

The origin, definition & history of curry



The Nawab of Oudh entertaining Governor-General Lord Moira to a banquet in the palace at Lucknow in 1814.
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origin of the word curry

The Oxford English Dictionary states that the English word curry is derived from the Tamil word *kari*. Dr K.T. Achaya, a leading authority on the history of Indian food, agrees. He explains that the Tamil word *kari* is actually a term for black pepper but that the word can be used to describe any dish spiced with pepper and served as part of a south Indian meal.

The food historian Peter Grove disagrees. His theory is as follows. In 1390 King Richard II of England commissioned his master cooks to write the first proper English cookery book. The title of the manuscript was "The Forme of Cury". Cury is the Middle English term for cookery and cookery in this context means making a dish from a mixture of ingredients as opposed to, say, roasting meat. The recipes in the document use many of the spices which we would now associate with curry e.g. cloves, nutmeg, cardamom, ginger and pepper. By the time English traders began to settle in India in the early 1600's the better-off English households had been making dishes of meat flavoured with spices for over 200 years. So when the English came across Indian dishes whose names were unpronounceable but which contained spiced sauces like the ones they were familiar with they reverted to calling them "cury" too.

A third explanation is that the term curry refers to the pot in which dishes with a spicy sauce are cooked. In much of India that cooking pot is called a *karahi*. Now, the Oxford BBC Guide To Pronunciation tells us that *karahi* is pronounced "kurr-Y" with the Y sounding like the y in cry. So the English in India could easily have mispronounced *karahi* as "curry".

So, is the word curry named after a cooking pot or is it derived from the Middle English *cury* or is it really from the Tamil *kari* after all? No-one knows for sure. It may even be a combination of all three.

What we do know is that the term was adopted by English traders in the seventeenth century to describe any Indian dish which came with a spiced sauce.

definition of curry

If we are not sure of the origins of the word then what has it come to mean? Well, it depends on who you ask.

Camellia Panjabi, in her definitive book *50 Great Curries of India*, states that "curry means a dish with gravy specially suited to combine with rice".

The founder of The Curry Club, Pat Chapman, says that curry is "a mixture of spices (masala) thoroughly cooked with main ingredients, such as meat, poultry, fish or vegetables, creating a thick or thin gravy".

The chef, writer and broadcaster Cyrus Todiwala OBE maintains that a dish should only be called a curry if the sauce contains coconut cream. That would exclude many Indian dishes commonly called curries but would include things like Thai curries.

The Indian cookery writer Mrs Balbir Singh writes in her classic book *Indian Cookery* "Curry in India is not a dish; it is a class of dishes" and, as an example, divides Indian meat dishes into four main categories – curries, tandoori dishes, kebabs and koftas.

Contemporary Indian restaurants also tend to distinguish between curries and other dishes but in a different way to Mrs Balbir Singh. They might offer:

1. Specials – traditional Bangladeshi, Indian or Pakistani dishes
2. Tandoori specialities
3. Curries – dishes based upon a stock sauce of puréed onions, garlic and ginger

I would combine the above definitions into the following:

curry is a class of dishes which are based on South Asian recipes and which incorporate a plentiful and well spiced sauce

My definition would then encompass South Asian curries, restaurant-style curries, Thai and other South-East Asian curries and even Japanese and British curries.

a history of curry

It is beyond the scope of this website to chart the complete history of cooking in the Asian sub-continent. Besides, it would be a formidable task which would have to be undertaken region by region. You could not study the history of Punjab in the north and assume it was the same for Kerala in the south. It would be like trying to follow the history of Italian cuisine by studying the development of cooking in Finland (which is as distant from Italy as Punjab is from Kerala).

The history of curry, on the other hand, is more concise and has a number of distinct phases.

It starts life with the arrival in India of traders from the English East India Company in the early 1600's. The English certainly ate the local food and enjoyed it pretty much unaltered. Confusingly, the English used the generic name "curry" for every dish they encountered which came with a spiced sauce. The name stuck.

By the early 1700's the East India Company had established fortified trading posts at Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. The trading posts did, of course, employ local labour but thousands of expatriate British supervised the trade, administration and defence of the trading stations. So more and more British were being exposed to Indian food (and were still calling everything curry). One East India Company employee wrote in 1759 "The currees are infinitely various" and another recorded in his diary "To-day had curry and rice for my dinner and plenty of it".

Curry recipes were already being taken back to Britain by Company employees who had finished their tour of duty. The first record of a curry recipe in an English cookery book comes from Hannah Glasse's "The Art of Cookery made plain and easy" which was published in 1747. Her recipe describes how "To make a Currey the India way" and uses onions, peppercorns and coriander seeds to make the sauce which is thickened with rice. This sounds to me very much like a cut down version of what her contemporaries were eating out in India and may well signify the start of the British altering Indian dishes to suit their own tastes.

