

THE SPICE MARKET

It took me over four months to discover the most incredible spice market on full display just three blocks from my flat. I had been living and working in Singapore, but was so busy that I would often eat or pick up groceries near my office, rather than my own neighborhood. On a rare day off, I decided to explore on foot and was thrilled with what I found.

I was living in Little India, one of the less affluent neighborhoods in town. It's always busy with tourists trying to find a good deal and locals pouring into the many restaurants for fish head curry and cheap beer. Just along the main drag, there was a market – Tekka Centre – that I must have walked past at least twenty times without going in. What a mistake! From the outside it didn't seem like much, but inside was an international food fest. There were aisles upon aisles of food stalls with every Southeast Asian cuisine and dish you can imagine – everything from *Pak Kashmiri Delight's Aloo Gobi* (a simple Indian vegetarian dish made with potatoes, cauliflower, spices and herbs) to *Whampoa's Prawn Noodles*, (a Hokkien noodle soup made with pork bones and prawn stock).



People sat at communal tables slurping their soups and dipping their *chapati* (Indian flat bread) into colorful, aromatic sauces. It didn't matter that the inside temperature was ninety-degrees and rising. Somehow the spices from the dishes

seemed to regulate everyone's body temperature.



After filling my belly with some *murtabak*, (a thin dough stuffed with minced meat, onions, and eggs), I headed deeper into the market past the stalls into the shopping area. From on high, it's a cavernous space selling every ingredient known to mankind, and then some. Exotic vegetables, glorious ripe fruits, local chickens and fish, a butcher shop with lamb carcasses dangling on hooks, dried anchovies, teas and coffees from around the globe, and dried spices so brilliant in color you could wet them and use them as paint.



Stopped in my tracks, I eyed the gorgeous spices wondering which ones I would need to make a lamb *korma*.

“Can I help you?” asked the handsome merchant.

“Well, I’ve been trying my skills at different curries, but I never really get the right balance. I was hoping to make a lamb *korma*.”

“Ah, that’s one of my favorites too. I’ll put together my secret mix for you.”



I wondered if he says that to all the ladies, but just as the thought crossed my mind, he started to spoon out at least a dozen different spices into one bag, then proceeded to recite the recipe to me.

“And once you’ve tried the dish, I expect you to come back and let me know how it turned out,” he said smiling, handing me the bag, “Just ask for Rakesh.”

Rakesh did not steer me wrong. The *korma* was delicious and his recipe was spot on. Each week I would return to the market to let him know how my dishes were turning out and each week he would send me on my way with a new spice mix and recipe. He became my first friend away from the office and made me feel like a welcomed addition to the neighborhood.