Dhal Palak (Indian Lentils with Spinach)

Dhal is my favourite part of any Indian meal. Sometimes written 'dal', it is a staple of Indian cooking, ranging from soupy to quite thick and made from any of a wide range of split dried beans, peas or lentils. I've kept my recipe simple, so use it as a guide for your own version; ginger and chilli powder are often included, as is a pinch of asafoetida (an Indian spice that aids digestion). Add diced tomato instead of, or as well as, the spinach ('palak' in Hindi), and serve it with chicken, meat or fish or on its own for a delicious vegetarian meal. Leftover dhal keeps refrigerated for days and freezes well. Add any Indian condiments you like, my favourites are mango chutney, lime pickle and plenty of thick natural yoghurt (like the sheep milk one from Meredith Dairy). Spices can be a challenge for some wines, but I found Stefano Lubiana's pale pink, textured pinot gris worked a treat.

Serves 6

INGREDIENTS

- 375g (2 cups) red split lentils*
- 2 teaspoons ground turmeric
- 1.25 litres water
- Salt flakes, to taste
- ⅓ cup ghee
- 1 red onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 3 small green chillies, seeded, finely chopped
- 200g baby spinach leaves
- 2 teaspoons cumin seeds
- 2 teaspoons brown mustard seeds
- 2 branches curry leaves
- Steamed basmati rice, for serving

** I use red (masoor) or yellow (moong/mung) lentils most often, as they don't need soaking so are quick to prepare.*

METHOD

1. Combine lentils, turmeric, 1 litre of the water and 2 teaspoons of salt in a saucepan.
2. Bring to the boil, reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, heat 2 tablespoons of the ghee in a large high-sided frying pan or wok.
4. Add onion and a good pinch of salt and cook for 8-10 minutes over medium heat, stirring often, until it turns light brown.
5. Stir in garlic and chilli and cook for 30 seconds or so, add spinach and cook for a few minutes, until wilted, stirring frequently.
6. Stir spinach mixture into dhal with remaining water and continue cooking for 10 minutes or so, stirring often, until lentils are tender.
7. Heat remaining ghee in a small saucepan. Add cumin and mustard seeds and curry leaves and fry for a few seconds until it stops sputtering.
8. Pour over the dhal and serve.

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