

THE MANY MEANINGS OF CURRY

Australian Constructions of Indian Food

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‘There was never a time when the possibility of curry did not feature in Australian cooking’. (Kingston, 1990: 44)

Abstract

While curry has been constantly in the Australian consciousness, its identity has altered. First seen as a fashionable dish by the well-to-do, curry became a popular commodity taken up by middle class housewives as a practical, economical meal and then by workingmen as a hearty staple. More recently, curry restaurants have become common in suburban shopping centres and Indian cuisine is increasingly promoted as a fine dining option. Yet curry has also been viewed at times with caution and suspicion. The story of curry in Australia not only provides an illustration of the transnational flow of goods and cultural practices, but its local adaptation serves as a case study of what happens to these practices when they intersect with and respond to a local culture.

Keywords

curry, India, Australia, globalisation, transnational

Introduction: A Colonial Dinner Party

In 1813, Maria Macarthur, newly married and returned to the colony of New South Wales, received a lengthy letter from her friend in England, 'Mrs. E'. As well as offering advice on how to manage servants, prepare medicinal remedies and entertain guests, Mrs. E also made a series of suggestions for dinner party menus, both for family dinners and for more formal dinners, "in case you ever want to make a gay set-out" (Barca, 1979: 70). A dish that Mrs. E consistently recommended for including in these formal dinners was curry.¹

Mrs. E's recommended menus indicate that the Macarthurs' dinner guests were offered curries alongside a range of traditional British dishes. For example, she suggested commencing a formal dinner for twelve or fourteen with a first course comprising soup, potatoes and fish, followed by a second course consisting of a curry of rabbit, along with two boiled chickens, "Maintenon cutlets", a "Raised pie" of sweetbread and veal, a small piece of pork, "rolled and stuffed and roasted", some roast beef with tongue and vegetables on a side table (ibid.: 72). Other menus included curries of veal or beef. Curry might even be appropriate for a Christmas dinner accompanying the traditional favourites of ham, roast turkey, boiled chickens, mince pies and plum pudding (ibid.: 61).

This early appearance of curry in the Australian colonies as a dinner party dish reflected the current vogue among the wealthy and privileged classes in both Britain and British India. Maria and her husband Hannibal Macarthur certainly personified the colonial equivalent. They each possessed immaculate colonial pedigrees; Maria was the daughter of a previous Governor, Philip Gidley King, and Hannibal Macarthur was the nephew of the soldier, entrepreneur and pastoralist John Macarthur. Their group of acquaintances was small and very exclusive; as Patrick Leslie, Hannibal Macarthur's son-in-law, recollected in 1835: "The first people here

are so very particular that you cannot get into their circle without first rate introductions and can only keep in it by first rate conduct" (Barca, 1979: 5-6).

The British Invention of Curry

Cecilia Leong-Salobir has recently proclaimed curry to be 'the signature dish of British colonial cuisine, ... clearly the single most important dish that defined the culinary history of British imperialism' (Leong-Salobir, 2011: 8). Leong-Salobir's claim attaches considerable significance to the dish, not only because it assigns curry a central place in the study of imperial foodways, the immediate concern of this article, but also, as we shall see, for **some broader implications it raises for our understanding of the nature of empire.**

Historians have generally agreed the word curry most likely derives from the Tamil *kari* (originally, "any spiced relish employed by south Indians to accompany rice" (Achaya, 1998: 49). See also Toussaint-Sama, 1992: 498-99; Davidson, 1999: 236; Sen, 2009: 7-8). Beyond that, arguments have differed over the nature of its genesis into a globalised food. Perhaps the most important perspective informing debates about curry, one that has provided the conceptual basis for several recent studies, has been that developed by theorists such as Bernard Cohn, Nicholas B. Dirks and Edward Said. Their work has explored the concept of what might be broadly termed 'imperial knowledge', a view that argues colonial rule was established not only through brute force, but also by subverting and controlling the indigenous culture as well (Cohn, 1987, 1996; Dirks, 1992; Said, 1994). In a series of detailed articles, Cohn demonstrated how the British, faced with comprehending and engaging with a society and culture as vast and complex as India's, developed a strategy of control that "reduced vastly complex codes and their associated meanings to a few metonyms", in order to better understand and thus control them (Cohn, 1996: 162). Among these 'complex codes' were, for instance, religion, law, art, language, the social structure, ethnic groupings, clothing, and, not least, cuisine. Thus, following

Cohn, 'curry' might be taken to stand as a metonym for 'Indian food' in the Anglo-Indian mind.

