

burmese, if you please

SIMPLE YET EXOTIC FARE FROM
ASIA'S COLORFUL COUNTRY

By John Feffer
Photography by Renée Comet
Styling by Lisa Cherkasky

When Aung Myint's family took over a doughnut shop several years ago in College Park, Maryland, they continued to sell crullers and jelly-filled doughnuts even as the cognoscenti crowded around the few tables to eat ginger salad and yellow beans with thousand-layer pancakes. "We weren't sure if Burmese food would work," Aung Myint says in the family's still-popular and now doughnut-free Mandalay restaurant. "Half the people you meet don't even know where Burma is."

Located smack in the middle of Southeast Asia, Burma—today know as Myanmar—is a storybook

country of fabled beauty: Lush tropical jungles, inland lakes, rugged mountainous areas and expansive plains fuse into an exotic landscape dotted with shimmering and elaborate gilded pagodas. Home to a heterogeneous and primarily Buddhist people, Burma also provides the setting for a distinctly unique cuisine that may deserve credit for being the world's ultimate fusion food.

Borrowing from the cooking traditions of neighboring Thailand, India and China, Burmese cooks

▼ have developed a cuisine suited to the country's sultry, fiery climate. Mealtimes feature smooth Indian-like curries, crunchy salads and vegetable dishes with Thai piquancy and spirit, and rice and noodle dishes that reflect strong Chinese influences. But, in general, because it relies on less sugar and fewer hot spices, Burmese cooking does not have the burn of Indian or Thai food, nor does it have the sweetness of many Chinese dishes.

Avoiding these extremes, the cuisine, nevertheless, manages to produce a range of intense flavors that certainly kick vegetarian food up a notch. For flavor shadings, cooks rely on turmeric, ginger, salt, sugar, garlic, galangal, onions and lemongrass—and some chilies. For vegetarians, the key stumbling block to enjoying the cuisine may be the omnipresence of *ngapi*, the salty fermented preparation made from either fish or shrimp. But both restaurant and home cooks respect vegetarian needs by substituting “white” soy sauce, a very pale soy sauce that relies more on wheat than on soy in the fermentation process for its saltiness.

Since rice is Burma's staple crop, no meal is complete without rice as the basis for the assorted salads, soups, vegetable curries, stir-fries and noodle dishes that feature the distinctive ingredients of the Burmese kitchen. For vegetarians, the discovery of such culinary diversity appeals.

As more Westerners become aware of this eclectic cuisine, more are willing to sample its curries and stir-fries. That's good news for Burmese restaurants such as Mandalay and the Myanmar Restaurant in Falls Church, Virginia. And that's good news for home cooks, who, with the growth of Asian staples in American markets, can easily reproduce the foods of this exotic Asian country.

ThaYat Thee Thoke (Green Mango Salad)

SERVES 2

This is a refreshing salad with just a hint of sweetness from the mango. Make sure that the mango is hard on the outside and green on the inside. You can buy roasted red chilies, chickpea flour and crispy shallots at most Asian markets. Recipe from Myanmar Restaurant, Falls Church, Virginia.

- ½ medium-sized onion, diced
- 2 Tbs. vegetable oil
- 2 cloves garlic, very thinly sliced
- 1 green mango, peeled and shredded
- 2 cups finely shredded green cabbage
- 2 Tbs. chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 tsp. low-sodium or “white” soy sauce
- 2 tsp. crushed roasted red chilies
- 1 Tbs. roasted peanuts, crushed
- 2 tsp. chickpea flour
- 2 tsp. fried shallots or onions

1. Soak onion in water to remove sharp taste. Heat vegetable oil in large skillet over medium heat, and sauté garlic until brown, for about 2 minutes. Remove garlic from oil, reserve oil and set garlic aside.

2. Combine mango, onion, cabbage, cilantro and garlic in large bowl. In separate bowl, combine garlic, oil and soy sauce. Toss mango mixture with oil. Garnish with red chilies, peanuts, chickpea flour and fried shallots, toss and serve.

