

think!

THEBIGSTORY

12,000 curry houses, 936 tonnes of chicken tikka masala eaten every year. As Britain celebrates 200 years since its first Indian restaurant, here's a pickled history of the special relationship

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In 1886, two scholarly British India-hands, Henry Yule and Arthur Coke Burnell, published the dictionary *Anglo-Indian words and Phrases*. They gave lengthy and often-idiosyncratic descriptions to some 2,000 words. One was 'curry': "In the East, the staple food consists of some cereal, either in the form of flour baked into unleavened cakes or boiled in the grain, as rice is. Such food having little taste, some small quantity of a much more savoury preparation is added as a relish, or 'kitchen', to use the phrase of our forefathers. And this is in fact, the proper office of curry in native diet. It consists of meat, fish, fruit, or vegetables, cooked with a quantity of bruised spices and turmeric (see mus-salla); and a little of this gives a flavour to a large mess of rice."

Their two-page rumination on curry is one of the longer entries in the dictionary — appropriately so, given the place Indian cuisine has now come to occupy in the hearts and stomachs of Britons.

This year, Britain celebrates the 200th anniversary of its first Indian restaurant. The Hindostanee Coffee House in west-central London, which opened in 1809, was the creation of Sake Dean Mahomet, a Patna-born immigrant with a sharp instinct of entrepreneurship who was well ahead of his time in selling India to the West.

A plaque at the site where the Hindostanee Coffee House used to exist in London

Located at 34, George Street, Portman Square, Dean Mahomet's establishment was aimed at catering to a British clientele that would have been familiar with Indian food. He may well have served such familiar Anglo-Indian delights as the kedgeree (*kichiri* with fish) and Mulligatawny soup (in Tamil Malligu is pepper and Tami is water).

What is known is that he offered the upper class sahib — pining for the comforts of India — "real chilm tobacco" in hookahs and Indian dishes "in the highest perfection, and allowed by the greatest epicures to be unequalled to any curries ever made in England." Mahomet's business sense was nothing short of visionary. Today, just minutes away from George Street is the upscale neighbourhood of Marble Arch, whose main thoroughfare is lined with popular sheesha cafes.

But Mahomet's timing was all wrong. The Hindostanee Coffee House did not do terribly well and Mahomet shut it down, declaring himself bankrupt in 1812. Just how much ahead of his time was this Bihari businessman? Exactly 100 years. While Mahomet was busy

CURRY ON BRITAIN

MIND THE GAP



GETTY IMAGES

BRITSPEAK FOR DESI FOOD

GO OUT FOR AN INDIAN
To eat one or two specific dishes at an 'Indian' restaurant)

KORMA Mild, creamy dish
DHANSAK Slightly sweet lentil curry
VINDALOO Very hot food
MADRAS Fairly hot curry, red in colour with heavy use of chilli powder
DUPIAZA Medium curry; boiled and fried onions used as primary ingredients

spread all over the country. They are run mostly by Bangadeshis, and serve North Indian food. The key to understanding the massive popularity of curry houses in Britain lies in the background of their patrons — the overwhelming majority of them are working class and they are fed up with fish and chips. It's no coincidence that the first Indian restaurant to have any real impact in Britain is thought to be the Shafi, which opened in 1920, employed some ex-sailors and quickly became a

draw for Indian students. In a cold place, a hot curry on the cheap had "winner" written all over it — a spicy and comforting reminder of home.

The bulk of the Indian restaurant and catering business is run by Bangadeshis. It has a turnover of over £ 3.5 billion, according to the Bangladesh Caterers' Association, and employs some 100,000 people — apparently more than British steel, ship-building and coal put together.

Nothing quite captures the image of the British curry as the chicken tikka masala. In 2001, the then foreign minister Robin Cook immortalised this red-coloured dish as a "true British national dish", symbolising the country's multicultural fibre.

Little is known about the origins of this madly popular dish: a mild chicken curry with tomatoes and a bit of cream. A chef in the Scottish city of Glasgow claims to have rustled up the first chicken tikka masala, and a local MP now wants the British government to ask the European Union to grant legal protection to the dish. Thousands

of miles away, Moti Mahal in Delhi's Darya Ganj lays a similar claim.