The project of acquiring this 'knowledge' of Indian food, of identifying, recording, classifying and categorising an array of regional, ethnic and religious food practices, was largely, though not exclusively, taken up by the memsahibs, the wives of British officers and officials in India (Colonel A. R. Kenney-Herbert's ('Wyvern') collection of recipes, *Culinary Jottings for Madras, Or, A Treatise in Thirty Chapters on Reformed Cookery for Anglo-Indian Exiles*, was one well-known male exception ('Wyvern': 1878)). Chaudhuri (1992: 231-32) and Zlotnik (1996: 51-54) have maintained that by assuming this responsibility, Anglo-Indian women became active agents of empire. However, it has been argued, British perceptions of Indian cuisine, and consequently the ability to record what was 'authentic', were constrained by a series of ideological convictions; about their own racial superiority, the need for social barriers to ensure racial exclusiveness and separation and the compulsion to integrate and subordinate Indian culture (Chaudhuri, 1992: Burton, 1993: 7; Narayan, 1995; Metcalfe, 1998: 178-79). Consequently, the recipes that came to be published in Anglo-Indian cookbooks and later disseminated throughout the empire were designed to make Indian food more 'British.' Ingredients that were unfamiliar to British cooks or might appear difficult to obtain were substituted by others more readily at hand. For example, butter (or lard) might be recommended as a cooking medium, rather than ghee or oil; milk (instead of coconut milk) as a cooking liquid; and apples or other fruit as a souring agent (in place perhaps of tamarind). The vast range of spices, herbs and other ingredients used in indigenous regional cooking was replaced by generic curry powders. Whereas Indians traditionally use a small amount of sauce to add flavour and relish to bland staples like rice and bread, British recipes reversed the balance; in Anglo-Indian curries, large quantities of meat became the centrepiece with rice served as a side dish (Tannahill, 1988: 116-17).

Moreover, Anglo-Indian recipes excised Indian food from its moral and medical foundations, 'the vast body of rules, maxims, prescriptions, taboos, and injunctions concerning food' (Appadurai, 1988: 8. See also Basham, 1967: 215-17; Mandelbaum, 1972: 196-201). Inherited knowledge about food practices that had been transmitted orally was now written down as recipes, and Anglo-Indian meals were reconfigured as individual dishes presented sequentially in a series of courses. Eating leftover food was allowed, even encouraged, whereas this practice carried the risk of moral and biological pollution in traditional society. There has been a consensus among historians that the result was an integrated cuisine that was neither particularly Indian nor British, a cuisine that has been described variously as 'a unique hybrid,' 'a fabricated entity' and 'a cuisine of miscegenation' (Leong-Salobir, 2011: 1; Zlotnik, 1996: 64; Narayan, 1995: 3; Fernandez-Armesto, 2002: 140). Anglo-Indian cookbooks thus became essential textual tools in the service of imperial rule, a particular discursive form of the type Said has described, tasked with 'reshaping or reordering of 'raw' or primitive data into the local conventions of European narrative and formal utterance' (Said, 1994: 119).