PER SERVING: 220 CAL; 4G PROT; 17G TOTAL FAT (1.5G SAT. FAT); 16G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 150MG SOD; 5G FIBER; 5G SUGARS

Gin Thoke (Ginger Salad)

SERVES 3

Ginger salad is often served as an appetizer in the United States but as a dessert or palate cleanser in Burma. Select the youngest and freshest ginger possible, avoiding any dried or discolored pieces. For a different, sweeter taste, try substituting red pickled ginger.

- ½ cup very thinly sliced fresh ginger
- 3 Tbs. fresh lime juice
- 1 Tbs. sesame seeds
- 2 Tbs. peanut oil
- 2 Tbs. sliced garlic
- 1 small tomato, coarsely chopped
- 1 cup diced cabbage
- 3 Tbs. ground roasted peanuts
- 2 Tbs. low-sodium or “white” soy sauce
- 1 Tbs. chickpea flour
- Hot green chilies, minced, optional

1. Combine ginger and 2 tablespoons lime juice, and set aside to marinate for a minimum of 2 hours.

2. Dry-roast sesame seeds in large skillet over medium-low heat until fragrant, about 3 minutes, stirring constantly to prevent burning. Remove from heat, and set aside. Heat oil in same skillet over medium heat, and sauté garlic slices until brown, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat, and set aside.

3. Squeeze lime juice from ginger. Combine ginger, tomato, cabbage, peanuts, garlic, remaining oil and sesame seeds. Add soy sauce and remaining lime juice. Sprinkle with chickpea flour, and toss. Garnish with finely chopped chilies, if using.

PER SERVING: 200 CAL; 5G PROT; 15G TOTAL FAT (2G SAT. FAT); 13G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 270MG SOD; 2G FIBER; 3G SUGARS

Kazun Ywek Thoke (Watercress Salad)

SERVES 6

30 MINUTES OR LESS

Burmese cooks would use Chinese watercress, but Western watercress works fine.

- 3 Tbs. vegetable oil
- 1 onion, sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, sliced
- 1½ Tbs. sesame seeds
- 2 scallions, thinly sliced
- 1 tsp. crushed red pepper, or to taste
- 2 Tbs. soy sauce
- 1½ Tbs. granulated sugar
- Salt to taste
- 2 Tbs. white vinegar

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½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
2 bunches watercress, rinsed and trimmed into 1-inch lengths

1. Heat oil in a skillet over medium heat. Sauté onion and garlic until golden, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat, and set aside. In a dry skillet, toast sesame seeds over medium-low heat until fragrant, about 3 minutes, stirring constantly to avoid burning. Remove from heat, and set aside.

2. Combine onion and garlic with scallions, crushed red pepper, soy sauce, sugar, salt, vinegar and black pepper, stirring to mix well. Add watercress, and toss again to coat leaves. Garnish with sesame seeds, and serve.

PER SERVING: 130 CAL; 2G PROT; 8G TOTAL FAT (0.5G SAT. FAT); 11G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 150MG SOD; <1G FIBER; 5G SUGARS

Wine Suggestions

Don't overwhelm the wonders of this salad—the crunchy texture and fresh-spring flavor would go well with a crisp chenin blanc from either Dry Creek in California or Hogue Cellars in Washington state.

Aloo Hin (Potato Curry)

SERVES 4

Most Burmese curries use the same base—onions, garlic, ginger and turmeric pounded into a paste. Using a food processor speeds up the mixing process. You can substitute other vegetables such as okra or cauliflower, or increase the proportions for the pureed onion mix, making a mixed vegetable curry. Traditional Burmese curries usually contain more oil than Americans would normally use, so if you prefer, reduce the amount of oil. Although the amounts seem small, this curry should be ample when served with rice and other dishes.

1 large onion
1 Tbs. minced garlic
1 Tbs. minced fresh ginger
1 tsp. ground turmeric
1 tsp. red chili powder
½ cup vegetable oil
1 Tbs. sesame oil
4 medium-sized or 3 large potatoes, peeled and cut into chunks

Salt to taste
Fresh cilantro leaves for garnish

1. Place onion, garlic and ginger in food processor with about ¼ cup water, and purée. Add turmeric and chili.

2. Heat vegetable oil in skillet over medium heat, and sauté onion paste, adding enough water to prevent burning. Cook until onion paste darkens.

