

“The Sublime Art of Curry-Making”:

Culinary Trends in British India

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By the time Colonel Arthur Kenney-Herbert wrote his best-selling book *Culinary Jottings for Madras* (1878), no self-respecting British memsahib would have dreamt of serving curry at a dinner party. The British rulers of India might have eaten curry for lunch or a quiet little dinner at home, men might have enjoyed curries at their club, but Indian food was nowhere to be seen at formal occasions. Things were very different a century earlier, in the days of the East India Company. A young Englishman by the name of John Grose travelled out to India in 1750 and later wrote about his experiences. In Grose’s time, the company’s employees were mostly eating the local food. He writes:

So much however is certainly true, that most of the Europeans soon reconcile themselves to the country-diet, and many at length prefer it to their own, even in point of taste or relish, independent of its being undoubtedly more wholesome, and more adapted to the climate. . .
(150–51)

The diet of the British in India changed over time. European dishes started to appear on their dinner tables, and Indian food began to fall out of favour. Dr. Robert Riddell, the superintending surgeon for the Nizam of Hyderabad’s army, wrote his *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book* in 1849. The book shows that, although the British were still enjoying Indian dishes at that time, European dishes had already gained dominance. Of the twenty-three chapters of recipes, only one focuses on what Riddell calls “oriental cookery,” although the book does contain an extensive selection of recipes for Indian food. There are forty-four recipes for curries, together with recipes for pilau, biryani, kebabs, and a dish called “ash,” which is made with meat, pulses, vegetables, fruit, sugar, milk, and spices.

Although Riddell includes many Indian recipes in his book, it is clear that the British were already anglicizing traditional dishes. When describing some of the ingredients used by Indian cooks, he explains:

Most of these would be disagreeable to a European palate, and are therefore omitted, though found in the receipts; and which, if copied, a literal translation would require. One or two are given, more as a curiosity than supposing they will ever be tried, however piquant they may be to an Asiatic palate. (376)

Riddell was writing primarily for readers who were living in towns and cantonments and who were in a position to enjoy formal dinners. However, curry was still the staple diet of soldiers in camp and officials in remote outposts. George Atkinson, a captain in the Bengal Engineers, wrote a satirical book titled "*Curry & Rice, on Forty Plates* (1859?) in which the "forty plates" are anecdotes about different aspects of life at a typical station. In a chapter titled "Our Agriculturists," he describes preparations for a meal:

Then are the table attendants actively alert; the sacrifice of the chicken has been accomplished; the savoury condiments for our Curry have been amalgamated, and are seething in the pot; the everlasting omelette is about to be cooked, and the unfermented cakes [chapattis] prepared.

Kenney-Herbert had arrived in India in 1859 as a young cadet and spent his early career in camp and at small stations similar to Atkinson's. As his military career progressed, he was posted to Madras and his social life, like Riddell's, began to encompass formal meals and regimental banquets. When he retired to England in 1892, he wrote an article for *Macmillan's Magazine* about his life in India. He describes a *burra khana*, or big feast, held by a colonel at his bungalow on a military cantonment. There were numerous courses to the feast, including one of eight different types of boiled and roasted meats, but the meal also included a course of various curries accompanied by chutneys and pickles ("In the Days of John Company" 119,123).

The *burra khana* would have been held when Kenney-Herbert was a junior officer, sometime in the 1860s. At that time, the curry course clearly had not been abandoned on formal occasions. Almost twenty years later, the situation had changed. Kenney-Herbert sets the scene:

Our dinners of to-day would indeed astonish our Anglo-Indian forefathers. With a taste for light wines, and a far more moderate indulgence in stimulating drinks, has been germinated a desire for delicate and artistic cookery. Quality has superseded quantity, and the molten curries and florid oriental compositions of the olden time—so fearfully and wonderfully made—have been gradually banished from our dinner tables. (Culinary Jottings 1)

When the Prince of Wales—the future King Edward VII—visited Madras in 1875, the Madras Club held a grand ball in his honour. It is likely that no Indian food was served at the ball, and the accounts of the club show “Europe extras” as a significant portion of the cost for the supper (Love 24). However, when the prince returned to the club for lunch the following day, he was treated to a selection of nine different curries accompanied by fifteen fresh chutneys (Wheeler 174). The minutes of the Madras Club record that the prince was so impressed with the curries that he took one of the club’s chefs back to England with him (Love 24).



