

# Eating the Imaginary India

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Tins of curry powder have, for centuries, been shipped around the globe, intended to represent the diverse flavors of an entire subcontinent.

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I was cooking chicken in mustard sauce and butter rice for my couch-surfing host in Amsterdam to thank him for giving a broke backpacker shelter. As I stirred the pot, he reached inside his larder and took out a tiny red tin.

"Here, don't you want this?"

I stared at it. It was rusting with age. The label in big, bold letters read "Curry Powder," and "mild" underneath, as an afterthought.

"I use this for all spicy curries," my host said.

A few weeks later that same summer, I was eating dinner with a family in Salzburg, the fresh fried smell

of pork schnitzels wafting through the air, when the matriarch turned the conversation to Indian food.

"I always use curry powder to make authentic curries," she exclaimed.

As I tried to explain to the hosts that prepackaged curry powder was not invented for Indians, and that I used regionally different complex spices, roasted and powdered or whole, tempered in oil to flavor dishes. I would be lying if I said the concept did not leave me intrigued.

Recently, I saw Marion Grasby, the Australian-Thai chef, decoding khao mok gai. She adds mild curry powder to yogurt, fish sauce, turmeric and



TRADITIONAL  
**CURRY**  
*mild*  
POWDER



the bashed trio of ginger, garlic and coriander roots, before dunking in the chicken pieces to marinate, explaining the origin of the recipe lay among the Muslim community in Thailand. I gave in to temptation and went to buy my first curry powder bottle.

The word curry is used rather loosely, yet the mind can immediately conjure an image—"Indian" gravies made with a combination of spices and herbs, cooked with meat or vegetables, usually served with rice.

"The idea of a curry is, in fact, a concept that the Europeans imposed on India's food culture," writes Lizzie Collingham in *Curry: A Tale of Cooks & Conquerors*.

The British, who were in India for more than 400 years, first as traders and later as rulers, adapted the term from the Portuguese, who had set up a capital in Goa, forts and outposts along India's coasts in the 16th century to wrest away control of the spice trade from Arab merchants. They described local broths made with spices and condiments as "caril" or "carree." Karil, in Kannada and Malayalam, described spices for seasoning and sautéed dishes. Kari, in Tamil, meant something similar, though now it describes sauce.



When local words were configured into Western lexicon, they eventually formed the word curry, "which the British then used as a generic term for any spicy dish with a thick sauce or gravy in every part of India," Collingham writes. While they categorized, broadly, "three separate classes of curry, the Bengal, the Madras and the Bombay," they chose not to or did not understand the subtle nuances of variety within regions and communities. Thus, curry was a catchall for wildly different dishes like korma, vindaloo and dopiaza. Also, Indian cooks steadily changed ingredients, spices and techniques to simplify complex dishes to suit tamer colonial taste buds. Gradually, curry became a dish in its own right, created for the British in India.

Returning officials and their families carried with them the curry and slowly integrated and naturalized it into British kitchens. Correspondence enclosing recipes between family members and their sons and brothers in India also helped popularize it. By mid-19th century, curry "had become a staple in the domestic cookery of the urban bourgeoisie," writes Collingham, further legitimized among the middle-class by authoritative cookbook writers like Eliza Acton and Isabella Beeton.

Acton's *Modern Cookery in all its Branches* (1845) and Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1859) had recipes for curries and curry powder. Collingham keenly notes that Beeton placed curries under "cold meat cookery."

Thus, "eating curry was in a sense eating India... the imaginary India, whose allure was necessary to provoke an imperial interest in incorporating this jewel into the British crown," writes historian Uma Narayan in *Eating Cultures: Incorporation, Identity and Indian Food* (2010).

Traditionally, spices, herbs and aromatics used in Indian households were daily ground or pounded. Indian cooks also used the method when cooking for meeker colonial palates. And so, initially in Britain, curry recipes used the principle of buying individual spices from local chemists. Hannah Glasse taught

readers to “brown fome Coriander Seeds over the Fire in a clean shovel, and beat them to Powder” in *The Art of Cookery* (1747), which had the earliest reference to Indian curry in Britain.