3. Add sesame oil, 1 cup water and potatoes. Reduce heat to medium-low, and cook until potatoes are soft. Add water if mixture begins to stick, and season with salt. Remove from heat, garnish with cilantro and serve.

PER SERVING: 260 CAL; 5G PROT; 9G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT. FAT); 42G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 20MG SOD; 5G FIBER; 4G SUGARS

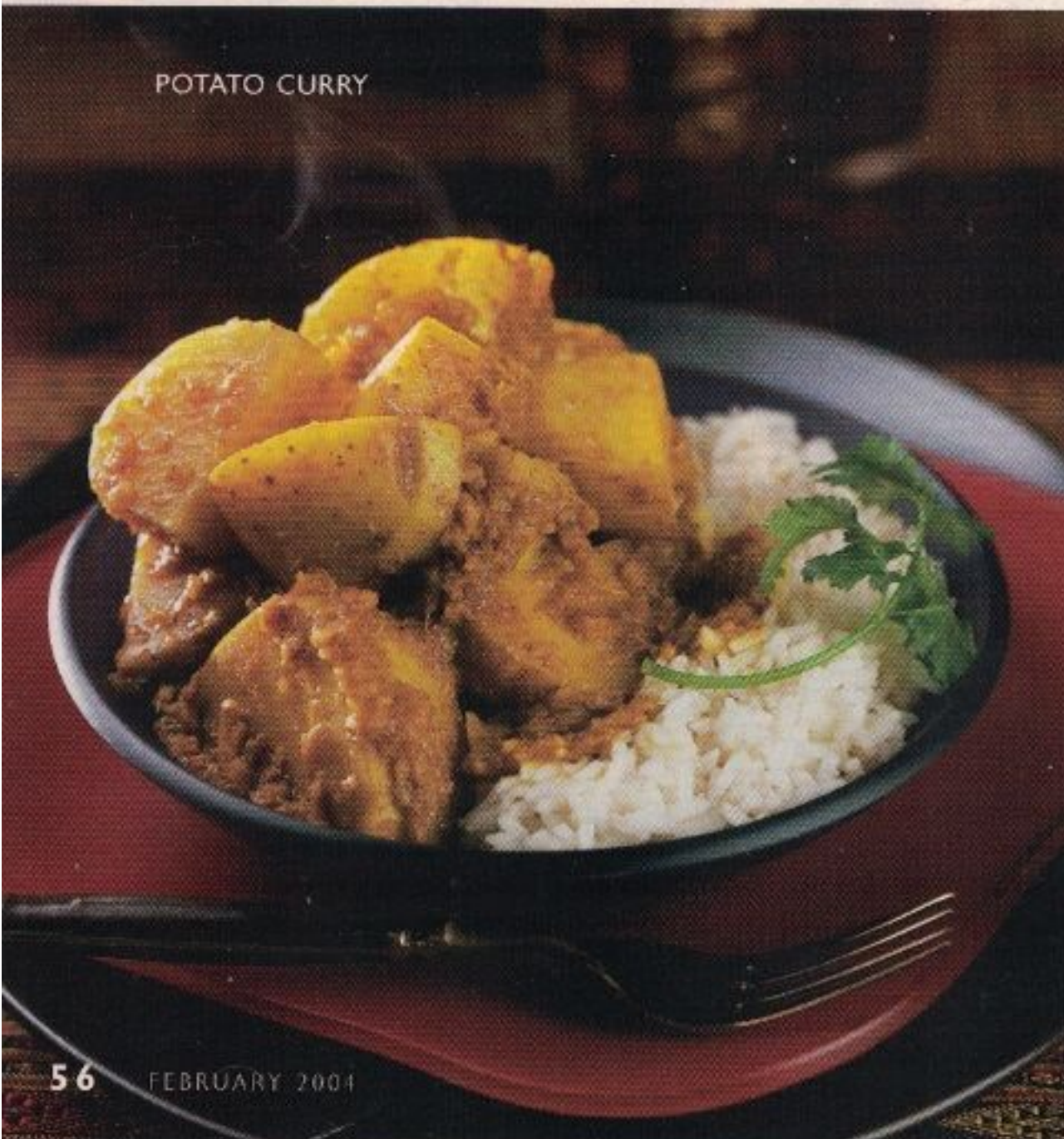
Panthay Khauk-swe (Burmese-Style "Chicken" and Noodle Curry)

