

## The HOME FORUM

## Tomato Rasam

2 teaspoons olive oil  
 1 teaspoon cumin seeds  
 1/2 teaspoon peppercorns (or less depending on your "heat" tolerance)  
 1/2 teaspoon powdered asafetida  
 A few fresh curry leaves (optional, see note below)  
 1/2 jalapeño or green chili pepper  
 2-inch piece of fresh ginger, finely diced  
 7 medium-size juicy tomatoes, chopped  
 1-1/2 cups water  
 Salt to taste  
 1/2 teaspoon brown sugar  
 1/2 teaspoon turmeric powder  
 1/2 teaspoon butter, melted  
 1 teaspoon honey  
 Chopped cilantro, for garnish  
 About 1/2 cup cooked rice, mashed (optional)

In a large saucepan, heat olive oil over high heat and add cumin seeds, peppercorns, and powdered asafetida. Stir well for 1 minute. Reduce the heat to medium before adding the fresh curry leaves.

Add chili pepper and chopped ginger. Stir in tomatoes and cook until they soften. Mash the tomatoes well with the back of a broad spoon.

Add 1-1/4 cups of the water, salt to taste, brown sugar, and tumeric. Stir well to mix. Add melted butter and honey and stir together. (Depending on the consistency you prefer, add the other 1/4 cup water or omit it.)

Simmer until the mixture comes to a low boil. Stir occasionally when the rasam starts to bubble gently. Remove from heat. Let stand 5 minutes for flavors to mix.

Strain (to remove the spices) and serve in small bowls.

Garnish with chopped cilantro, if desired. Serve as appetizer, to be drunk straight from the bowl. Or if you prefer a more substantial soup, add several tablespoons of cooked, mashed rice to each serving, to make the soup more filling. Serves 4 as an appetizer or 2 for main course.

**Note:** Fresh curry leaves are available at most Indian grocery stores and are an added bonus in this dish. Don't buy brown or dried-out ones.

Recently, I caught a rerun of the famous Soup Nazi episode from the popular sitcom "Seinfeld." When the characters discussed mulligatawny, a soup from India, I felt happy, the way you generally do when you hear about a good guy from your hometown making a name for himself in the wider world. With its prime-time, national-network TV appearance, this dish from South India had entered the American food lexicon, I felt.

Granted, my grandmother in Madras

**Rasam has remained much the same for centuries, but there's room for improvisation.**

parts of the world as mulligatawny still goes by the name of rasam (pronounced RAH-sum). It means the "essence" or "flavor" in Sanskrit.

The first word in the recipe title tells you what kind of rasam it is – lemon rasam, ginger rasam, or the rare butter-

has always been room for improvisation. Rasam is forgiving and nonfussy, and it works well with judiciously chosen unconventional ingredients.

A friend of mine, a New Yorker, says that chicken broth enhances the taste of all rasams, but her orthodox family back home would never sanction this addition.

Surprisingly, pineapple riffs with the spices in the rasam in a pleasing way; this fruity version is often served at wedding dinners.

In the past, an Indian mother-in-law

## IT'S DELICIOUS NO MATTER WHAT YOU CALL IT



PHOTOS BY JOANNE CICCARELLO – STAFF

**APPETIZER SOUP WITH TWO NAMES:** In South India, the soup that's known in other parts of the world as mulligatawny is called rasam. The various types of rasam always include black pepper.

(Chennai) would not recognize the delicious version of the flavorful broth she makes in her kitchen at least three times a week.

In Tamil, my mother tongue, mulligatawny (*milagu* plus *tannir*) means pepper water. But you'll see no flicker of recognition in Grandma's eyes even if you enunciate the name of the dish very carefully. It isn't your accent, either – her reaction would be much the same if I said it. The dish she prepares is not called mulligatawny at all. It's called rasam.

There is a simple historical explanation for this.

In the latter part of the 17th century, this broth became a favorite with the British officials of the Madras Presidency. Using the thin soup as a base, their local cooks added meat and fish to come up with palate-pleasing variations of the original vegetarian dish.

The appetizer then traveled to Europe, where it changed further in form and became popular in nicer restaurants in its Anglicized version, mulligatawny.

In South India, what's known in other

milk rasam.

There is a garden-variety rasam, but even this no-name kind is more than just pepper water; it contains yellow lentils and a medley of spices.

Black pepper is the only common essential ingredient for all rasams. Perhaps a British employer once asked his cook-cum-butler, who knew little English, what made the food so fiery – and got the response, *milagu tannir*. It sounded like mulligatawny – and the name stuck.

Tamarind, tomatoes, and citrus fruits, such as lemon or lime, can give rasam a mild piquancy. Tomatoes are a common component of most rasams. Pick only the ripest ones to make this dish. However, if the tomatoes are ripe, but not of the finest quality, adding tamarind or adjusting the amount of the seasonings will greatly improve the taste.

The recipe for the everyday rasam has remained much the same with the passing of centuries, but there

used rasam as a quick test to gauge the cooking skills of her son's bride. Back then, a special vessel made of a low-melting alloy was used for rasamaking. If this pot was left on the fire too long – perhaps to tease the flavor from unripe tomatoes without adding sufficient water – the bottom would burn out.

The rasam pot is now an heirloom in most homes; the practice of devising kitchen tests for the new bride is also a thing of the past. Rasam is easy to make – any container or saucepan will do – but some loving attention enhances the flavor of the broth. This, of course, is the universal secret ingredient in all home-cooked food.

The New England-based restaurant chain, Legal Sea Foods, has drawn culinary inspiration from

India's cuisine to create a dish that is at once nutritious and delicious. Along with clam chowder and baked Boston scrod, the menu offers rasam seafood soup, which is described as "shrimp, scallops, and scrod in a hot-and-sour tomato broth."

It seems that the well-traveled rasam is on its way to becoming haute soup.

**Vijaysree Venkatraman**

