the

Judy shows us how to achieve what she calls 'eye appeal' using colourful spices

chance to sit around the table and sample each other's cooking. Then it's back to the hotel for a lazy afternoon by the hotel swimming pool. On the last day I proudly make gulab jamuns, which are round balls of dough that taste like doughnuts.

We wash them down with home-made lassi (a refreshing drink made from yoghurt, fruit, cardamom and ice). 'A typical south Indian home will be full of loud slurping noises at eating time,' says Judy. 'Using hands to eat is a must, as long as the food doesn't drip below the wrist.'

At night we visit the local beach bars: Britto's for the most amazing array of desserts; La Dolce Vita, where the jetset of Goa chill out; and the Mayonna bar for all night rock'n'roll.

Judy's cookery school has helped to demystify Indian cooking and I no longer feel even remotely dazzled by an Indian restaurant menu. I confess I am hooked, but after a long morning working over a hot stove, I can't wait to get back to the beach at the end of class and leap into the sea.

ESSENTIALS

Rachel Foster travelled to Goa with On the Go Tours (020 7371 1113; www.indiaonthe menu.com), which offers cooking holidays in destinations such as Morocco, Mexico and Jordan. An eight-day cooking course in Goa costs from £549pp including accommodation at the three-star Casa de Goa in Calangute, excluding flights. Jet Airways (0800 026 5626; www.jetair ways.com) flies from London to Goa (via Mumbai) from £450pp.