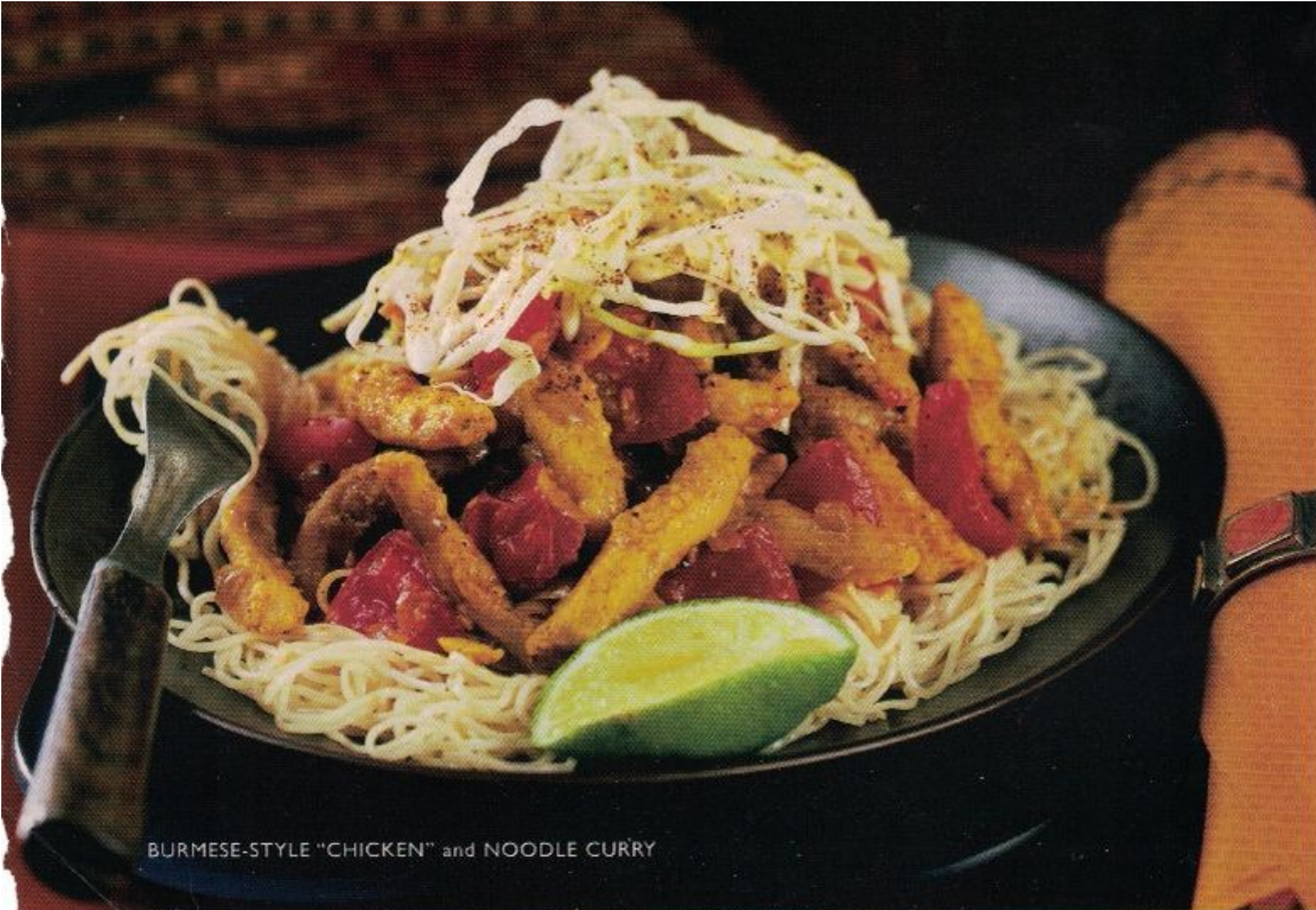
SERVES 6

This simple, no-fuss meal calls for fresh egg noodles, which cook up in 3 to 4 minutes. If these are not available, you may use any dried, spaghetti-like pasta, but allow for a longer cooking time. Look for the Indian spice garam masala in the spice section of your supermarket.

1 lb. fresh Chinese egg noodles or ½ lb. dried spaghetti
3 cloves garlic, peeled and minced
1-inch piece fresh ginger, minced
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. garam masala
3 6-oz. pkg. soy "chicken" strips
3 Tbs. vegetable oil
1 large onion, diced, plus 1 large onion, thinly sliced
2 tomatoes, finely chopped
1 tsp. paprika
1 tsp. ground cayenne pepper
1 tsp. ground turmeric
½ tsp. ground cumin
1 cup water, or more if needed
½ head green cabbage, cored and thinly sliced for garnish
3 limes, cut into wedges for garnish
Cayenne pepper for garnish

POTATO CURRY





BURMESE-STYLE "CHICKEN" and NOODLE CURRY

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil, and cook noodles until tender. Remove from heat, drain and set aside.
 2. Combine garlic, ginger, salt and garam masala in a large bowl. Add "chicken" strips, and coat each piece with mixture.
 3. Heat oil in a large wok or saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and tomatoes, and cook, stirring and sprinkling with paprika, cayenne and turmeric. Cook until onions soften and mixture thickens, for about 5 minutes, sprinkling with a little water if needed to prevent sticking.
 4. Add "chicken" and 1 cup water, reduce heat to low, cover and cook for about 10 minutes, or until mixture thickens.
 5. To serve, arrange a portion of noodles on each plate, and serve "chicken" over noodles. Garnish each serving with cabbage. Pass lime wedges and cayenne.
