Vegetable Pakoras
Deep-fried fritters made from seasoned chickpea flour (also known as besan or gram flour), pakoras are the quintessential Indian snack food. Small enough to hold in your hand and dip into some green chutney (see below), these goodies can be found throughout India and are eaten at any time of the day. Try some for a group stopping over for late afternoon cocktail hour.

The following recipe is adapted from Marthannah Stevens, of Boston, Mass, who spent her early years learning the recipes of Yamuna Devi, author of "Lord Krishna's Cuisine: The Art of Indian Vegetarian Cooking." Devi's book is an amazing reference which I also consulted for this recipe.

Batter Ingredients:
2 cups chickpea flour
1 teaspoon baking powder (optional; use if you like a puffier result)
3/4 teaspoon cayenne
1/2 teaspoon cumin
1/2 teaspoon turmeric
1 teaspoon coriander
1/8 teaspoon asafetida
2 teaspoons salt
1/2 teaspoon kalongi seeds (optional)
1/2 teaspoon cumin seeds (optional)
Approximately 1 1/2 cups cold water

Veggies that can be used:
Zucchini (rounds or batons), bell pepper (rectangles), eggplant rounds (use small, thinner eggplants), diced potatoes, sweet potato rounds, cauliflower florets, julienned carrots, onion rings, spinach leaves, watercress.

For frying: ghee (traditional), canola or vegetable oil

Method:
With a rubber spatula, mix all ingredients, except for the water, to combine. Add water gradually, and mix well after each addition. Continue to add water until the batter is the consistency of heavy cream or of pancake batter.

Let batter rest for about 15 minutes. In the meantime, you may either prep your vegetables for frying or make a green chutney (see below) for dipping.

Heat about 2 inches of fat of your choice in a heavy deep pot or a wok until temperature reaches approximately 335 degrees. If you don't have a cooking thermometer, you can test the oil with a spoonful of batter; it is ready for cooking when it bubbles in response.

Veggies such as zucchini rounds, eggplant rounds and bell pepper rectangles use a medium-consistency batter. More delicate items such as spinach leaves and watercress may require a thinner batter. If you're planning to do a mixed order, prepare the heavy-batter items first, then water down batter as needed for more delicate pieces.

Dip veggies into batter, making sure they are completely coated. With a pair of tongs, place into hot oil and let cook until medium golden brown. You may turn veggies with tongs to allow for browning on both sides. Remove with a slotted spoon and transfer to paper towels or a layer of paper bags for draining. Eat while pakoras are still warm and serve with chutney.

Green Chutney
Chutneys are typically made in Indian households on a daily basis. Amounts are approximate, ingredients are flexible and emphasis is up to the cook, which is why chutney recipes may vary by village, family, region. The key with a green (herb) chutney is to make it invigorating to the tongue. It should be fresh and should cut against the fat of the pakoras.

Below are guidelines for a green chutney, based on several rounds of recipe testing:

Ingredients:
1 large handful fresh cilantro leaves
1 small handful fresh mint leaves, stemmed
1/2 inch fresh ginger root
1 or 2 cloves garlic
1 small or medium tomato
1 small green chile, such as Thai bird
salt to taste

Method:
Roughly chop the cilantro, mint, garlic and tomato. Slice ginger and roughly chop. Dice the chile and remove the seeds if you want less heat; if you want more eat, keep seeds. Place all ingredients in the bowl of a food processor in a blender; blend until smooth and well combined. Add salt. Serve at room temperature; chutney may be stored in the refrigerator in an airtight container for up to two days.