But celebrity chefs such as Bhatia and Kochhar will not be caught dead-offering 'CTM' to their clients. Their posh restaurants offer specialised cuisines for a price — you can taste Indo-French food at Le Porte Des Indes, Kerala cuisine at Quilon, game in the Cinnamon Club, Anglo-India dishes at Chutney Mary and "bold authentic dishes" at Veeraswamy's, London's oldest Indian restaurant. They select their wines with great care.

By contrast, the slightly soiled curry house menus come with the stock fare of vindaloos, kormas, karhai and biryanis, mostly laced with cream or yoghurt and usually eaten with a pint of lager. "Authenticity has nothing to do with my cuisine, but tradition has," says Kochhar. "When I came to Britain, Indian food was all a big mishmash. But now the cloud has been cleared and I'm explaining what this food is all about."

Dean Mahomet would have been proud of Kochhar, Bhatia and other innovators. And he would have frowned at the curry houses.

TANDOORI NIGHTS IN THE UK: A TIMELINE

1809 Migrant from Bihar Dean Mahomet opens the Hindostanee Coffee House at 34 George Street, Britain's first Indian restaurant where people could smoke hookahs as well. He declares bankruptcy in 1812 and shuts shop in 1833

1840 Queen Victoria employs an Indian employee Abdul Karim who introduces curry in the royal household. It becomes one of the Queen's favourite dishes



Abdul with Queen Victoria declines after the Sepoy Mutiny

1857 The curry's popularity in Britain declines after the Sepoy Mutiny

1927 Edward Palmer opens the first high-end Indian restaurant in London, Veeraswamy's Indian Restaurant. In 1935, he sells Veeraswamy to William Steward, who runs the restaurant for 40 years and is dubbed 'The Curry King' by The Times

1953 Queen Elizabeth II's coronation lunch has Coronation Chicken, sort of curried concoction, on the menu



Shafi, a popular Indian restaurant in the 50s in London

1960 The tandoori is introduced and tandoori and tikka chicken became popular dishes. Chicken tikka masala is said to have been invented in Glasgow around this time

1971 After the formation of Bangladesh, there is an influx of Bangladeshis at London's East End many of whom open curry houses. Indian food becomes popular among students

1984 Pat Chapman creates The Curry Club and writes *The Good Curry Guide*. This pressurises supermarkets to stock curry ingredients and frozen meals

1988 Gulam K. Noon, the new 'Curry King', starts stocking frozen curry meals. Today, he supplies processed Indian food to Sainsbury's and Waitrose



Curry King G.K. Noon

1997 Britain spends over £ 7.7 million on mango chutney and £ 2.2 billion food on Indian food

2001 Foreign Secretary Robin Cook calls the chicken tikka masala "Britain's true national dish". Tamarind wins the first Michelin star for an Indian restaurant

2005 British Curry Awards are established. Bombay Brasserie and Tamarind are winners

2007 Chicken tikka masala named the 'national dish' of Britain based on a Gallup opinion poll

2010 With the tightening of immigration laws and many curry houses having lost many of their best chefs, there are 20,000 vacancies to fill. And the competition is hot.



Protests against anti-immigration laws

'ONE LAGER AND ONE CTM, PLEASE'

Legend has it that a customer in Glasgow complained that his chicken tikka was "too dry". The Indian/Bangladeshi/Pakistani chef apparently took it back, opened a can of Campbell's Tomato Soup, whipped it up with cream and a few spices to get the gravy 'flowing'. Thus was born the chicken tikka masala aka. CTM.