Other historians have taken a more benign view of the process of acquiring imperial knowledge of Indian food, challenging, in particular, the assumption that the Raj exercised 'unremitting hegemony' over their Indian subjects (Procida, 2003: 138). While acknowledging that curry emerged in British India as a 'unique' hybrid, Leong-Salobir has argued that 'its culinary creation was a collective but haphazard effort of both the coloniser and the colonised' (Leong-Salobir, 2011: 40). While Leong-Salobir acknowledges the significance of Cohn's work, for example his account of how the British employed census statistics to identify, separate and categorise Indians into hierarchies, her conviction is that the British did not intentionally colonise Indian food practices and 'invent' curry, but simply 'adopted and adapted' it (*ibid.*). Rejecting Metcalfe's metaphor of the Anglo-Indian bungalow as 'the front line of a battlefield whose commanding officer was its British mistress,' Procida insists that, on the contrary, it was 'an important site for cultural

appropriation and transformation' (Metcalf, 1998: 179; Procida, 2003: 125). These views assign far greater Indian involvement in the creation of curry and emphasise the necessary interaction between memsahibs and their servants. While the memsahib might well have issued her instructions for the day's menus, her instructions inevitably suffered some slippage in translation, and it was the servants who purchased ingredients from the bazaar and cooked them, no doubt with some intention of modifying the results to suit known British tastes. And because British households in India frequently employed Goan Christians, presumably because they were considered to come from a community favourably disposed to Europeans, or Muslims, perhaps because they were more comfortable than Hindus in preparing and cooking meat, the cornerstone of the British diet, the British were always likely to perceive curry through particular communal perspectives (Gilmour, 2005: 298; Kincaid, 1973: 276).

Curry travelled to Britain with returning East India Company officers, officials and their families, who brought with them their tastes and their recipes, and was first embraced by the well-to-do (of whom Mrs. E was presumably one) as a suitable dish for their fashionable dinner parties. But gradually, curry was transformed into a popular British commodity, largely through the publication of a series of cookery books and columns in mass circulation newspapers and women's journals that popularised Anglo-Indian recipes (Chaudhuri, 1992: 238-41; Zlotnik, 1996: 51-61). Curry powders were displayed at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 and commercial mixtures such as Edmunds' 'The Empress' brand began to find their way into suburban stores (ibid.). By the middle of the nineteenth century, curry had come to be regarded as a "completely naturalised" English food, according to one contemporary commentator, popular among both the British middle- and working-classes (Chaudhuri: 240-41; Zlotnik: 52, 63).

Curry in the colonies

The Macarthurs' enthusiasm for Anglo-Indian curries was clearly encouraged by news from home about current trends, such as the advice contained in 'Mrs. E's' letter, but the imperial pathway connecting London with New South Wales was not the only, nor even the most significant conduit through which imperial knowledge of India and of Anglo-Indian food travelled to the colonies. James Broadbent, Suzanne Rickard and Margaret Steven, in particular, have documented the extensive trade links and the exchange of resources and people between India and the Australian colonies in the first fifty years of the European presence, from the time when Calcutta served first as a 'lifeline' for the struggling colony in the 1790s, and then as a form of 'general store' in the decades following (Broadbent, Rickard and Steven, 2003: 32, *passim*). India provided most of the material goods that arrived in the colony in these years and was the main source of its imported food. There was already a thriving trade in whole spices from India, commercial spice mixtures and specialised dinnerware in Sydney in the Macarthurs' time. The *Sydney Gazette* carried frequent advertisements for 'curry powder' and individual spices as well as for 'curry dishes' and 'curry tureens'.ⁱ

Handwritten accounts and receipts collected in the Macarthur family papers demonstrate that Maria's wealthy relatives, John and Elizabeth, regularly bought large quantities of curry powder, ginger, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, mace, tamarinds, rice and lentils ('dholl') from Sydney merchants involved in the India trade.³

Knowledge of India also arrived in the colony with the many people, officials and their families, military men, merchants and servants, who had previously lived and worked there, and Anglo-Indian tastes in food undoubtedly travelled with them, as Harriott Blaxland's experiences suggest. Sent as a young girl by her family in Sydney to live with her aunt in Calcutta for 'improvement,' she was "completely taken by

her surroundings”, the retinues of servants, the charmed lifestyle and “the tastes of Bengali foods and spices” in particular, and on return later related how her “Manners, Habits and every Taste had been cultivated and too deeply fixed in memory ever to be forgotten” (Rickard, 2003: 76-77).

