

## Two pulse tarka dal

*A good dal has to be one of my all-time favourite foods. I've experimented with various pulses, spices and aromatics and so far this is my favourite recipe. It is very loosely based on one by Madhur Jaffrey. It's quite spicy, so for a milder version cut down a little on all the spices, especially the cayenne, and use less fresh chilli, garlic, ginger and shallot.*



*You can also make this with other lentils. A combination of small red lentils and big green-brown ones, or yellow split peas, works well, as the larger ones keep their shape and the little ones disintegrate into sauce.*

*'Tarka' refers to the method of cooking by which piping hot ghee is scented with spices and then thrown into the dish at the end of cooking. If you don't have ghee and can't be bothered to clarify butter, use a mix of unsalted butter and sunflower oil. If you don't have asafoetida or curry leaves, just leave them out.*

*This dal is delicious served with rice or flatbreads. If it's made quite hot and spicy, I like to serve it with a dollop of full-fat plain yoghurt. You can make the dal in advance then gently reheat it while you make the tarka. Or go ahead and complete the entire dish including the tarka and keep it chilled until needed. Reheat gently and simmer for a few minutes, then serve with fresh coriander leaves.*

**Serves: 8 as side dish or starter**

- 200g (1 cup) hulled and split mung beans (moong dal)
- 200g (1 cup) hulled and split yellow pigeon peas (toovar dal)
- 3 UK pints (7+ cups) water
- ½ tsp nigella seeds
- ½ tsp fenugreek seeds
- ½ tsp cumin seeds
- ½ tsp fennel seeds
- ½ tsp asafoetida (if available)
- ¼ to 1 tsp cayenne (depending on how hot you like your food)
- ½ tsp turmeric
- 4 tsps grated fresh ginger
- 6 + 2 plump cloves garlic, finely sliced
- 2 to 6 hot green chillies, finely sliced (depending on how hot you like your food)
- 2 + 2 shallots, finely sliced
- 1 to 1½ tsps salt
- 4 tbsps ghee (clarified butter)
- 1 heaped tsp brown mustard seeds
- 4 dried long, thin, hot red chillies
- 30 fresh curry (kari) leaves (or dried ones if you can't get fresh ones)
- 2 or 3 medium tomatoes, cut into wedges
- 1 cup loosely packed coriander leaves

1. Rinse and drain pulses several times. Place in a saucepan with 3 pints (7 cups) water. Bring to a boil. Skim off the scum that floats to the surface.
2. Lightly toast the nigella, fenugreek, cumin and fennel seeds in a dry pan then grind to a powder and mix with the asafoetida, cayenne and turmeric.
3. Add spice mix, grated ginger, 6 sliced garlic cloves, sliced green chillies, 2 sliced shallots and salt to pulses and simmer gently, partially covered, for 1 hour or until pulses are totally tender and starting to disintegrate. Stir occasionally to make sure it doesn't stick and add more water during cooking if needed. The dal should be loose, not stodgy.
4. Heat ghee in a frying pan. Add 2 sliced shallots and fry 2 mins. Add 2 sliced garlic cloves and fry another 2 mins til they start to turn golden. Add mustard seeds and dried chillies and fry another 2 mins. Keep stirring. By now the shallots and garlic should be a deep golden colour. Crush curry leaves in your hand and, standing back, add to frying pan. It will sizzle and spit. Stir a couple of times and then add contents of frying pan to the dal along with the fresh tomatoes. Immediately cover with the lid to trap the aromas. Let sit for five minutes, or up to 20.
5. When time to serve, stir dal to incorporate curry leaves and add half the coriander leaves. Check seasoning and add more salt if needed. Garnish with remaining coriander. Serve with warm naan bread or chapatis, and yoghurt if you made it really spicy.



### **Spice facts:**

- Nigella seeds, otherwise known as 'black cumin' despite being nothing to do with cumin, are from a flower closely related to love-in-the-mist. The Egyptians were some of the first to cultivate it, and must have valued it highly as some seeds were found in Tutankhamen's grave. Two teaspoons of crushed seeds taken twice a day is said to boost the immune system. (Didn't seem to work for young Tutankhamen though.)
- Fenugreek seeds come from a bean plant. In some countries they are cooked up as a staple like dal or used to make a milk substitute for babies. Tutankhamen liked them as well, apparently. Used as a spice fenugreek has a distinctive aroma – a sweet savouriness reminiscent of maple syrup. In fact, it's used to flavour artificial maple syrup.
- Cumin seeds crop up in all sorts of recipes all over the world, from North African tagines, to Indian curries, East European soups, Mexican burritos and a few European cheeses and breads. The ancient Greeks loved it so much they kept it on the dining table in its own special box.
- Fennel seeds are anise-flavoured, like the stems and leaves of the plant. Star anise is chewed in China, and fennel seeds in India, to 'sweeten the breath' – literally – the distinctive chemical compound common to both spices is 13 times as sweet as regular sugar, by weight.
- Asafoetida powder, charmingly nick-named 'devil's dung', is made from the sap of the root of a member of the carrot family. The sap is aged until resinous, sometimes in goat or sheepskin to enhance its naturally sweaty, sulphurous, stinky cheese scent. Don't let this put you off, some claim

the smell reminds them of white truffles. The vegetarian Jains in India use asafoetida in place of onions and garlic, which they avoid as uprooting them kills the future plant and disturbs the little bugs in the soil.

- Cayenne powder is derived from the Cayenne variety of chilli pepper, which is approximately 3 times 'hotter' than the Serrano, at least 15 times hotter than Paprika, and over 100 times hotter than the Bell pepper (in Scoville pungency units). So beware how much you use.
- Turmeric powder comes from the dried rhizome of a plant in the ginger family. It has been used since prehistoric times to colour skin, clothing and foods yellow, for ceremonial purposes and as a medicine and preservative. It's still popular today - India produces some 350,000 tonnes each year.
- Mustard seeds are usually added at the end of cooking as prolonged exposure to heat reduces their pungency and leaves behind a generic cabbage-family aroma. Black mustard seeds are the strongest, then brown, then yellow. On the global scale of trade, black pepper is the only spice to outdo mustard in monetary terms. The word 'mustard' comes from its use in the popular condiment – 'must'-'ardens', ie 'piquant must', as prepared mustard used to be made with grape must.
- Curry leaves come from a small citrus tree and are used widely in Indian and Malaysian cuisine. 'Curry' probably hails from the word 'kari', which means 'spicy sauce' in many languages in those regions. Most local names for the plant include the word 'kari', however there are no kari leaves in the usual curry spice mixes, and 'kari' can also mean 'black' it seems, referring to the colour of the leaves of a similar looking bush. Which would mean that the stupid Brits just called them 'curry leaves' because they heard a word that sounded similar – 'kari'. To complicate matters further there is some evidence that the word 'curry' was used for stews in Britain before the first traders arrived in the subcontinent. A great etymological mystery that I will assign to my linguist husband for further research... Anyway, the leaves are usually added whole to dishes, like bay leaves, and often fried briefly in butter before being added, as in this recipe. They're much better fresh than dried, and can be stored in the fridge or freezer for a week or two before they lose their flavour. Buy them on the branch if possible. It's antidiabetic qualities are supported by scientific research.

#### Sources:

*On Food and Cooking*, Harold McGee, 2004

*Food Plants of the World*, Ben-Erik van Wyk, 2005

[www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

[www.plantcultures.org.uk](http://www.plantcultures.org.uk)

[www.uni-graz.at/~katzer/engl](http://www.uni-graz.at/~katzer/engl)