

Diwali: it's a celebration that brings together both family and friends



P. Narayan/AGE Fotostudio

Traditional dishes: food plays an important role in Diwali



sinopictures/dinodia

Lighting up the season

Sie wissen nicht, was Diwali ist, und wie es gefeiert wird? Lassen Sie sich von uns erleuchten! INEZ SHARP sprach mit einer indischen Kochbuchautorin über das Lichterfest. **medium** www.inezsharp.com

“The Festival of Lights”: who wouldn't be seduced by such a magical phrase? I certainly have been for a long time, but — to my shame — without knowing more about Diwali than its importance as a religious holiday in India and Nepal. This year, after listening to an Indian friend describe the festivities, I decided it was time to investigate.

The Festival of Lights is a five-day celebration in the Hindu calendar. It takes place around a full moon, usually between mid-October and mid-November. This year, the high point of the holiday, the third day of the celebration, falls on 17 October. Diwali, or Dipawali, a Sanskrit word meaning a row of lights, is celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains as a religious festival, and by many Muslims as a secular holiday.

Diwali celebrations centre on the story of the Hindu Prince Rama. According to legend, Rama, who has spent 14 years in exile, takes on and defeats the evil demon Ravana. Rama wins back his wife, Sita, and returns home — a journey that takes him from southern India to his north-

ern homeland. To guide the happy couple on their travels, houses, streets, shops and temples are decorated with rows of small oil lamps known as dipas.

To get the full flavour of the festivities, I sought the expert help of Mridula Baljekar, an award-winning Indian cookery writer and enthusiastic celebrator of Diwali. She spoke to me from her home in London.

Inez Sharp: How do you celebrate the Festival of Lights? **Mridula Baljekar:** It's very much like Christmas, because we exchange gifts at Diwali. Actually, both the religious aspect and the family get-together during Diwali are equally important. The religious aspect teaches us goodwill and that good can always win over evil, as shown in the battle between Rama and Ravana. It also teaches the younger generation to be caring, to be giving and forgiving, and to live a good life. Young people learn always to try and do a good deed and never to harm anyone knowingly. It's this kind of teaching that underlies the celebrations. In India — especially in the north of India — it also marks the beginning of the new business year.

Sharp: How do people prepare for Diwali?

Baljekar: There are many things that people do, starting with spring-cleaning their houses and cleaning all their cooking utensils. We often buy new clothes and gifts, and we also cook all kinds of sweets. Diwali is all about sweets, really. Hindus believe that sweets represent the inner goodness in us. So all kinds of sweets are prepared specially, using fresh coconut. Doing this signifies a good omen. By giving sweets to people, we feel we are giving goodwill to friends and family.

Sharp: What happens during the five-day celebration?

Baljekar: On Diwali Day itself — some people celebrate it on the third day, some celebrate it on the fourth day, depending on the region of India — lamps are lit, and we have fireworks as well. The fireworks signify the death of the evil demon Ravana, whom Rama had killed. People used to build effigies of Ravana and set them alight — that's how the tradition of fireworks began.

We don't actually take five days off, but there are three days of holiday, and everything comes to a standstill. We visit friends and family, taking along sweets that we've made. Of course, we sit down to feast, but the food is quite simple, because you are not supposed to eat any meat, fish, eggs or poultry during Diwali. It has to be totally vegetarian food.

bless sth. [bles]	etw. segnen
cinnamon ['sɪnəmən]	Zimt
deep-fry sth. [ˌdiːp ˈfraɪ]	etw. in Fett ausbacken
desiccated ['desɪkətɪd]	getrocknet
Diwali [dɪˈwɑːli]	indisches Lichterfest
effigy ['efɪdʒi]	Bildnis
feast [fiːst]	ein Festessen abhalten
filo pastry ['fi:ləʊ ˌpeɪstri]	Blätterteig
generosity [ˌdʒenəˈrɒsəti]	Großzügigkeit
goodwill [ˌɡʊdˈwɪl]	Wohllöwen
grated ['ɡreɪtɪd]	gerieben
hospitable [hɒˈspɪtəbəl]	gastfreundlich
investigate [ɪnˈvestɪɡeɪt]	(etw.) herausfinden
lime [laɪm]	Limette
mustard seeds ['mʌstəd ˌsiːdz]	Senfsamen
new business year [ˌnjuː ˈbɪznəs ˌjɪə]	neues Wirtschaftsjahr, Geschäftsjahr
nutmeg ['nʌtmeg]	Muskatnuss
pastry ['peɪstri]	Gebäckstück
plain flour [ˌpleɪn ˈflaʊə]	Mehl (ohne Zusatz von Backtriebmittel)
poultry ['pɔʊltri]	Geflügel
recipe ['resəpi]	Kochrezept
season sth. ['siːzən]	etw. würzen
secular ['sekjələ]	weltlich
seduce sb. [sɪˈdjuːs]	jmdn. verführen
seek sth. [siːk], past tense: sought	um etw. bitten
set sth. alight [ˌset əˈlaɪt]	etw. anzünden
signify sth. ['sɪgnɪfaɪ]	für etw. stehen
skinless ['skɪnləs]	geschält
soak sth. [səʊk]	etw. einweichen
split [splɪt]	gespalten
standstill ['stændstɪl]	Stillstand
sweets [swiːts]	Süßspeisen, Süßigkeiten
take sb. on [ˌteɪk ˈɒn]	gegen jmdn. antreten

We also worship Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, at this time. We leave the lights on until after midnight, because Lakshmi will not enter a dark house. We believe that Lakshmi will come in and bless the house, and that is a very important aspect of Diwali.


Sharp: What would a visitor to India during Diwali be able to see?

Baljekar: There are a lot of celebrations in public places and in parks, and visitors are always welcome. Guests are really very welcome. Indians are very hospitable: to us, guests are considered equivalent to God. They are really looked after with great respect, warmth and generosity. And they can join in all the festivities — in fact, they'll make the local people very happy if they do join in.


Sharp: Do you have any special recipes for Diwali?

Baljekar: One very simple dish is prepared at this time using skinless and split mung beans. These are soaked and boiled, and then seasoned with mustard seeds, grated coconut and lime juice. It's like a salad, and it's said to have been a favourite of the Hindu Prince Rama, which is why it's prepared during Diwali.

But my real favourite is the coconut-filled pastries. You make a pastry out of plain flour. Take some coconut — and in India, it's always fresh coconut, not desiccated coconut. You flavour it with cinnamon and nutmeg, then it's mixed with cashew nuts and raisins, wrapped in pastry and deep-fried. That would be my own recipe, but if I'm cooking in England, I use desiccated coconut, add the spices, put filo pastry around it and bake it in the oven. ●



MRIDULA BALJEKAR was born in north-east India and thanks her grandmother for awakening her love for food and cooking. This passion led her to turn cooking into a career. Mridula Baljekar, who now lives in England, has written 15 cookery books and has appeared regularly on television food shows. Her latest DVD, *Indian Cooking Made Easy* (ASIN B000KH9GU), is available at amazon.de

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