But with time, recipes called for spice mixtures simply labeled as “curry powder”—a spoonful or two in everyday dishes. Sorlie’s Perfumery Warehouse in Picadilly advertised ready-mixed curry powders as early as 1784. There was never a set combination of spices used, but one frequently made an appearance.

In the early 19th century, Britain’s turmeric import grew threefold because it was the main ingredient to make curry powder.

“The popularity of curry went further afield when, as at the 1889 Universal Paris Exhibition, the composition of curry powder was set by decree: 34 g of tamarind, 44 g of onion, 20 g of coriander, 5 g of chili pepper, 3 g of turmeric, 2 g of cumin, 3 g of fenugreek, 2 g of pepper and 2 g of mustard,” writes Cecilia Leong-Salobir in *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire*.

Enterprising Indians, too, joined the bandwagon. Merwanjee Poonjiajee & Sons Pvt. Ltd’s Sun Brand tins were among the first curry powders exported from then-Bombay in 1876. Its original blend containing 16 spices and herbs is still widely available on various e-commerce sites.

By the end of the century, general grocers were selling three curry powder mixes—yellow, brown and reddish—emphasizing Britain’s complete reliance on such powders, something unheard of in the subcontinent. The usage, too, had morphed in Britain—added at the same time as the stock or water during cooking, and often, curries were thickened with a roux of the powder mixed with flour.

Susan Zlotnick, in her work based on Victorian domestic cookbooks and gender, argues that while British cookbooks attempted to “neutralize the threat of the Other by naturalizing products of

foreign lands,” in this case, curry and curry powder, Britain tried to later market the appropriated commodity back to India. For example, bottles and tins of curry powders and chutneys from The Empress brand bore the motto “The sun in her dominions never sets.” Zlotnick describes advertisements where Indian royalty and the Viceroy of India’s chef testify to the excellence and superiority of the brand’s curry powders, by extension thanking the British for dispensing it to grateful Indians.

British imperialism was a mixed process of expansion and consolidation, from traveling to and establishing forms of government in white colonies, to imposing rule in territories like India and parts of Africa, and extending influence beyond the boundaries of formally held territories like China with the possession of Hong Kong through the Treaty of Nanjing. And, wherever they went, the British took curry. In all probability, it was the tedious nature of shipping spices to colonies that led to the common use of curry powder, more specifically the Madras-inspired blend containing turmeric, coriander, fenugreek and pepper among others, in far-flung places.

The abolition of slavery in 1833 created a labor shortage in the empire’s various plantations (tea, sugar, palm oil, cane, rubber, etc.) around the globe. The British set up recruitment offices and sent more than 1.5 million Indians as indentured laborers to their colonies, with nominal pay and rations for a specified number of years. The first ship with indentured laborers sailed for Demerara (British Guiana) in 1838. Then, they were sent to Trinidad, Jamaica, South Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, British Malaya and even to Dutch and French colonies, among others.

The majority of indentured laborers, or “coolies,” never returned to India, instead setting up home far away, clinging onto their roots. In foreign lands, their cooking was a mix of adaptation and survival, blurring caste distinctions. Today, the cuisines of such countries display a strong Indian influence in recipes and techniques.

In Trinidad, a little less than half the population is of Indian origin. Curry is taken very seriously, and the use of ready-made curry powder is a given. Initially, without a supply of known Indian ingredients, Indians improvised dishes with various local-grown herbs when they arrived.

Culinary historian Colleen Taylor Sen writes a typical Trinidadian spice mix will contain turmeric, cumin, coriander and fenugreek. Fresh chile pepper used will be the fiery Scotch bonnet, which, in 1492, Christopher Columbus mistakenly thought were "Indian peppers," thinking he had landed in India. Taylor Sen adds that when making a Trinidadian curry, the cook sautés a paste of curry powder mixed with a little water (a distinctive Caribbean technique) before adding marinated meat. The popular curry powder brands include Turban, which began manufacturing in 1956, and Chief (1957), whose powder is somewhat hotter.