The passage of curry from India to the Australian colonies can be seen as an illustration of the kind of cultural traffic, the flows of customs, beliefs, traditions and other forms of cultural capital, that Tony Ballantyne has recently identified as being an integral component of global mobility in the imperial age (Ballantyne, 2014: 13). And as Ballantyne and others have emphasised, imperial networks existed between colonies, particularly between Asia and the British colonies in the South Pacific, as much as they did between colonies and the metropole (*ibid.*, 22-23; 8; Goodall, Ghosh and Todd, 2008; Ghosh, 2011; Ray and Srinivas, 2012). As Ballantyne has written, “alongside the thick networks and high volume of traffic that linked colonies to Britain, important connections to Asia persisted” (Ballantyne, 2014: 22-23).

“Fruity Curry” and “Hot Meat Jam”

The opening chapter in the story of the globalisation of curry and its life in Australia took the form of its invention; the second, its physical migration, to Britain and the colonies, and the third, the process of adaptation it experienced after arrival, whereby an interleaving of cultural practices combined to produce a new hybrid form (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2006: 138. Or, as Duruz has it, “these are stories of global migration...of local adaptation... of culinary fusion and cultural exchange.” Duruz, 2010: 4). As had been the pattern in Britain, curry experienced a process of gradual domestication in the Australian colonies as it was taken up first by the middle, and then working classes. This process was promoted by the publication of colonial cookbooks, such as the works of Mrs. Lance (Mina) Rawson and Mrs. Hannah Maclurcan, which featured recipes for curry, by articles in urban and

provincial newspapers, and by the introduction of commercial curry powders (Rawson, 1894; Maclurcan, 1930).

Colonial curries exhibited a range of variations in the course of adapting to local conditions. To begin, Australian curries typically featured enormous quantities of meat, understandable because it was plentiful and cheap (Cannon, 1982: 149-150). In Blainey's view, meat had become "a way of life" for nineteenth-century Australians, the average consumption per head more than doubling that of Britain or the United States (Blainey, 2003: 199-200). But while colonial Australians might well have boasted of their diet of "meat three times a day", as Symons observes, the surfeit of meat also made for a repetitive and monotonous (and undoubtedly unhealthy) diet, and so currying provided at least some variety and flavour (Symons, 2007: 38).

Before refrigeration became available, one of the greatest advantages Australian cooks found in currying meat was that it helped take care of leftovers, particularly in families where a whole joint of beef or mutton would be enough to last several days. Recipes suggesting how cold cuts might be curried were plentiful. For example, *The Queenslander* advised how "the remains of a joint can be made into a very nice curry" by first cooking a mixture of onions, butter and an apple with a half ounce of curry powder – here at least the flavour must have been almost minimal – and then briefly warming through the cold meat (*Queenslander*, 3 October 1903). Alternatively, leftover meat might be minced, formed into rissoles and then cooked as a curry (*Evelyn Observer and Bourke East Record*, 27 January 1911). Currying was recommended as a simple way of adding flavour to any kind of leftovers from a meal; chicken ("a white curry"), fish, even stale bread could be transformed by currying them (*Liverpool Herald* (New South Wales), 29 July 1899; *Queenslander*, 31 March 1906, 12 June 1930; *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 22 September 1923; *The Mail* (Adelaide), 30 September 1933). Curry made a small contribution to combating Australia's rabbit plagues; as Blainey and Watson have each noted, rabbits were a

favoured food source in the bush, particularly for those struggling on the land, and there were many recipes for curried rabbit in colonial cookery books (Blainey, 2003: 208-11; Watson, 2014: 139; *Queenslander*, 13 January 1912; Buller Murphy, 1940: 424). Another handy standby was to take some beef that had been preserved by salting or corning and to give it a more acceptable taste by currying (*Sunday Times* (Perth), 18 March 1905; *Canberra Times*, 28 July 1928). A further recommendation for curries was that they had the reputation of gaining in flavour if kept and reheated, as *The Australian Women's Weekly* reflected in 1965 (*The Australian Women's Weekly*, 3 February 1965).

