

The Origins of Curry



Most people in the world today know what a curry is - or at least think they do. In Britain the term 'curry' has come to mean almost any Indian dish, whilst most people from the sub-continent would say it is not a word they use, but if they did it would mean a meat, vegetable or fish dish with spicy sauce and rice or bread.

The earliest known recipe for meat in spicy sauce with bread appeared on tablets found near Babylon in Mesopotamia, written in cuniform text as discovered by the Sumerians, and dated around 1700 B.C., probably as an offering to the god Marduk.

The origin of the word itself is the stuff of legends, but most pundits have settled on the origins being the Tamil word 'kari' meaning spiced sauce. In his excellent Oxford Companion to Food, Alan Davidson quotes this as a fact and supports it with reference to the accounts from a Dutch traveller in 1598 referring to a dish called 'Carriel'. He also refers to a Portuguese cookery book from the seventeenth century called *Atre do Cozinha*, with chilli-based curry powder called 'caril'.

In her '50 Great Curries of India', Camellia Panjabi says the word today simply means 'gravy'. She also goes for the Tamil word 'kaari or kaaree' as the origin, but with some reservations, noting that in the north, where the English first landed in 1608 then 1612, a gravy dish is called 'khadi'.

Pat Chapman of Curry Club fame offers several possibilities:- 'karaahi or karai(Hindi)' from the wok-shaped cooking dish, 'kari' from the Tamil or 'Turkuri' a seasonal sauce or stew.

The one thing all the experts seem to agree on is that the word originates from India and was adapted and adopted by the British Raj.

On closer inspection, however, there is just as much evidence to suggest the word was English all along.

In the time of Richard I there was a revolution in English cooking . In the better-off kitchens, cooks were regularly using ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, galingale, cubebs, coriander, cumin, cardamom and aniseed, resulting in highly spiced cooking very similar to India. They also had a 'powder fort', 'powder douce' and 'powder blanch'.

Then, in Richard II's reign (1377-1399) the first real English cookery book was written. Richard employed 200 cooks and they, plus others including philosophers, produced a

work with 196 recipes in 1390 called 'The Forme of Cury'. 'Cury' was the Old English word for cooking derived from the French 'cuire' - to cook, boil, grill - hence cuisine.

In the preface it says this "forme of cury was compiled of the chef maistes cokes of kyng Richard the Secunde kyng of nglond aftir the conquest; the which was accounted the best and ryallest vyand of alle csten ynges: and it was compiled by assent and avysement of maisters and phisik and of philosophie that dwellid in his court. First it techith a man to make commune pottages and commune meetis for howshold, as they shold be made, craftly and holsomly, Aftirward it techith for to make curious potages and meetes and sotiltees for alle maner of states, bothe hye and lowe. And the techyng of the forme of making of potages and of meetes, bothe flesh and of fissh, both y sette here by noumbre and by ordre".

In his book 'Manners and Meals in Olden Times' (1868) F.J.Furnell noted a passage from a fifteenth century treatise against nouvelle cuisine :

'Cooks with peire newe conceytes,

chopynge, stampyng and gryndyng

Many new curies alle day pey ar contryvyng

and fyndyng

pat provotethe pe peple to perelles of passage prouz peyne soore pyndyng

and prouz nice excesse of such receytes of pe life to make a endyng.'

So when the English merchants landed at Surat in 1608 and 1612, then Calcutta 1633, Madras 1640 and Bombay 1668, the word 'cury' had been part of the English language for well over two hundred years. In fact, it was noted that the meal from Emperor Jahangir's kitchens of dumpukht fowl stewed in butter with spices, almond and raisins served to those merchants in 1612, was very similar to a recipe for English Chicken Pie in a popular cookery book of the time, 'The English Hus-wife' by Gevase Markham. Indeed many spices had been in Europe for hundreds of years by then, after the conquests of the Romans in 40AD and the taking of Al Andulus by the Moors in 711 AD, bringing to Europe the culinary treasures of the spice routes.

