

Backyard Tandoori-Style Chicken

Indian restaurants may get the flavor right, but the chicken's texture is typically dry and stringy. Can home cooking bring redemption?

BY ANNE YAMANAKA

Tandoori chicken was one of the first Indian restaurant dishes I grew to like as a child, lured by its preternaturally bright red hue. Typically marinated in a spicy yogurt mixture and then grilled in a tandoor oven, well-made tandoori chicken is complex, tangy, and deeply charred from an intense fire. Yet, as an adult, I tend to avoid this dish. It's not the flavors I mind (I like them a lot), it's how dried out and tired the chicken usually is. Perhaps it's the blistering heat of the tandoor oven or an inattentive cook in the kitchen, but the meat is inevitably dry and stringy. Could I make it better at home?

Tandoori is more a style of cooking than a particular dish, as it refers to a tandoor, a type of Indian oven. Typically made from clay, tandoors are beehive-shaped and heated with charcoal or gas to very high temperatures. I didn't have a tandoor in the test kitchen, but I did have a charcoal grill on which I could try to mimic the tandoor's high, dry heat.

Research produced plenty of tandoori recipes, each a little different from the last. The recipes suggested that just about any cut of chicken can be pressed into service. I thought dark meat pieces might be the best choice because the meat is typically moister than white meat, but after trying a few of those recipes, I found that the bony pieces did not absorb the spices very well. At the other extreme, recipes that used boneless,

EATING Cumin

We tested five brands of cumin in a variety of applications, and all were deemed perfectly acceptable. If you like to order spices by mail, Penzeys India Ground Cumin Seed (left) is a best buy at \$1.59 per ounce, plus shipping. (Penzeys also has brick-and-mortar stores in certain cities around the country; check the Web site, www.penzeys.com, for more information.) If you prefer to buy spices at the supermarket, McCormick Gourmet Collection Ground Cumin (right) is a best buy at \$2.79 per ounce.



BEST BUYS



A simple blend of spices and a quick yogurt sauce give this chicken complex, exotic flavor.

skinless breasts readily absorbed flavor but were thoroughly parched after grilling.

Seeking a middle ground, I tried bone-in, skin-on chicken breasts and was finally met with success. The skin shielded the top of the breast and the bone shielded the interior from the grill's hot, dry heat. In addition, there was plenty of surface area to which spices could cling.

High or Low?

Temperatures in a tandoor can easily exceed 500 degrees. A grill can do that, too, given a big enough pile of charcoal. In my first attempts, I tried just that. I ignited an enormous pile of charcoal and placed the lid on the grill to trap the heat for a spell before I added the chicken pieces. In hindsight, perhaps I was a bit overzealous: The chicken was singed and black in a matter of minutes.

With fewer coals, the results were nominally better, but the exterior still charred while the meat was pink at the bone—fine for a steak, but bad news for chicken. Taking an opposite

approach, I cooked a batch of breasts over a fairly cool fire. It took longer, but the meat was much moister and more tender, though the skin was flabby. Clearly the skin needed higher heat to crisp, and a two-level fire was required. I browned and crisped the chicken over the hot coals, then slid the meat over to the cooler side to finish. While the results were the best yet, it took a while for the chicken to cook through and the meat wasn't quite as moist as I'd hoped.

Using a familiar test kitchen trick, I covered the breasts—while on the cool side—with a disposable aluminum pan to trap heat (using the lid of a charcoal grill while cooking can impart off flavors to the meat). The chicken turned out moist and juicy, and the total cooking time was significantly shorter without adversely affecting the flavor or texture.

Spicy Matters

Foods to be cooked "tandoori-style" are typically soaked for a day or two in a spiced yogurt marinade, which adds both flavor and moisture. After trying a few classic recipes, I found the marinade's impact slight and the time involved significant—I opted to skip it in favor of a dry rub. The tangy yogurt flavor, which tasters missed, could be added after grilling with a raita, an herb and garlic dipping sauce as familiar to most Indian tables as ketchup is in the United States.

I followed a dozen different recipes and churned out a dozen different spice and flavoring mixtures. Some were as complicated as a curry—with an entire spice rack's worth of ingredients—while others took a simpler approach that highlighted just a few key ingredients. I was delighted when tasters favored the latter approach—short ingredient lists do not necessarily beget simple flavors.

I fine-tuned a mixture of fresh ginger, coriander, and cumin. I thought equal amounts of each might work, but the balance was off; the cumin was too strong. Reducing the volume by half and adding sweet cinnamon brought harmony to the spice rub. I also thought the chicken might benefit from sitting with the rub on it, but tasters could detect little difference between the chicken