



Summer Flavor School #3: Try this sizzling spice trick

Welcome to week #3 of Summer Flavor School! So far we've covered umami and the aromatic base, and this week is all about tarka, the trick that maximizes the power of spices. The flavor is complex but the concept is simple: "blooming" spices, garlic, and/or chilis in hot fat (usually oil). While most home cooks stir ground spices straight into a pot of ingredients, the pros fry those spices in hot oil for about thirty seconds first, resulting in a deeper, far more fragrant outcome.

How does tarka work? It's about science. Most of the flavor in spices is locked in oils that dissolve in fat, not water, so a quick sizzle in hot oil pulls that flavor out. In contrast, stirring them into a soup or stew leaves most of the flavor behind. Have you ever wondered why a good curry or dal (spiced Indian lentils) smells and tastes so savory? The traditional method of these dishes starts with a tarka.

A Few Rules for Blooming

One thing to watch out for is using too much heat, a mistake that is not reversible. Unfortunately, the heat that boosts your spices can scorch them in seconds, rendering a burnt, bitter mess. To prevent this, it's important to follow a couple of guidelines. First, keep the oil at a medium sizzle rather than a smoke. Watch your pan carefully and ensure that your oil does not get too hot. Second, be mindful of order. Whole spices like cumin seeds, mustard seeds, and coriander seeds go in the oil first, because they take the heat well, and ground spices go in last since they burn fastest, usually needing only about ten or fifteen seconds before adding main ingredients. Third, keep everything moving in the pan, with the next ingredient ready to go in as soon as the spices smell fragrant.

Two Techniques, Two Lists

There are two main ways to use this technique, and which you choose depends on the results you're after. You can bloom spices at the start, cooking them in oil for a few seconds before the onions go in, so their flavor spreads through the whole dish. Or, you can finish with a tarka, drizzling sizzling spoonfuls over a finished pot of dal, beans, soup, or yogurt right before serving, imparting a more intense hit of flavor.

Start with a bloom: Fry your spices in oil before the onions go in, so their flavor runs through the whole dish. Here are common examples where a starting bloom will elevate your dish:

- A pot of dal or any simmered lentils
- A vegetable curry
- A pot of beans or chickpeas
- Rice or grains, toasted in the spiced oil before the water goes in
- A soup or stew, with the spices bloomed first and the broth added after the vegetables

Finish with a tarka: This gives your dish a dramatic flourish. Fry spices in hot oil or ghee (clarified butter commonly used in Indian cooking) and pour the sizzling spoonful over the top right before serving:

- A finished pot of dal or other lentil soup
- A bowl of plain yogurt or labneh
- Cooked beans or chickpeas
- A vegetable soup
- Roasted or steamed vegetables

Red Lentil Dal with a Cumin-Garlic Tarka



This dal uses both methods, a bloom in the base and a tarka on top. Since red lentils cook fast and need no soaking, the whole dish comes together in about half an hour. Serve it with rice or warm flatbread.

Ingredients (serves 4):

For the dal:

- 1 cup red lentils, rinsed well
- 4 cups water
- 1/2 teaspoon turmeric
- 1 tablespoon neutral oil or ghee
- 1 onion, diced
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 can (14 oz) diced tomatoes
- Salt (omit if you're on a low-sodium diet)

For the tarka:

- 2 tablespoons neutral oil or ghee
- 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
- 3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes or 1 dried chili
- A handful of fresh cilantro, chopped
- Lemon or lime, for serving

Instructions:

1. Put the rinsed lentils, water, and turmeric in a pot and bring to a boil. Lower to a simmer and cook, stirring now and then and skimming any foam, until the lentils break down into a loose porridge, about 20 minutes.
2. While the lentils cook, heat the oil in a skillet over medium. Cook the onion until soft and golden, about 8 minutes, then add the garlic and ginger and cook another minute.
3. Stir the ground cumin and coriander into the onions and let them bloom for about 30 seconds, then add the diced tomatoes and cook until jammy, about 5 minutes. Stir this mixture into the cooked lentils along with a good pinch of salt, and keep the dal warm.
4. For the tarka, heat the oil in a small pan over medium until it shimmers. Add the cumin seeds and let them sizzle until fragrant, about 20 seconds, then add the sliced garlic and pepper flakes and cook until the garlic is just golden, under a minute. Watch it closely, since garlic goes from golden to burnt fast.
5. Pour the sizzling tarka over the pot of dal, stir it in halfway so some stays visible on top, and finish with cilantro and a squeeze of lemon or lime.