

CURRY

Around The World

By **CLAUDIA ALARCON**
Photography courtesy of **HOT JOY AND THAI FRESH**



RED CURRY AND JASMINE RICE, THAI FRESH

Although the exact definition of curry is broad, renowned food historian Alan Davidson wrote in the *Oxford Companion to Food* that curry “denotes various kinds of dish in numerous different parts of the world; but all are savoury and all are spiced.” Although the term ‘curry’ isn’t used in India, the British adopted it to categorize a number of different Indian dishes they discovered upon colonizing the subcontinent — Davidson says that curry comes from the Tamil word *kari*, or spiced sauce.

The Portuguese are credited with popularizing curry after colonizing the Indian west coast; there is a recipe for *kari* in a 17th Century Portuguese cookbook. The first curry recipe in English was published by Hannah Glasse in 1747, but the recipes are much older. Scientists believe they may have found evidence of a 4,000-year-old ‘proto-curry’ from the Indus Valley civilization of India. Anthropologists found traces of cooked ginger and turmeric (which are still key ingredients in Indian curries) in human teeth and in a cooking pot from the ancient town of Farmana, west of Delhi. They believe the remains date between 2500 BC and 2200 BC, making this the earliest recorded use of either spice to be identified in the area and curry the oldest continuously prepared cuisine known in human history.

Curry dishes based on the original Indian styles, as well as European versions of the recipes, exist throughout Southeast Asia, East Africa, South Africa and Caribbean islands like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. The United Kingdom has adopted curry as a national dish, thanks to a large population of Indian, Pakistani and



BLACK CURRY MOLE CHICKEN WINGS, HOT JOY

Bangladeshi immigrants whose restaurants created British-Asian dishes in the 1970s to suit Western tastes, such as chicken tikka masala and the Birmingham Balti. The Brits even host a National Curry Week during which fans vote for the U.K.’s curry capital, curry pub of the year, favorite restaurant and best signature dish.

Although spices and herbs vary widely by region and style, curries are usually similarly prepared. “Every culture and region has their own ingredients and procedures, but all stem from each other,” says San Antonio chef John Philpot of Hot Joy, the playful Southtown restaurant. “When I make curries I try using natural sweetness like bananas and apples to add another note of flavor. We always have a curry on the menu in some fashion, either traditional, or sometimes we will add or do something silly to make it ‘Hot Joy-ish,’” he says. Some of Philpot’s creations include Thai red curry with sunchokes and beef tendon, and black curry mole carnitas served on Malaysian flatbread. “If I had to pick, I would say Indian-style curries are my favorite, just because of the depth of flavor and ingredients used.”

Indian curries come in many variations, but all feature a complex, carefully layered blend of dry spices and fresh aromatics. The most popular Indian curries are tikka masala, a creamy tomato and yogurt sauce; vindaloo, a spicy, sour gravy made with vinegar and fresh and dried chiles; and rogan josh, made from browned onions, shallots, garlic, dried chiles, bay leaves, cardamom, cinnamon and ginger.

In Austin, the most impressive selection of Indian curries is at Asiana, a neighborhood restaurant that specializes in authentic regional cuisine of the subcontinent. While the most popular Indian dishes in the U.S. are of Punjabi origin, Asiana’s menu includes dishes from various parts of India as well as Indo-Chinese recipes. Owners Pandiyan Kaliyamoorthy and Loganathan Appavu hail from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where curries rely on fresh herbs, are lighter on the dry spice and are often hot and spicy. They also distinguish themselves by the use of coconut and fenugreek seed and leaves, which are known as methi. Asiana serves delicious southern curries like Hyderabad-style lamb curry made with a paste of fresh jalapeños and cilantro, and Chettinad-style chicken masala. Other specialties here include khorma, a creamy stew made with onions and nut paste, and kadai murg, a spicy dish of chicken cooked with tomatoes, onions and bell peppers.

Southeast Asian curries are a whole other ballgame. “Thai curries are mostly coconut milk based, although there are also many that are stock based,” says Jam Sanitchat, Chef/Owner of Austin’s Thai Fresh, a quaint café that dishes some of the best Thai cuisine in the city. “Thai curries are thicker than Vietnamese curry. Thai and Malaysian curries are similar, especially if you go to southern Thailand. Malaysian curries resemble Indian curries, with more dried spices in the ingredients.”

Thailand’s most popular curries are yellow, red, green, panang, massaman (or Muslim-style), jungle curry and khao soi (a yellow curry from northern Thailand and Laos that is thickened with tomatoes and served on soft or crispy egg noodles). They are normally soupy, made with different combinations of aromatics like garlic, ginger, galangal, lemongrass, Thai lime leaves, cilantro, basil, Thai chiles and shrimp paste, seasoned with fish sauce and lime juice. Yellow and massaman curries are generally mild, while jungle and green curries are fiery hot. “Most common curries have more or less the same ingredients and recipes. It’s more of a preference than anything else,” says Sanitchat. “Some like their curries with more dried spices; some make their red and green curries with no dried spices. Some like to make their curries spicier, others not so much. Old recipes for Panang curry also have peanuts in the paste, although my mom never made it that way,” she says. On the other hand, Chef Philpot likes to use nut butters in his curry recipes.

Southeast Asian curries may contain almost any meat, along with vegetables like squash, onion, potato and eggplant. “Heavier meat like beef, goat and lamb go well with curries with dried spices, like massaman and yellow curries. Panang with beef is definitely my favorite,” says Sanitchat. Of course, Muslims will not add pork to their curry. Made from a paste of dried chiles, cloves, nutmeg, cumin and aromatics (lemongrass, galangal and shrimp paste), massaman curry includes whole spices like cardamom, cinnamon and peppercorns, and is

served with or on potatoes. In true Hot Joy style, Chef Philpot has served this curry with tater tots, fries and baked potatoes.

As you see, curry is in the eye of the beholder. ❖

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YELLOW CURRY WITH BONE-IN CHICKEN AND JASMINE RICE, THAI FRESH

A short list of countries where curry, in its many variations, is enjoyed.

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Nepal: Masu is a common dish that consists of curried chicken or mutton in a thick gravy, served with rice.

Sri Lanka: Common curries are white (based on coconut milk), red (with a large amount of chiles) and black (with dark roasted spices).

Indonesia: Rendang is the most famous dish and is considered a ‘dry’ curry, which means the sauce is simmered down to evaporate most of the liquid.

Malaysia: Malaysian curries resemble Indian-style stews and contain turmeric, coconut milk, shallots, ginger, shrimp paste, chiles and garlic.

Burma: Burmese chicken curry is a Punjabi-style chicken dish, without tomatoes or peppers.

Philippines: Dinuguan, also known as black curry, is made with pork meat (including innards) and thickened with pork blood, seasoned with vinegar, chiles, garlic and onion.

Japanese curry: Invented in 1912 and also known as battleship curry, it is made from a stock, usually pork, thickened with ketchup and bulldog sauce and seasoned with Worcestershire sauce, ginger, curry powder and white pepper. It includes meat, onions, potatoes and carrots. The Japanese also use curry as an ingredient for other dishes such as katsu kare (curry on a breaded pork chop) and yaki kare, curry that is baked with a raw egg.

Ethiopia: Wat is a version of Indian-style curry and can be based on any vegetables or meat except pork.