Many supporters of the Tamil word kari as the basis for curry, use the definition from the excellent Hobson-Jobson Anglo English Dictionary, first published in 1886. The book quotes a passage from the Mahavanso (c A.D. 477) which says "he partook of rice dressed in butter with its full accompaniment of curries." The important thing, however, is the note that this is Turnour's translation of the original Pali which used the word "supa" not the word curry. Indeed Hobson -Jobson even accepts that there is a possibility that "the kind of curry used by Europeans and Mohommedans is not of purely Indian

origin, but has come down from the spiced cookery of medieval Europe and Western Asia.”

Whatever the truth, ‘curry’ was rapidly adopted in Britain. In 1747 Hannah Glasse produced the first known recipe for modern ‘currey’ in Glasse’s Art of Cookery and by 1773 at least one London Coffee House had curry on the menu. In 1791 Stephana Malcom, the granddaughter of the Laird of Craig included a curry recipe she called Chicken Topperfield plus Currypowder, Chutnies and Mulligatawny soup as recorded in ‘In The Lairds Kitchen, Three Hundred Years of Food in Scotland’.

Around the same time the word "consumer" began to appear which, conversely, was not originally an English word as one might think, but derived from 'Khansaman', the title of the house steward - the chief table servant and purchaser as well as provider of all food in Anglo-Indian households.

In 1780 the first commercial curry powder appeared and in 1846 its fame was assured when William Makepeace Thackeray wrote a ‘Poem to Curry’ in his ‘Kitchen Melodies’.

Curry

Three pounds of veal my darling girl prepares,

And chops it nicely into little squares;

Five onions next prures the little minx

(The biggest are the best, her Samiwel thinks),

And Epping butter nearly half a pound,

And stews them in a pan until they’re brown’d.

What’s next my dexterous little girl will do?

She pops the meat into the savoury stew,

With curry-powder table-spoonfuls three,

And milk a pint (the richest that may be),

And, when the dish has stewed for half an hour,

A lemon’s ready juice she’ll o’er it pour.

Then, bless her! Then she gives the luscious pot

A very gentle boil - and serves quite hot.

PS - Beef, mutton, rabbit, if you wish,

Lobsters, or prawns, or any kind fish,

Are fit to make a CURRY. 'Tis, when done,

A dish for Emperors to feed upon.

In the same year Charles Elme Francatelli, chief cook and maitre d'hotel to Queen Victoria included a recipe for 'Indian Curry Sauce' in his 'The Modern Cook', based on Cook's or Bruce's meat curry paste.

In 1861 it was Mrs Beeton's turn in her 'Book of Household Management' where she includes no less than fourteen curry recipes, including Dr Kitchener's Recipe for India Curry Powder. Even Charles Ranhofer, chef at Delmonico's (1862-98) wrote in The Epicurean "Curry - the best comes from India. An imitation is made of one ounce of coriander seeds, two ounces of cayenne, a quarter ounce of cardamom seeds, one ounce salt, two ounces turmeric, one ounce ginger, half an ounce of mace and a third of an ounce of saffron".

The development of the curry industry in Britain has been peculiarly Anglo-Asian such that many people brandish 'authenticity' as if it were the Holy Grail. According to Camellia Panjabi "Ninety nine per cent of Indians do not have a tandoor and so neither Tandoori Chicken nor Naan are part of India's middle class cuisine. This is even so in the Punjab, although some villages have communal tandoors where rotis can be baked. Ninety five per cent of Indians don't know what a vindaloo, jhal farezi or, for that matter, a Madras curry is".

Since the opening of The Bombay Brasserie in London in 1982 there has been a growing group of highly trained chefs offering the classic Indian dishes but the backbone of the British industry has consisted largely of self taught chefs who have been clever enough to adapt to market requirements resulting in the Balti craze and the, now world famous, Chicken Tikka Masala amongst others.

'Curry' has not looked back since and was recently named the British National dish after a major opinion poll by Gallup. It is interesting to note that the Portuguese, Dutch and even the French were in India long before or concurrently with the English and yet it was Britain that readily adopted curry, not the others.

Perhaps it was because England had had a tradition of 'cury' all along!