

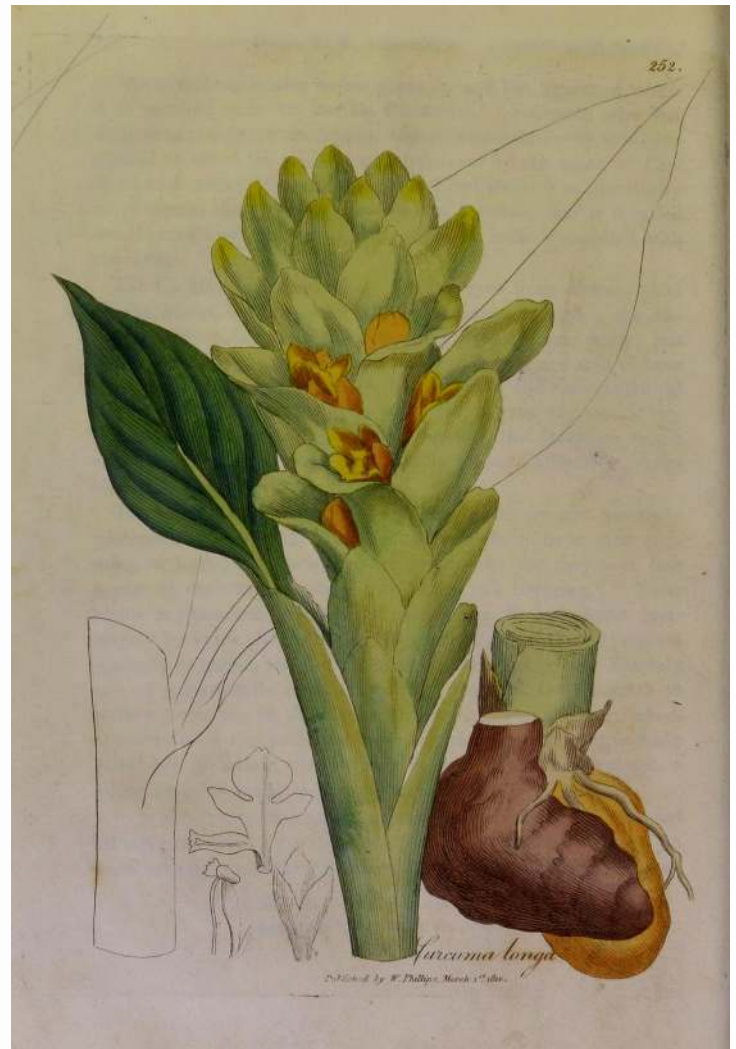


## Turmeric: Herb of the Sun

Julia Fine

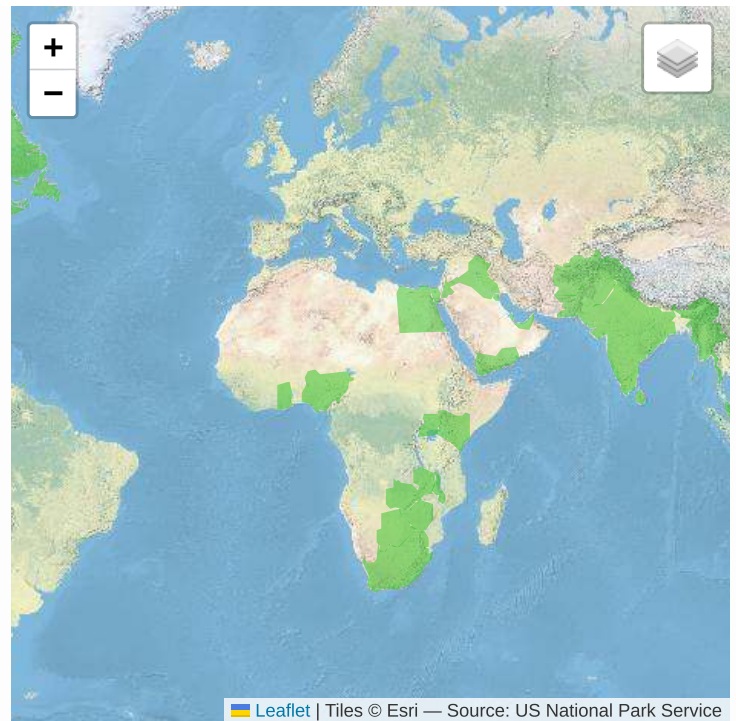
### Merit of the Earth?

Turmeric's status as a valuable medicinal plant has long been mythologized. Indeed, many juggernauts, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*, suggest that its etymology stems from an adulteration of the French trade-name "terre mérite." Dr. William Guthrie, in a 2008 article, all but proved this etymology to be spurious, but it nonetheless illustrates how turmeric has been seen across the centuries: as a plant of extreme value (mérite) from the earth (la terre).<sup>1</sup>



⋮ Turmeric as Represented in William Woodville's... ⌂

While the “*mérite*”, as Dr. Guthrie noted, most likely refers to the spice’s medicinal value, turmeric has been held in high esteem for many other reasons. As the long history of turmeric and its consumption reveals, its distinctive color and taste were integral parts of the mechanism through which British men and women could perform the ideological work of empire, or, in the words of historian Susan Zlotnick, “neutralize the threat of the Other by naturalizing the products of foreign lands.”<sup>2</sup>