In Guyana, where a large part of the population also has Indian origins, curry is fundamental. Chicken with a thick gravy that uses curry and garam masala powders and wiri wiri pepper makes a comforting meal. Lalah's (established 1920 in Madras), Guyanese Pride (since 1977) and Maywah (family-owned business since 1989) are some of the curry powder and garam masala brands used.

Curry powder is also a pantry staple in Jamaica, but it differs from the Madras blend. Jamaican curry powder usually contains warm pimento berries or allspice, Scotch bonnet, thyme and has a higher turmeric amount.

The influence of curry in Africa has come over time due to spice trade and movement of enslaved people by Arabs and Indians, as well as migration and later, colonization.

In South Africa, journalist Ishay Govender writes there are as many curries as there are cultural groups. On the west coast, the Dutch established a revictualing station in the Cape in 1652. They brought enslaved people from Southeast Asia who came to be known as Cape Malays and brought

spices like turmeric, garlic, fennel, cumin, while chiles were earlier introduced by the Portuguese. They redefined Dutch and local palates; mentions of "kerrie-kerrie" came about as early as 1740.

Along the east coast, indentured laborers arrived from 1860 in Natal and over time, created a rich red, spicy, oily Durban curry. The Cape Malay curries are less fiery and more robust.

Despite regulations among mingling of communities, curries flourished, as did the use of curry powder blends due to convenience and low costs with brands like Cartwrights (the box descriptions state "a superior blend of exotic Eastern spices created in India 150 years ago"), Rajah (1938) and Pakco (1948).

Collingham mentions that during apartheid, when it was illegal for Indian joints to serve Black South Africans, they turned to a more to-go friendly iteration served in hollowed-out bread, called bunny chow.

Far off the east coast, in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius's food is a potpourri of Indian, Creole, French and Chinese influences.

"Curry powder (la poudre cari) tends to be a bit forward on the coriander powder, the amount in the mix can be as much as cumin or sometimes even more...It also almost always tends to have some curry leaves mixed in," says Eliette Stall, a Mauritian-origin personal chef based in Los Angeles.

She says Mauritian-Indian cuisine tends to focus on the use of curry powder, either mild or hot, rather than garam masala, which, in the island country, is heavier on cinnamon and cardamom. The most commonly eaten dishes using curry powder are chicken curry with potatoes, a brothy fish and eggplant curry, and lima beans curry that is available everywhere on the island because "it goes into our roti."

In North America, curry and curry powder became just as common as in Britain in the 19th century. Taylor Sen says South Asians were the first non-

European immigrants in the New World. They came as servants and cooks for rich British nabobs who moved after making fortunes in the subcontinent. She cites an early American cookbook, Mary Randolph's *The Virginia Housewife* (1824).

"It contains a recipe for chicken curry 'after the East Indian manner,'" she adds in *Curry, A Global History*.

Randolph's curry powder recipe calls for turmeric, cumin seed, coriander seed, white ginger, nutmeg, mace and cayenne pepper: "pound all together, and pass through a fine sieve; bottle and cork it well—one teaspoonful is sufficient to season any made dish."

A popular dish using curry powder, called "country captain" was first recorded in Eliza Leslie's *New Cookery Book* (1857). It was modified in the early 20th century to include currants and almonds. Food columnist Cecily Brownstone is credited with revitalizing the dish, and she "published it many times and insisted on getting it included 'for the record' in dozens of cookbooks," including Irma Rombauer's *The Joy of Cooking*. Brownstone accepted Leslie's description that it is an "Indian dish and a very easy preparation of curry...introduced at English tables by a Sepoy officer."

