

[Register for free](#) | [Login](#)

Chiles' arrival brought heat to Indian food

BY DAVID HAMMOND November 6, 2012 9:50AM

Updated: November 6, 2012 9:56AM

While it is playing a role in Friday's Art Institute gala, Diwali — the Indian Festival of Lights — is largely unrecognized in mainstream USA.

In India, however, Diwali is big. Investments made during the holiday are believed especially auspicious, and though Diwali is a season of looking ahead, my interest in it has more to do with the past, specifically India's edible past.

Last spring, speaking with a gentleman from Mumbai, I mentioned it was intriguing to ponder how Indian food might have evolved had Columbus not "discovered" America. I then added, somewhat unnecessarily I thought, that, "Of course, there were no chile peppers in Indian cuisine before European traders brought them from the New World."

"There weren't?" he looked at me, puzzled.

That surprise no doubt is shared by many who enjoy Indian food, often is characterized by the satisfying burn of chiles, which originated in the Americas.

I asked Indian food historian Salma Husain to describe the country's food before Columbus introduced New World ingredients to Old World kitchens. "Indian food was very bland," Husain said. "We had black pepper, ginger and other aromatics, but overall ancient Indian food was very bland."

Husain is author of *Nuskah-e-Shabjahani*, a collection of Indian recipes including some from before the late 15th century, before chiles came to Eurasia.

It's difficult to imagine some major culinary traditions before what historians call the Columbian Exchange. Consider the food of Italy without tomatoes, Ireland without potatoes, or India without chiles. Unimaginable.

A little over 400 years after indigenous Native American chiles were brought to India, the chili pepper has become fully integrated into Indian cuisine.

As Divya Singh cooked me dinner at Kalwara House, her home in Rajasthan, I gazed slack-jawed at the incredible range — and amount — of chili powder and spices she put into her mutton dish, a Rajput staple. Though a member of this time-honored warrior caste, Singh in her kitchen makes peace among pungent flavors, encouraging them to work together, complementing without overwhelming one another.

During the Diwali season, Bombay Spice (450 N. Clark) offers a low-priced holiday menu. Further north, Sukhadia's (2559 W. Devon) has special Diwali sweets, a perfect close to a spicy meal.

E-mail detective@suntimes.com.

© 2011 Sun-Times Media, LLC. All rights reserved. This material may not be copied or distributed without permission. For more information about reprints and permissions, visit www.suntimesreprints.com. To order a reprint of this article, [click here](#).