At their most idiosyncratic, some individual Australian curries were distinguished by their sweetness. Traditional Indian *thali* meals typically include several sweet dishes served together with savoury and other items – diners at the iconic Mumbai vegetarian restaurant *Chetna* continue to be offered a mildly sweet Gujarati *tuvaar daal* and *khadi*, a thickened, sweetened yoghurt-based gravy as part of its *Dal-Bati-Churma thali*.⁴

However, in several recipes for colonial curries sampled for this research, sweetness appears to have been dealt out in heavy proportions. Adding chutney and raisins was recommended in some, but other, more extreme versions advised cooks to add, variously, rhubarb, treacle, red jelly or marmalade to their dishes (Maclurcan, 1898: 205; *Sunday Times*, 17 December 1905; Buller Murphy, 1940: 344). The folklorist Warren Fahey even recalls a family recipe known as “fruity curry”:

Grind and mix curry ingredients of curry leaves, coriander, cumin, fennel seeds and mustard seeds until you have a curry powder. Fry 2 sliced onions and then add the dry mix until the onions sweat and take in the curry. Now add your chopped meat (chicken, lamb or beef) and cook until it browns. Add whatever vegetables and dried fruits you have available. Sliced pumpkin, squash and carrots are good and so are raisins, sultanas and dried pineapple. Add whatever fruit is available – sliced

bananas, apple or pear are excellent. Add 4 cups of chicken stock and bring to the boil, then turn down to low and allow to simmer for one and a half hours. Serve with boiled rice and cold yoghurt (Fahey, 2005: 266).

Beckett uncovered another individual case, a 1932 recipe for a meat curry whose ingredients included apples, bananas, sultanas, chutney and coconut. Beckett concludes, with a strong sense of disdain and condescension, that these Australian versions of a curry more closely approximated a "hot meat jam" than anything else: "I know it well; my mother used to make it once a week with cold roast lamb" (Beckett, 1984: 114). Beckett suggests that such mixtures could be rationalised in terms of Australians' typical sense of practicality and generosity of spirit:

An Australian saw some sort of curry displayed with all its side dishes on a dining table and reasoned that the whole business would be much easier if one simply boiled everything up together – after all, they finished up on the same plate, didn't they? (ibid.: 113)

However, the taste for sweet curries was not at all universal. For example, one Tasmanian reader related how he had recently been served a curry based on treacle, apples, raisins and "thickening" and described the product as "a freak, because none of these items are ever employed in a curry". Consequently, he called on the "local Savarins" to avoid offering such a "nauseating mess" in the future (*Examiner*, (Launceston), 21 October 1920).

The most likely reason for the variations found in colonial curries is that cooks simply incorporated whatever food source was locally available; Australian cooks, especially in the bush, often had to make do. One of the earliest published recipes was for bandicoot curry, but kangaroo tail and wattlebirds were also the subject of recipes (*Queenslander*, 18 December 1880; Buller Murphy, 1940: 365). On the other

hand, few recipes for vegetable curries exist, most likely because vegetables were frequently scarce, particularly in eastern Australia west of the Dividing Range. Because of the plentiful supply of mutton and beef, lard and dripping tended to replace butter or oil as the cooking medium. Coconut milk was substituted by infusing the dessicated by-product or by using cows' milk. But inventiveness could sometimes approximate eccentricity; according to some local experts, curries might be baked with minced meat and eggs or in a pie, served in a pineapple or on scallop shells or on toast (*Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill) 29 November 1934; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 May 1953). For more refined tea parties, it was suggested that curry might be offered in the form of sandwiches, croustades, croutons or cakes (*Queenslander*, 28 July 1906; *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 30 October 1924; *Barrier Miner*, 25 July 1936; *The Mail* (Adelaide), 30 September 1930; *West Australian*, 1 February 1935). Cooks were encouraged to provide extra flavour to their curries by adding pickled pork or bacon (*Sunday Times* (Perth), 12 February 1911; *Queenslander* 13 January 1912). Worcestershire sauce, tomato sauce or even wine might be added to the sauce for richness (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 1906; *Sunday Times* (Perth), 10 October 1909; Buller Murphy, 1940: 404; *Brisbane Courier*, 28 July 1927).