“The Prince of Wales at the Madras Club Ball—16th December 1875.” *The Illustrated London News*, 22 January 1876.

The decline in the popularity of curries at formal dinners coincided with a large influx of British citizens into India. In the wake of the Indian rebellion of 1857, the British government took India under direct control, acquiring assets and assuming responsibilities previously held by the East India Company. The newcomers were not only military personnel, like Kenney-Herbert, but also professionals, such as civil servants, surveyors, and railway engineers. The families of the Raj developed their own exclusive communities and imported their social conventions from home. The result was that formal dining became more European in style and content. Meals were served according to the conventions of *service à la française*, and even standard English dishes were given French names on the menu cards.

The hill stations built by the British displayed even more of a mirror image of social life back in England than the cantonments or the remote stations on the plains. The milder climate and perceived safety of the hill stations made them so attractive that the whole machinery of government would be transferred there during the hottest months of the year. There were dances, dinner parties, clubs, and all manner of sports. There were botanical gardens where the British could promenade and where they could propagate English fruit and vegetables. In culinary terms, the temperate climate of the hill stations meant that the British were able to cook dishes that were impossible to make in the heat of the plains. Pastry was particularly difficult to make in India in the days before refrigeration, and Kenney-Herbert is envious of the pastry chefs who are fortunate enough to work at the hill station of Ootacamund.

When Kenney-Herbert's contemporaries did eat curry, it had been thoroughly transformed into an Anglo-Indian dish more suited to their liking. Kenney-Herbert added a new chapter to the fourth edition of *Culinary Jottings for Madras* (1883) with the appropriate title of "Our Curries" (emphasis added). He had been taught how to cook curries by one of the "elders at Madras" who belonged to "a generation that fostered the art of curry-making" (*Culinary Jottings* 286). His famous recipe for Madras chicken curry was centred around his homemade curry powder, which he made in huge batches, each weighing twenty-one pounds (9.5 kg). Indian cooks would prepare each curry from a selection of individual spices, but Kenney-Herbert preferred to make his curry powder in advance and use the same blend in every curry. He maintained that his method was far superior to the way in which Indian cooks

made their “curry-stuff” (*Culinary Jottings* 287–91). When Kenney-Herbert wanted to add a sweet and sour flavour to his curries, he dispensed with the traditional south Indian ingredient of tamarind paste and replaced it with a very English alternative: redcurrant jelly.

The popularity of curry among the British in India continued its decline as the nineteenth century came to a close. Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner first published *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* in 1888, and it became the most popular manual on how to run a British household in India. The success of the book owed much to Steel and Gardiner’s first-hand experience. Steel lived in India for twenty-two years, and Gardiner brought up a large family there. The earliest editions of the book contain hardly any recipes for Indian dishes. It was only in the 1898 edition that they added, somewhat reluctantly, a mere one and a half pages on “native dishes.” They introduce the chapter by advising: “The following native dishes have been added by request. It may be mentioned incidentally that most native recipes are inordinately greasy and sweet, and that your native cooks invariably know how to make them fairly well (305).” It appears that the “English girls” to whom the book was dedicated no longer needed or wanted a repertoire of Indian recipes.

It was left to *Culinary Jottings* to carry the torch for curry-making in British cuisine into the twentieth century. Florence White, in her 1932 cookery book *Good Things in England*, acknowledges Kenney-Herbert as “the greatest modern authority on curries and curry-making” (178) even though it had been nearly fifty years since his essay on curries had first been published. Kenney-Herbert’s reputation was revived in 1970 by Elizabeth David in her book *Spices, Salt and Aromatics in the English Kitchen*. David was an influential cookery writer and had rejuvenated British cooking in the 1960s with her books on Mediterranean cuisine. Despite the fact that David thought of Kenney-Herbert as her “Officer of the Kitchen” (158), his British-style curry recipes were already going out of fashion. The spread of Indian restaurants across Britain in the 1970s and the growing popularity of South Asian cookery writers highlighted how recipes made with curry powder and English ingredients lacked authenticity and variety. Curry still has a prominent place in British cuisine, but the recipes from the Raj have been superseded by the very dishes from which they were adapted in the first place.

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