If we jump forward a hundred years or so things are quite different in many ways. By the mid 1800's the British were no longer simply trading partners with the Indian regions; they were the political and military rulers. Now more and more Britons arrived in India to administer colonial rule. That brought about a change in the type of food the British were eating. One old India hand, writing in 1883, is already nostalgic for a time when the British encouraged their servants to cook "eight or nine varieties of curries, with divers platters of freshly-made chutneys". He complains "curries have deteriorated in quality" by being Anglicised or had been replaced altogether by European dishes. The Indians, needless to say, continued to make their dishes in the same way and with the same ingredients as before.

Curry recipes were still being taken home by returning colonials but now the recipes had already been Anglicised before they got back to Britain. On top of that, the fresh ingredients used to make authentic curries were either not available or were prohibitively expensive for ordinary households in Britain. Curry powder had been made in small quantities for a hundred years or so as a substitute for the whole range of fresh and ground spices used to make curry. But the huge demand in the second half of the 19th century turned the making of curry powder into an

industrial process. The curry powder made in Madras (now Chennai) became world famous and is still a significant Indian export to this day.

Unfortunately, the export of curry powder to Britain and other parts of the British Empire heralded the nadir of the curry because the time came when the majority of curries were being made with curry powder to almost identical recipes. Mrs Beeton included the recipes for a dozen curries in her famous "Book of Household Management" of 1861 and they are all much the same. The sauces are made with curry powder and are usually thickened with flour. The main ingredient is mostly re-heated meat or fish left over from other meals so it's clear that curry isn't held in high regard.

This sorry state of affairs continued right up until the 1960's. Immigrants from what are now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh had been coming to Britain in relatively small numbers since the second world war but in the 1960's immigration increased considerably. Often the immigrants were men who came alone to establish themselves in anticipation of being joined later by their families. These Asian men, unlike their English counterparts travelling in the opposite direction 200 years before, found the local food far too bland. So the various communities opened basic cafés to satisfy their need for good home-style food. Quite a few of those cafés then transformed into prototype "curry houses" as spice-hungry Brits realised the food was extraordinarily good and, what's more, cheap.

And so began the rise of the Indian restaurant in Britain. There had been Indian restaurants in Britain for a very long time but they were generally formal, upmarket affairs. The new curry houses were informal, cheap and a world away from English cooking at the time. Brits took to them immediately and the restaurants spread right through the country. Inevitably, to encourage more customers, the restaurants tempered their menu to suit a wider British clientèle. Curries like the Madras and the Chicken Tikka Masala were introduced onto the curry house menu. So, once again, authentic South Asian food was modified to suite the British palate.

So where is curry now at the beginning of the 21st century?

The 1960's style of curry house has all but disappeared. Whilst most restaurants still offer a selection of curries from the old curry house menu many, like the new wave of proudly Bangladeshi restaurants, now serve a wide selection of authentic regional dishes as well.

The Indian restaurant concept created by British Asians had been exported to many other countries and modified once again to suit the local tastes.

Britain has a thriving, multi-million pound Indian food industry. All the major supermarkets offer Indian ready meals which include old curry house favourites. That famous pair of curries, the Madras and the Chicken Tikka Masala, may be restaurant inventions but they are alive and kicking in restaurants and supermarkets throughout Britain and other parts of the world.

In the midst of all that change one thing stubbornly remains the same. We still use the term curry as shorthand for South Asian dishes with a spiced sauce. I suppose a 400 year old habit is hard to break.

curry myths

In all the years I have been writing The Curry House certain misconceptions turn up time and time again. Namely :

- “curry is a spice” – curry is not one spice but a curry does contain a blend of several spices.
- “curry is a plant” – there is such a thing as a curry plant, *Helichrysum Angustifolium*, but it merely smells like curry powder and is not used to make curries; curry leaves, *Murraya Koenigii*, are used in south Indian cooking but only as one flavouring alongside other spices.
- “curry is made with curry powder” – a curry can be made with ready-blended curry powder but it does not have to be; traditional South Asian dishes which might be labelled as curries never include curry powder – each has its own blend or *masala* of spices.
- “curries are hot” – a curry does not have to be hot; most curries contain chilli but many are medium or mild.
- “curry is an Indian dish” – whilst thousands of South Asian dishes might be described as curries each has its own individual Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi name.
- “they make the dish with curry” – it is not possible to make something **with** curry; curry is a class of dishes not an ingredient.



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The Origin, Definition
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[Index](#)