The question of authenticity

Nevertheless, cookbook authors, food journalists and contributors to newspaper columns on food constantly insisted their recipes were authentic, as in the case of one Perth resident who asserted that her recipe for "mutton curry" was made in "the real Indian fashion" (*Sunday Times*, 28 July 1907). Correspondents asserted that their recipes had been obtained directly from "the black *khansamah*" (cook or head of the kitchen) or from "my Indian cook-boy", but often the source was "a resident in India" (*Western Mail* (Perth), 26 June 1906; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 1917), suggesting once again that India was at least as important a source of information about curry as Britain. Many referred to their personal experience in India; as one Queensland reader boasted, "only those who have lived in India can really appreciate the exquisite flavour of curry dishes" (*Queenslander*, 8 August 1929). One

Victorian journalist lamented that "few of our cooks can make it properly, so that it is like the crisp, brown-golden mixture one gets in India" (*Traralgon Record*, 6 November 1903). Mrs. Rawson similarly pronounced local versions might be called "curry" only "by courtesy" and bore "slight resemblance" to the real thing (Rawson, 1892: 22). But as we have seen, claims about the authenticity of curry were always contentious, given its hybrid history; the "black *khansamah*" was most likely only telling his memsahib what she wanted to hear, after all.

There was also contention over the issue of whether it was correct to use commercial curry powders. Critics cautioned against using "spurious preparations often sold under the name of curry-powder" and advised home cooks to make their own, if this were practical, although mixtures imported directly from India might be considered acceptable (*Queenslander*, 13 January 1912; *Brisbane Courier*, 10 March 1927). Ideally, as a correspondent to the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* advised, "the Indian epicure insists on curries made from spices ground fresh every day" (*Courier-Mail*, 11 November 1953). Fahey's mother was one such suburban housewife who disdained "English" curry powder and preferred to grind whole Indian spices to make her family curries (Fahey, 2005: 6). But while whole spices could be bought in the major cities, in provincial towns the only source very often was the local chemist shop, and few cooks in the bush had access to the equipment such as a mortar and pestle needed to grind them in any case. The increasing availability of curry powders does much in the way of explaining Australians' growing acceptance of curry; they were cheap, they were widely available, they transported well and they made the task of preparing a meal quick and easy. Consequently, the process of roasting, grinding and mixing spice mixtures to suit particular tastes had become "hardly worth the trouble", according to *The Queenslander* (*Queenslander*, 13 January 1912).

Curry as Workingman's Food

Middle-class Australian housewives played an important role in domesticating curry, as had their British counterparts (Chaudhuri, 1992; Zlotnik, 1996). According to Symons, by the 1920s curry had become widely accepted, so much so that, for example, the association of New South Wales cookery teachers' recommended curry powder should be an essential item in every household pantry cupboard (Symons, 2007: 6). But curry had also become popular as workingman's food. In Melbourne in the 1870s, a series of fourpenny and sixpenny restaurants flourished, typically run by married couples who did their own cooking, illustrating how workers could afford to eat for little expense in this workingman's paradise. Artisans and labourers rushed these cheap restaurants at the start of their one o'clock lunch hour for a range of cheap dishes that might include "mutton haricot curries" along with a number of other meat stews (disappointingly, according to Symons, the curried mutton might really have been the remains of a previous "stewed lamb", served with a little curry sauce on the side of the plate, to be recycled on the following day as Irish Stew with mashed potatoes) (Symons, 2007: 127-28). In the bush, where the workforce was exclusively male, and much of the cooking was necessarily done by men, many cooks were known for preparing curries, some luminaries earning the moniker "Hot Bum the curry maker" according to Fahey, a testament no doubt to the fierceness of their creations (Fahey, 2005: 103). Henry Lawson witnessed "mutton curries" being served to shearers in outback pubs during his tour of western New South Wales in the 1890s (Lawson, 1900). A bush cook's equipment might include a very limited range; perhaps a tomahawk, a knife, a quart pot and a frying pan or camp oven. In most cases, in roadside pubs, in shearers' quarters, in the kitchens of squatters and free selectors, conditions were rudimentary, and most meals were cooked over an open fire using a single cauldron and including whatever basic flavourings were easily transportable and available. Given these considerations, curry was an ideal solution.