THE RECIPE

500g chicken, cut to bite-size pieces (serves 3-4)
Marinade
2 cm piece of fresh ginger and garlic, finely grated
1/4 tsp chilli powder, 1/4 tsp turmeric, 1 tsp garam masala, coriander powder, 1/2 tsp cumin powder
salt to taste, juice of 1 lemon
6 tblsp of yogurt
Combine the ginger, garlic, turmeric, chilli powder, garam masala, cumin, coriander and salt with the lemon juice and yogurt. Mix well. Cover and leave in the fridge to marinate overnight. Thread chicken pieces on to skewers and cook under the grill.
Sauce
4-6 tblsp vegetable oil, 1 large onion, finely chopped
2 cm piece of fresh ginger, garlic finely grated
1/4 tsp turmeric, 1/4 tsp chilli powder
1 tsp garam masala, 1 tsp coriander powder
1 tblsp tomato puree, salt to taste
2 tblsp ground almonds, mixed to a paste with warm water, 2 tblsp thick cream
fresh coriander leaves, chopped
Heat the oil in a large pan. Add the onion, ginger and garlic, stir and fry for 5-8 mins. Add turmeric, chilli, garam masala and coriander. Fry for 1-2 mins. Add tomato puree, salt and almonds. Add chicken and let simmer for 15-20 mins. You may need to add a little water to prevent burning. When the meat is tender, add cream, and sprinkle on the coriander leaves just before serving.

Corners in London that are deliciously Indian

PAPADUM PREACH Vir Sanghvi lists his Top 5 Indian restaurants in Britain. Don't go looking for lager'n'chicken tikka masala here

RASOI

Vineet Bhatia (photo below) is the world's most successful Indian chef with Michelin stars for this restaurant and for his operation in Geneva. Bhatia left the Oberoi group to go to London and win acclaim at Zaika, the first Indian restaurant to win a Michelin star. Zaika was owned by Claudio Pulze who owns



restaurants all over London and finally Bhatia tired of working for him. He set up Rasoi, his own operation, as a small gastronomic restaurant and has consistently won acclaim for his innovative cuisine and his mastery of Indian flavours. Bhatia is now a celebrity chef with restaurants all over the world but Rasoi remains his showpiece.



THE BOMBAY BRASSERIE

Perhaps the most influential of them all. The Brasserie was the first truly upmarket Indian restaurant in London. (Shezan, a Pakistani restaurant, was expensive and well regarded in the 70s but was never trendy and really upmarket.) Owned by the Taj group, it aimed for the clientele of such then-trendy London restaurants as Langan's Brasserie and very quickly became the place to be seen at. In terms of food, it was also a breakthrough because it served Bombay — rather than Punjabi — cuisine and included such starters as sev puri and invented new dishes like tandoori scallops, which have now been passed on to a new generation of chefs.

AMAYA

Owned by the Panjabi sisters, Camellia and Namita, along with Namita's ex-banker husband Ranjit Mathrani, this was the first Indian restaurant to win such awards as Restaurant of the Year (across all cuisines), get rave reviews from London critics, attract a celebrity clientele and win a Michelin star, all within a year or so of opening. The Panjabis own other restaurants in London, some of which are arguably better (Chutney Mary, for instance) and also run the wildly successful Masala Zone chain of low-priced Indian street food eateries, but I suspect that they will be remembered for the high wattage glamour of Amaya and for the way in which the restaurant has re-interpreted traditional Indian kababs.



GAYLORD

Not taken very seriously by critics these days but hugely influential in its time. When Gaylord opened in London's Mortimer Street in 1966, it was one of the few genuinely Indian restaurants in a sea of East Pakistani (Bangladesh was created in 1971) curry houses. Other restaurants had installed tandoors before, but it was Gaylord that really popularised tandoori cuisine in Britain. Its menu comprised the sort of Punjabi restaurant cuisine that was popular in India in the 1960s (chicken tikka, lamb pasanda, keema matar) but was largely unknown in Britain in that era. If Gaylord had not popularised tandoori cuisine in Britain, the Brits may never have discovered the chicken tikka and its many bastard offspring.

QUILON

Another Taj group operation run by chef Sriram (photo below) who made his reputation at Bangalore's Karavalli. Sriram is one of the most talented and innovative Indian chefs cooking in Britain, but has been hamstrung by both location (at the Taj-owned St James Court hotel at the edge of Victoria) and décor (the restaurant has a truly hideous room). Nevertheless, the excellence of his South Indian food (some of it re-interpreted for Anglo-Saxon sensibilities) has overcome these disadvantages and Quilon finally has a Michelin star (many years too late). This is the best South Indian food in England and Quilon would be a success were it to serve food of this calibre in any Indian city.