- PER SERVING: 340 CAL; 22G PROT; 11G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT. FAT); 46G CARB; 30MG CHOL; 590MG SOD; 9G FIBER; 11G SUGARS

Wine Suggestions

This is an unusual dish, so try an unusual white. Hedges Columbia Valley Fume Chardonnay has a slightly floral aroma and finish and would go nicely with the spiciness of the curry. The Jefferson Vineyards Viognier from Virginia, a light straw-colored white that's ever so slightly sweet, is another good choice.

Sanwinmakin (Semolina Cake)

SERVES 5

This is a very popular Burmese dessert with strong Indian influences, for a similar confection is enjoyed throughout much of India. Instead of semolina, you may use regular Cream of Wheat.

- 1 cup semolina or Cream of Wheat
- 3 cups light coconut milk
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 2 Tbs. butter

- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 2 large eggs
- 1/4 cup raisins
- 1/4 cup poppy seeds

1. Preheat oven to 325F. Lightly grease a 9x9-inch square pan, and set aside.
 2. Put semolina in a large saucepan, and stir in coconut milk and sugar. Add butter and salt.
 3. Separate eggs, setting whites aside. Beat yolks, and stir into coconut milk mixture. Beat egg whites until stiff, and fold them into mixture. Stir in raisins and 1/4 cup of poppy seeds. Pour mixture into pan.
 4. Bake for about 45 minutes, or until center is firm to touch. Remove from oven, sprinkle remaining poppy seeds over top, and set aside to cool slightly before slicing and serving.
- PER SERVING: 560 CAL; 11G PROT; 20G TOTAL FAT (11G SAT. FAT); 88G CARB; 95MG CHOL; 230MG SOD; 3G FIBER; 56G SUGARS