The Fear of Curry

Nevertheless, Australians' views of Indian food were ambivalent and from time to time, curry became the subject of criticism for being poor quality food. The instances were scattered but kept resurfacing. In the 1920s, for example, the *Adelaide Register News-Pictorial* complained that curry was "just another way of warming up cold meat" and warned that a poorly-made curry could be "so peppery that no one can eat it" (*Register News-Pictorial*, 29 April 1929). One Queenslander complained curry was too often presented as a "hasty, greeny-yellow mixture sometimes served, surrounded by stodgy rice" (*Queenslander*, 24 October 1929). T.Y. of Perth, writing to the *Western Mail* in 1939, warned his fellow Australians that curry concealed hidden dangers. Having mentioned to his landlord, "a Singhalese named Lee Sing", how much he liked "hot" curry, he was served the dish the next day:

After a few mouthfuls I grabbed a glass and made for the water bag, much to Lee Sing's amusement. I accused him of making it extra hot as a joke on me, but he protested that that was the way they made the curry for themselves. I am still wondering (*Western Mail*, 29 July 1939).

Later again, the *Australian Women's Weekly* was so concerned by the danger that "fiery chillies" might pose to its readers that it advised that while "Indians are dexterous with their hands at eating curry", "Westerners" should use a fork and spoon and always mix rice with the curry to "cut down the hotness" (*Australian Women's Weekly*, 8 March 1967).

If we were to choose a low point in curry's fortunes in Australia, it might be the following. In 1940, Sydney and Melbourne newspapers reported a curious incident at Holsworthy Army Base near Liverpool, outside Sydney (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October 1940; *Argus* (Melbourne), 16 October 1940). Two thousand troops of the militia had refused to eat the curry served as their midday meal, claiming simply

that "curry was an unsuitable ration for such hot weather" (the temperature reached 26.7 degrees Celsius that day, following the extreme of 35 degrees the day before). The *Sydney Morning Herald* disapproved of the troops' action, citing "an authority on diet in tropical countries" who observed that "curry was a popular luncheon dish throughout the East". Reports mentioned a longstanding belief, handed down among Australian soldiers, that the curry served to them in mess halls was really just the previous days' Army stew with some curry powder blended into it. As one World War I veteran wrote about the incident to the Melbourne *Argus*: "The general view of this mixture taken by the troops was that curry powder was used by the cooks as an admirable medium for hiding deficiencies of freshness in the meat used" (*Argus*, 16 October 1940). That is, the men perceived the curry presented by Army cooks as a deceitful trick, a subterfuge for concealing spoiled goods with a veneer of exotic glamour.

Complaints of these kinds have not been unique to Australia, of course. Nicola Frost has recently detailed the severe criticism British journalists made of the Bangladeshi restaurants in the Brick Lane area of east London, accusing their cooks of over-reliance on artificial food colourings and heavy-handed use of oil (Frost, 2011). These attacks came at a particular historical moment when the Brick Lane district was suffering from the combined effects of heightened racial tension, a severe shortage of housing, unemployment, crime and a lull in the local economy. It is tempting, but difficult, to establish a similar socio-economic connection in the Australian context. Issues of race were neither more or less intense in the 1920s and 1930s, when the correspondents mentioned above were sending their complaints to newspapers, than at any other moment in Australia's European history. Indeed, if anything, race was far more of an issue during the White Australia agitation of the 1890s, a time when, as we have seen, curry had become popular among working-class Australians as a cheap meal.

The origins of Australians' intermittent suspicions about Indian food might be traced to the British ambivalence towards India itself, for, as Metcalfe has reminded us, "from the beginning the British conceived of India as a land of dirt, disease, and sudden death" (Metcalfe, 1998: 171). This perception explains why, as Procida has maintained, Anglo-Indian memsahibs never cooked and rarely entered the kitchen itself because it was viewed as "unclean" (Procida, 2003: 127-29). By discounting Indian food and substituting Anglo-Indian mulligatawnies, country captains and Madras curries in its place, the British had subverted another pillar of Indian culture and in this way, reinforced their own sense of superiority. Colonising curry was not merely a process of making Indian food safe but another way of controlling India and in this sense, it could be argued Australian cooks were contributing in their own ways to the imperial project.