In Australia, the arrival of the spice blend was announced in the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* in December 1813. Over the decades, curry powder became a regular advertisement, positioned alongside other imported commodities like tea, sugar and coffee. Edward Abbott's *The English and Australian Cookery Book* (1864), the first cookbook in Australia, mentioned "curry stuffs" and recipe to blend one's own due to "invariable adulteration" of shop-bought powders.

In 1866, curry powder was exhibited in the Melbourne Intercolonial Exhibition, reinforcing curry as a familiar food down under. Academic Frieda Moran writes that this was a moment of "eroding a distinction between a white Australia and a colonial other." Keen's was listed as a manufacturer at the event. Produced and blended in Tasmania, a "distant

outpost of the empire in the 1860s," over the next 90 years, Keen's advertisements changed, promoting it as having "true Indian flavor" and "made to an ancient Indian recipe."

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My very Bengali father loves a Japanese katsu curry. First, he cleans the entire bowl filled with the roux-thickened, mild gravy, cutlets and rice, and then contentedly sighs. Legend has that curry was introduced in the island nation in the 1800s by a shipwrecked British sailor. Historically, in the Meiji era (1868-1912), Japan embraced Western culture. Merchant ships arrived to trade and brought unknown foods like cutlets, curry and croquettes. Soon, British curry recipes appeared in cookery books, with instructions on how to add curry powder to flour and oil.

Curry was adopted by army canteens by 1877, because it was easy to scale up portions and incorporate meat into diets. Curry and rice appeared in school lunches post-World War II, and after the introduction of commercial curry cubes, it became popular in homes.

My friend in Hong Kong swears by Japan's S&B Golden Curry boxes. She says it adds a delicious umami flavor to Indian home-style sabzis (a plethora of vegetable dishes). In fact, historically, it was in Hong Kong that Singapore noodles were created—the delicate stir-fry of vermicelli, curry powder, meat, eggs and vegetables.

India has had a long-standing spice trading association and religious migration relationship with Southeast Asia. Thus, spices like cumin, cardamom, coriander and turmeric had been used in these parts for centuries, with local ingredients like coconut milk, lemongrass and galangal. However, under colonization, which much of Southeast Asia endured, Western influences seeped in. Curry powder, too, found a way.

A 1914 article describes Indian workers in British Malay rubber plantations eating "rice and curry with a little of dried fish and some description of dhal

or other pulse." In modern-day Malaysia, food is an amalgamation of varied influences throughout the centuries and its version of curry powder can be seen all through regional cultures. It is typically used in curry dishes made with coconut milk and the flavor profile is sweet with savory (chile peppers, cardamom and cinnamon).

Thailand was never colonized, but royalty had an affinity for western influences. Indigenous kaengs (gaeng) or spicy stews were an easy curry label. Thai yellow curry is a good example as the local name kaeng kari literally translates to "curry-curry." It could have been influenced by British naval presence in the region. Taylor Sen adds yellow curry paste "contains turmeric, ready-made curry powder and roasted coriander and cumin seeds...and is also the base of an Indian-like chicken curry made with onions and potatoes, ingredients rarely used in Thai cuisine."

Rebecca Le, an American-Vietnamese blogger in Texas, recalls her mother's pantry cupboard always stocked with curry powder to make cà ri gà.

"The powder has seasoning, so you just add potato and chicken," Le says.

Her family ate the curry with baguettes, dipping pieces to soak up the flavors.

France had developed its own variant of curry powder—*vadouvan*—after colonizing Pondicherry in southern India. By the time they occupied Vietnam, curry was a popular dish on French tables. Many south Indians migrated under the French administration and over time, intermingled with the local population. They opened spice shops, and history suggests they adapted curry powders to suit local taste buds.

"Demands for curries and curry powder among the population was consistent with the emergence of a modern Vietnamese middle-class starting at the dawn of the 20th century," writes Thi Nguyen in a Saigoneer article.

Today, I can easily buy these curry packets thousands of miles away from the Southeast Asian country thanks to sizable export to places that boast Vietnamese diaspora.

In Indonesia, especially western Sumatra, use of "Indian" spices, not curry powder, is a legacy born of ancient trade with India.

