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## Dining with Warriors in Rajasthan, India

*The Rajput like to fight and eat mutton*

Tuesday, October 23rd, 2012 12:00 PM

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By **David Hammond**

In India, Rajput are part of the warrior caste. For generations, they've passed down the philosophy that it's far better to stand and die than to run like a coward. Invading Muslims and British found the Rajput to be fearsome fighters.

In Jaipur, Rajasthan, Virendra Singh posed with the kind of ceremonial sword carried by Rajput in all family celebrations.

Unusual among Indians, the Rajput also own a number of guns, mostly ceremonial, reminders of an age when they were all fighters. Many still own forts – really, no kidding – hearkening back to a time when such family fortifications were the first line of defense against marauding neighbors.

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"I keep a proper fort," Singh proudly mentioned, twice.

Talk turned to armaments, and I was somewhat pleased with myself (in a silly sort of way) that I alone in this group had actually fired Glocks, Sigs and other 9mm weapons that are unheard of in India, except when used by the military and police. I mentioned that in my town of Oak Park, we are not allowed to have hand guns, and we all agreed that such a law is probably a very good thing. Handguns, we concurred – particularly semi-automatics – are basically good for one thing: killing people. The Rajput prefer to think of weapons as tools for protection and preserving hereditary honor.

In the kitchen, Divya Singh was preparing a typical Rajput dinner of mutton (which in India means goat, not lamb). In the old days, the Rajput would have hunted the mutton; now, it's bought at a local butcher as hunting is, like firearms and ammo, severely restricted.

Divya prepared the mutton with bay leaf, cinnamon, cardamom, turmeric, yogurt and some herbs. I was surprised to see that instead of lightly cooking garlic to golden, as I usually do, Divya preferred to cook her garlic hard: "When you cook it until it's brown, all the harsh flavor disappears," she said to me, and cooking garlic at high heat certainly does mellow it out.

In many Hindu households, there are two kitchens, one for vegetarian and one for non-vegetarian cooking. Given the logistics of the evening, Divya was cooking the mutton in the vegetarian kitchen, usually presided over by a picture of Shiva. Out of respect for this deity, Divya removed the picture and placed it facedown on a faraway cabinet.

She did not want to prepare meat under the eye of the god, who usually oversaw vegetarian cooking. I found that dear.

Dinner was spectacular and wonderful in a way that only a skillful home-cooked meal can be. Though I saw Divya put into the meal a vast range and amount of spice, the flavors were all beautifully distinct and balanced, with fine gradations of heat complementing central ingredients.

There were some standouts.

Gratta is made of lentil flour, red chili and cumin, with added oil and water that permit it to be rolled into sausage-like lengths and boiled; then it's sliced into sections and served in a sauce of chili and coriander (I'm vastly simplifying recipes to give you a hint of what the finished taste was like). The rolling was done by Manju, a Nepalese helper who lived in Divya's home along with a number of others, who traded room/board and salary for cooking, cleaning and other duties.

After roasting papadum (everyone knows these: crisp lentil disks, studded with black pepper), Divya broke up the tortilla-like bread and cooked it in a mixture of oil, garlic, turmeric, red chili and coriander. The lentil disks absorbed the sauce and became soft, highly flavorful sheets. I've always admired the range of Indian breads, and it seems likely that one reason for this wide variety is that you need something to buffer the spiciness of the food. When food is not so saucy – like, for instance, the food of Japan or Canada – you don't need a lot of sops.

The mutton, lal mass, was so very good, but that is to be expected as this is a dish that has been perfected over generations. "Among us warriors," said Divya, "mutton will always be there on the menu." The mutton added a lot of delicious fat to the plate, which functioned to convey the complex flavors while adding a textural variation to a largely vegetarian dinner.

Deprived of their guns, restricted in hunting rights, unable to carry their ceremonial swords far from home (there are metal detectors even on public transit systems in many parts of India) the Rajput warrior tradition is honored in "the kitchen," which as Divya explained to me "is a worshipping place."

Amen to that.

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