

BURIANI

The buriani (or biryani in India) is one of those great dishes that's both the ultimate one-pot comfort meal and a stunning centerpiece to any dinner party. This dish of aromatic rice steamed over a rich curry is hugely popular in South Asia, with each region doing it slightly differently - be it the addition of potatoes, the variety of rice used, the spices that go into it or even the vessel it's cooked in. The competition between states in India for the title of best biryani is rife and it's not difficult to get into a heated debate with fellow connoisseurs of the dish when championing one region's biryani over another.

Sri Lanka has its own take on the dish, and I ate my first Sri Lankan buriani at the famous Hotel de Buhari in Colombo years ago. In the years that followed, I have eaten some incredibly tasty burianis in Muslim friends' homes, Pettah Market and along the east coast of the country.

While sharing a resemblance to its Indian cousins (all of whom ultimately owe their existence to the Mughal and Persian influences in the region) the Sri Lankan buriani is quite different. For one, it is drier and not as richly spiced as biryanis from south India. In many ways it is akin to a pilau, which is effectively a dish of rice boiled in an aromatic broth.

The buriani we've developed at Hoppers takes inspiration from some of our favourite south Indian and Sri Lankan versions but follows the more traditional method of layering and steaming par-cooked rice over a rich meat curry as opposed to boiling raw rice in the curry.





Like so many great dishes, the trick to an ace buriani is practice, planning and indulging in the process as much as the result. So plan ahead, set a morning or afternoon aside to do your prep, and above all else, enjoy it all from start to finish! The pay-off when you get this labour-intensive dish right is that you will need little else on the dining table other than a big bowl of chilled raita to create an unforgettable feast.

A traditional buriani consists of rich, thick curry (be it veggie, meat or fish); par-cooked fragrant spice-scented rice; and a garnish of herbs, nuts and fried onions. All these elements are meticulously layered in a large vessel, tightly sealed and then gently cooked, allowing the aromas and flavours to waft into each other, creating one gorgeous dish.

Albeit a one-pot dish, you will need to prepare a number of elements ahead of your meal, so read through the chapter below thoroughly before proceeding to cook your buriani. Start with the spice mix, below; then pick one of the curries in this chapter. Prepare the rice (page 115) and finally bring it all together (page 116).

ELEMENTS OF THE BURIANI

BURIANI SPICE MIX

SERVES 4

- 1 tsp fennel seeds
- ¼ tsp cumin seeds
- 4 cloves
- 2.5cm (1in) cinnamon stick
- 4 green cardamom pods
- 1 tbsp coriander seeds
- 1 whole red chilli, deseeded
- 1 tsp black peppercorns

1

Roast all the ingredients in a dry frying pan (skillet) over a medium heat for 4 minutes. Cool completely and grind to a fine powder in a pestle and mortar or spice grinder.

ASSEMBLING & COOKING THE BURIANI

SERVES 4

4 tbsp ghee
3 tbsp raw
cashew nuts
1 tbsp raisins
2 hard-boiled
eggs, peeled
10g (½oz)
mint leaves
10g (½oz)
coriander (cilantro),
roughly chopped
remaining fried
onions from
the curry

1 While you can create a multi-layered buriani, I feel a simple two-layered buriani is equally effective and satisfying, cooks more evenly and is less of a faff to assemble. Start by heating the ghee in a stockpot and frying the cashew nuts until golden, then remove and drain them on paper towels. Add the raisins to the hot ghee and fry for 15 seconds, remove and drain them with the cashew nuts. Finally fry the peeled boiled eggs (whole) until a light golden crinkly skin develops on the surface. Remove and set aside. Drain the ghee into a small heatproof dish.

2 Take the stockpot off the heat and add the meat or vegetarian curry to it. Sprinkle over half the mint, coriander (cilantro) and fried onions. Layer the rice over and sprinkle with the remaining mint, coriander and fried onions. Sprinkle the cashew nuts and raisins over and place the eggs on top. Trickle the reserved ghee down the sides of the pot and over the rice. Cover the pot tightly with two layers of foil, trying to ensure there is a gap between the garnished rice and the foil to allow steam to circulate and, more vitally, prevent all the gorgeous garnish sticking to the foil.

3 Place a heavy lid on the pot, ensuring that it is all as tightly sealed as possible. The idea is to trap the steam released by the stewing meat at the bottom which in turn will steam the par-cooked rice above it, bringing all the ingredients together in one magical dish. Place the pot over a medium-high heat for 5 minutes, then reduce to just above the lowest heat of your burner. Cook untouched for 35 minutes for a meat buriani or 20 minutes for a vegetarian one.

4 Turn off the heat and leave to rest for at least 5 minutes before opening. I usually lift the lid at the table and, despite cooking hundreds of these, I still get very nervous about the result. The perfect buriani for me is one where each grain of rice is perfectly cooked, remains individual and is not broken; the meat falls off the bone, and there is just enough gravy to add pockets of masala to the dish as opposed to soaking the rice and resulting in a soggy mass of overcooked rice.

5 If it's your first time (or second, or third, for that matter) I suggest lifting the lid and checking on your buriani in advance of your party, so you can rectify any errors or switch to Plan B! If it's all gone to plan and you are happy with the results, you can re-seal the pot and keep it warm for up to an hour in an oven set to 90°C (195°F). Don't exceed an hour or you risk drying out the rice and it developing a crust.