"Indonesian kari uses fresh herbs and spices rather than premade curry powder," says chef and TV personality Vindy Lee. "While an Indian curry usually starts with whole spices, heated in oil, then onions, ginger, garlic and tomatoes, and powdered spices... we use fresh grinded spices, almost always heavy on the red shallots. Lesser-used ingredients include masala salt, dried chile and mustard seeds. Locally grown coriander, turmeric and fresh chiles are used in curries too."

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There are traces of curry and curry powder almost everywhere in the world. It has permeated into cuisines, adopted and assimilated into cultures with time beyond the Indian displacement. Colonization, migration, commerce and trade have played key roles for this to happen. For example, you can munch on a currywurst on the streets of Berlin, dig into curry tteokbokki in South Korea and eat karrysild (curried herring) during Christmas in Copenhagen. There's curry powder even in the hodgepodge that is Sweden's comforting casserole, *Flygande Jakob*.

"I spend an inordinate amount of time explaining to non-Indians that 'curry powder' is not an Indian creation," says Pooja Dutt, who has lived and worked in different parts of the world and currently calls London home. "A recipe once called for its use, and I tried it, but the basicness of the flavor profile left me wanting."

However, she realizes a curry powder bottle is a staple for some. Priyanka Bhattacharya, a digital marketer who shuffles between India and Germany, concurs.

“My German in-laws use it when they cook Indian curries,” Bhattacharya says. “I bought a bottle once but didn’t like the taste after as the flavors felt completely off.”

Writer Anushka Bhartiya was intrigued and bought a bottle after moving to California from New Delhi.

“I was fascinated by the name, and it made sense to try it in our temporary residence for we really lacked kitchen space to hold all our spices,” Bhartiya says. Like Bhattacharya, she was not a fan.

Tanushree Kulkarni, who studied in Australia, assumed “curry powder” would give her chicken marinade a unique flavor in Melbourne, but she found the proportions off.

“You get the rawness of all the spices in equal taste, with no flavor,” she says.

For Suprita Das, curry powder was overwhelming during a brief stint in the U.K.

“Everything tasted the same,” says the corporate communications specialist. “All my friends who had studied outside of India would pack their bags with enough individual regional spices to start a shop with every time they visited home.”

My family uses paanch phoron in Bengali dishes. It is a mixture of whole fennel, nigella, cumin, fenugreek and radhuni (wild celery) that is tempered in oil to release aromatic fragrances, a combination widely used in eastern India. The southern parts of the country use an array of podis. The spice compositions change regionally. For example, milagi podi (commonly called gunpowder) is differently made in every state though dried red chili is a common binder. In Maharashtra, goda masala is used extensively—a blend where dagadphool (a species of lichen) lends a unique taste.

“We prepare [goda masala] at home and keep [it] in bottles to use as and when needed,” says Anamika Nandedkar, a journalist in Pune.

In the north, what is food without a pinch of homemade garam masala right at the end of the cooking process? The mix of dry toasted powdered spices that exude warmth in every bite.

There is, however, an enormous industry of premade Indian spice blends. These pantry-staple, time-saving blends are focused on, say, a particular preparation—biryani, korma, pav bhaji, rajma, channa, sambhar, kebabs—unlike a generic curry powder. There are even region-specific spice blends for bisbele bath, gutti vankaya and undhiya to target specific populations. The packaged masala industry is reportedly worth over \$1 billion, according to *The Economic Times*.

Back to my curry powder bottle: I tried using it, I did. I used it to make a mutton curry base, sprinkled it over grilled sausages, added to marinades and even some to a sandwich filling similar to Coronation chicken (created in 1953 to mark Queen Elizabeth’s reign). I waited for the musky, pungent fragrance to smell familiar. Instead, curry powder left me wanting. And so, the bottle lies forgotten in the pantry, gathering dust as I go about using paanch phoron, podis, my family’s garam masala recipe or a spoonful or two from a specific Indian spice blend box. 🍴

