

For the love of curry: the history, evolution and global spread of curry

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Say the word “Curry”, and you can see it, smell it and taste it – an array of aromatic and flavourful dishes now enjoyed around the world. Originating from the Indian subcontinent, curry has undergone significant evolution and adaptation, leading to a rich assortment of global variations and interpretations. Explore the fascinating history, evolution, and global spread of curry with me as we look at both its cultural significance and culinary versatility.

Origins

The origins of curry can be traced back over 4,000 years to the Indian subcontinent, where evidence of spiced stews dates back to the Indus Valley Civilisation. The term “curry” is believed to have been derived from the Tamil word “kari,” meaning sauce or relish for rice. Early curries were likely simple preparations of meat and vegetables cooked with spices, influenced by regional availability and culinary traditions.

Ancient texts like the Vedas and the Charaka Samhita mention the use of spices in cooking, indicating the long-standing tradition of spice utilisation in Indian cuisine. Spices such as turmeric, cumin, coriander, and fenugreek were commonly used, creating the foundation for the complex flavours that define curry.

Evolution on the Subcontinent

As Indian cuisine evolved, so did curry, becoming a diverse and multifaceted culinary tradition. Regional variations emerged, each with its distinct ingredients and cooking methods. In Northern India, curries often featured dairy products like yogurt and ghee, along with rich gravies made from nuts and cream. In contrast, Southern Indian curries were characterized by the liberal use of coconut, tamarind, and curry leaves, resulting in tangy and aromatic dishes.

The arrival of foreign traders and invaders further influenced Indian curry. Persian and Mughal invasions introduced new ingredients such as saffron, dried fruits, and nuts, leading to the creation of iconic dishes like biryani and korma. The Portuguese brought chili peppers, which became a staple in Indian cuisine, enhancing the heat and complexity of curries.

To England and across the waves

The global spread of curry can be significantly attributed to British colonialism. During the British Raj, colonial administrators and soldiers developed a taste for Indian cuisine, leading to the introduction of curry to Britain. The first British cookbook to feature curry recipes, “The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy” by Hannah Glasse, was published in 1747, marking the beginning of curry’s integration into British cuisine.

Curry became increasingly popular in Britain, leading to the establishment of curry houses in the 19th and 20th centuries. The dish was adapted to suit British palates, resulting in milder and creamier versions such as chicken tikka masala and balti. These adaptations were so well-received that they are now considered quintessential British dishes. Then there is curry sauce, added simply and directly to chips – or as a dip for very traditional British food, like haddock or peas. A perfect demonstration of curry’s versatility.

Southeast Asia

Curry’s influence spread to Southeast Asia through trade and migration, leading to the development of distinct regional variations. In Thailand, curries are known for their use of fresh herbs, coconut milk, and a balance of sweet, sour, salty, and spicy flavours. Iconic Thai curries include green curry, red curry, and Massaman curry, each with its unique blend of spices and ingredients.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, curries are influenced by both Indian and local culinary traditions. Malaysian curries often feature a rich blend of spices, coconut milk, and ingredients like lemongrass and pandan leaves. Indonesian rendang, a slow-cooked dry curry, is renowned for its deep, complex flavours and is a staple at festive occasions.

Japan

Japanese curry, or “kare,” is another fascinating adaptation. Introduced to Japan by the British in the late 19th century, Japanese curry has since become a beloved comfort food. Japanese curry, milder and sweeter than its Indian counterparts, is typically served with rice and accompanied by pickled vegetables. The dish has become so popular that it is now a standard part of the Japanese school lunch menu and a staple in home cooking.

Caribbean

Curry’s journey continued to the Caribbean, brought by Indian indentured labourers in the 19th century. In countries like Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Jamaica, curry became an integral part of the culinary landscape. Caribbean curries often feature local ingredients such as goat, chicken, and seafood, cooked with a blend of spices and herbs, reflecting the fusion of Indian and Caribbean flavours.

Africa

Curry also made its way to Africa, particularly to countries with significant Indian communities like South Africa and Kenya. In South Africa, Cape Malay curry is a unique blend of Indian and Malay influences, characterised by the use of fragrant spices, dried fruits, and a touch of sweetness. Traditional Bobotie is a perfect example of a fusion food, bringing together a variety of cuisines into a single melting pot dish that takes the tastebuds on an intercultural adventure with a single bite. In East Africa, curries are often infused with local ingredients like coconut milk and cassava, creating distinctive regional dishes.

Contemporary Global Cuisine

Today, curry is a global phenomenon, enjoyed in various forms across continents. In the United States, curry has gained popularity with the rise of Indian restaurants and fusion cuisine. Dishes like currywurst in Germany, a sausage topped with curry-flavoured ketchup, and curry laksa in Australia, a spicy noodle soup, showcase the versatility and adaptability of curry. The global spread of curry has also led to the creation of spice blends and curry powders, making it easier for home cooks to recreate these flavours. Culinary innovations continue to emerge, with chefs experimenting with new ingredients and techniques to reinterpret curry for modern palates.

The history, evolution, and global spread of curry is a testament to its enduring appeal and adaptability. From its ancient roots in the Indian subcontinent to its widespread popularity around the world, curry has transcended cultural and geographical boundaries, evolving into a diverse and beloved culinary tradition. Its rich history and myriad variations reflect the complex interplay of tradition, innovation, and cultural exchange, making curry a truly global dish.