The Rehabilitation of Curry

In recent decades, curry's reputation and popularity have been much restored. Beckett has claimed the process began when passengers travelling First Class on P&O liners from Australia to Britain were served curries, but not as Australians knew them; these were "genuine Indian curries, cooked by Indian chefs" (Beckett, 1984: 110). However, a more likely cause for the revival resulted from the experiences of a generation of young Australians that travelled to Britain during the 1950s and 1960s. There they found a network of reasonably-priced restaurants run by Indians, Pakistanis – and most especially Bangladeshis – who had migrated from South Asia after Independence in 1947. British supermarkets stocked a range of curry pastes, such as Bolst's, that made curries a cheap and convenient meal to prepare, and many among this generation returned to Australia with a taste for the versions of curry they had encountered. Their return coincided with the arrival of a generation of British migrants, the so-called 'ten-pound Poms,' who themselves brought warm memories of local curry houses. A handful of restaurants had sprung up in Australia. In Sydney there were Amar's in Goulburn Street, Rajah's in Crow's

Nest and branches of the East India chain in Chatswood and Brookvale. The Indian Tea Centre in Pitt Street offered a daily selection of curries, as well as varieties of Indian tea. Charmaine Solomon's cookbooks made it easier for Australians to try their hands at making their own curries (*The Complete Asian Cookbook*, with large sections on India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, was first published in 1976).

More recently, Australian restaurants have followed a trend, first evident among Indian restaurants in Britain, where Indian food has been presented as "an elegant cuisine, every bit as sophisticated as French cookery" (Collingham, 2005: 2). In the 1980s, groups of Indian chefs, the "Taj Boys", who had been trained by the Taj Group of hotels, came to Australia under contract to the Indian Government in a program designed to educate Australians about Indian cuisine. The upmarket "Mayur" restaurant opened in Sydney's MLC Centre as the flagship of this operation, its chefs establishing themselves there before moving on to open their own suburban restaurants (O'Maera, 1997). As an example of the trend, the prominent Sydney restaurant Zaafran currently announces on its website that it "elevates Indian cuisine to a fine dining level" in order "to prove that Indian cuisine can be as subtle and finely balanced as any of the world's greatest cuisines". The restaurant's menu, customers are assured, emphasises "unique, rare and treasured recipes, gleaned from royal households of India, not from commercial Indian kitchens" (<http://www.zaafran.com/>, accessed 23 April 2015). Kumar Mahadevan, one of the original Taj Boys, recently appeared as a celebrity chef on the popular television program *MasterChef*, an episode in which junior MasterChefs, aged twelve and under, were challenged to produce their own curries under competition conditions in the studio. If ever we were in any doubt, the event demonstrates how curry has truly crossed cultural borders and confirmed itself as an Australian staple.

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Endnotes

¹ It is thought “Mrs. E” might have been Mrs. Samuel Enderby, an aunt Maria Macarthur stayed with when her father visited England. While Mrs. E refers to various curries in her letter, she provided little detail of the ingredients for the dishes she recommended. Jacqui Newling, communication with the author, 20 November 2011.

² For some early examples, see advertisements in the *Sydney Gazette*, 4 December 1813, 13 August 1814, 7 October 1817, 29 November 1817, 7 October 1820, and 11 August 1821.

³ Macarthur Papers, Mitchell Library (ML), Sydney. For example, see John Macarthur—Box of receipted bills, 1827-34, ML A3002-2, v106B; John Macarthur, Receipted bills, 1822-1828 and Accounts 1816-1824, ML A3002; Mrs. John Macarthur Accounts, 1811-1848, v13, ML A2909.

⁴ Chetna’s current menu may be read at www.chetna.com (accessed 22 April 2105).

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