LAMB KARI

SERVES 4

1kg (2lb 4oz) lamb shoulder or neck, bone-in and skinless, cut into 5cm (2in) chunks
2 tbsp minced garlic
2 tbsp minced ginger
1 tsp salt, plus extra to taste
1 tsp ground turmeric
oil for deep-frying
300g (10½oz) red onions (approx. 2 medium onions), sliced
3 tbsp ghee
200g (7oz) ripe tomatoes, sliced
2 tbsp Buriani Spice Mix (page 111)
10–12 curry leaves
1 lemongrass stick, cut lengthways
10cm (4in) piece pandan leaf
1 green chilli, cut lengthways
1 tbsp Kashmiri chilli powder
100g (3½oz) natural full-fat yoghurt
150ml (5fl oz) coconut milk
juice of ¼ lime

1 Marinate the lamb in 1 tbsp each of minced garlic and ginger, 1 tsp salt and ½ tsp turmeric. Cover and refrigerate for a minimum of 2 hours, or overnight if you have the time. Marinating this overnight really helps the flavours penetrate and the meat to tenderize when cooked.

2 Heat oil in a deep-fryer to 170°C (340°F) then deep-fry the onions until golden brown and crisp. Set to drain on paper towels.

3 Heat 2 tbsp of the ghee in a heavy-based deep pan. Add the marinated lamb and fry well for 5–6 minutes over a medium-high heat until well sealed and slightly browned on the outside. Be careful not to overcrowd your pan or the meat will stew instead of browning, so do this in batches if you need to. Remove the meat and leave any fat in the pan.

4 Add 1 tsp of ghee to any residual fat in the pan along with the remaining garlic and ginger and fry for a minute over a medium heat. Then add the tomatoes and cook for 5–6 minutes until they have broken down fully and are pulpy. Add the meat back into the pan, along with the buriani spice mix, remaining turmeric, curry leaves, lemongrass, pandan leaf, chilli, chilli powder, yoghurt, coconut milk and half the fried onions. (Reserve the remaining onions to sprinkle over the rice when layering the buriani.) Cook the meat for 10 minutes, covered, stirring occasionally. Do not add any water; the meat will release its juices and you want a fairly thick gravy at the end, or else the rice will get too mushy when layered and steamed over it.

5 Season and squeeze in the lime, just before taking off the heat. Set aside and layer the buriani when ready. You can prepare the curry up to a day in advance.

VARIATIONS

You can reduce the meat by 200g (7oz) and add about 300g (10½oz) potatoes to the gravy. Simply peel and cut them into 5cm (2in) cubes or chunks and add them into the meat curry just before layering up. If you want to be a little more indulgent, fry them in ghee until they are browned on all sides before adding them.

The lamb can also be substituted for 1kg (2lb 4oz) bone-in skinless chicken thighs. Reduce the steaming time to 25 minutes over a low heat after the first 5 minutes on medium-high heat. For a vegetarian version substitute the lamb curry for the Root Vegetable version (page 114) and follow the same procedure above.



THE
CURRIES

ROOT VEGETABLE CURRY

SERVES 4

1kg (2lb 4oz) mixture of carrots, parsnips, potatoes, swede or celeriac cut into 5cm (2in) chunks

2 tbsp oil, plus extra for deep-frying

2 tsp salt

1 tsp ground turmeric

250g (9oz) red onions (approx. 1 large onion), sliced

3 tbsp ghee

1 tbsp minced garlic

1 tbsp minced ginger

250g (9oz) ripe tomatoes, sliced

2 tbsp Buriani Spice Mix (page 111)

10–12 curry leaves

10cm (4in) piece pandan leaf

1 tbsp Kashmiri chilli powder

150g (5½oz) natural full-fat yoghurt

200ml (7fl oz) coconut milk

1 green chilli, cut lengthways

juice of ½ lime

1

Preheat the oven to 220°C/200°C fan/430°F. Combine the root vegetables with the oil, 1 tsp salt and ½ tsp turmeric. Mix well, transfer to a roasting tray and roast for 15–20 minutes until the vegetables turn brown around the edges but are not cooked through. If you fully cook them at this stage, they are likely to break down in the buriani; remember they will be steaming along with the rice later.

2

Heat oil in a deep-fryer to 170°C (340°F) then deep-fry the onions until golden brown and crisp. Set to drain on paper towels.

3

Heat 2 tbsp of the ghee in a heavy-based deep pan. Add the garlic and ginger and fry for a minute over a medium heat, then add the tomatoes and cook for 5–6 minutes until they have broken down fully and are pulpy. Add the buriani spice mix along with the remaining ½ tsp turmeric, curry leaves, pandan leaf, chilli powder, yoghurt, coconut milk, green chilli and half the fried onions. (Reserve the remaining onions to sprinkle over the rice when layering the buriani.) Cook for 10 minutes until you have a thick curry; reduce for a few more minutes if it seems too thin.

4

Take the curry off the heat, add the roasted veg and mix everything well. Season with the remaining ½ tsp salt and squeeze in the lime. Set aside and layer the buriani when ready. You can prepare the curry up to a day in advance.

1

Wash the rice thoroughly in about four changes of water in a large bowl. Leave submerged and allow to soak for 45 minutes.

2

Boil about 2½ litres (88fl oz) of water in a large stockpot. Add the spices and salt to it. Drain and add the soaked rice, bring back to the boil and cook for about 6–8 minutes until the rice is almost cooked but still has a bite.

3

Using a slotted spoon, quickly spread the rice onto a large roasting tray or two, allowing it to cool down and stop cooking quickly. You can pick out the whole spices at this stage or leave them in; I like to leave them in. You can cook the rice up to an hour before you layer the buriani.

RICE

SERVES 4

400g (14oz) basmati rice, the very best you can find

4 cloves

5cm (2in) cinnamon stick

4 green cardamom pods

½ tsp cumin seeds

½ tsp black peppercorns

1 tbsp salt

NOTE

The deep yellow or orange colour you see in some burianis is often achieved by mixing some of the parboiled rice with yellow or orange food colouring or saffron soaked in water. We don't use these in our buriani, but if you'd like to colour your rice, go ahead and do so.