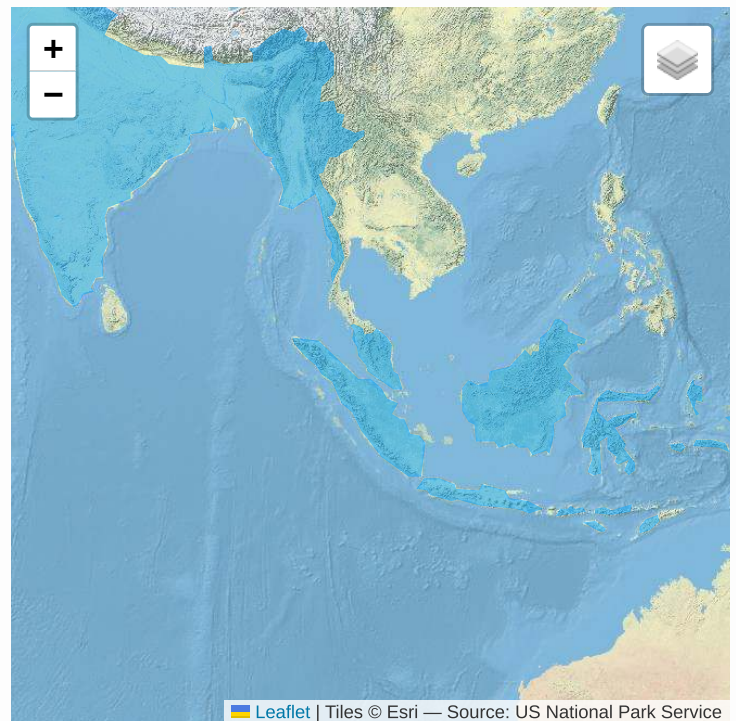


⋮ Former Countries of the British Empire



## Turmeric’s Origin Story

Turmeric’s roots are deeply embedded in the cultural landscape of South and Southeast Asia. But it is unclear exactly where in South and Southeast Asia the plant originated. Various naturalists suggest different places of origin, from present-day South India and Malaysia to Indonesia.

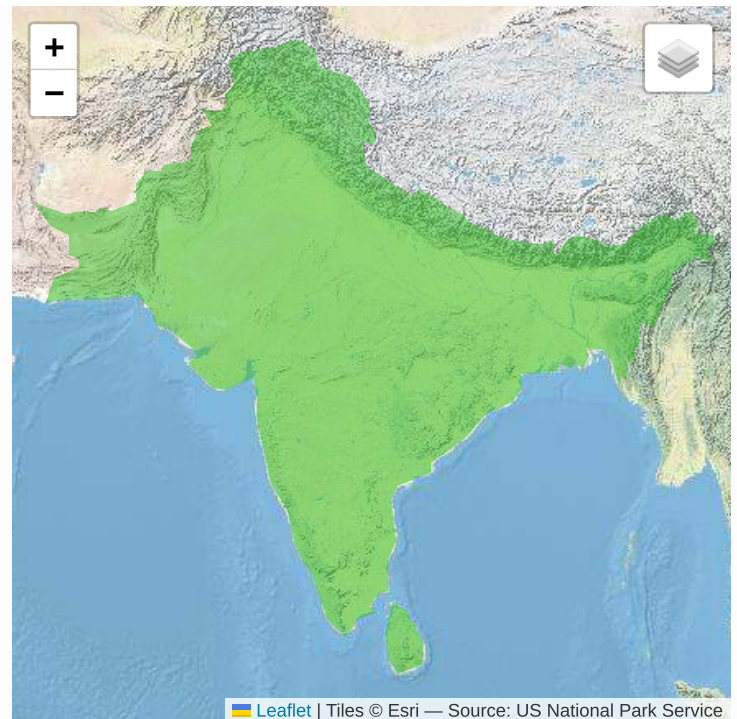


⋮ The Origins of Turmeric

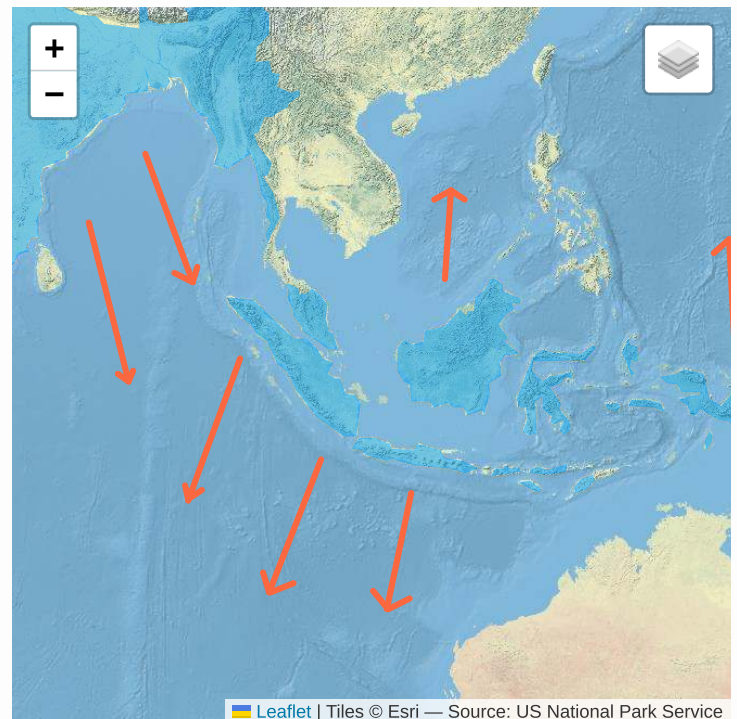


Wherever its exact origin, anthropologists, historians, and botanists have long noted the cultural importance of turmeric. The spice has been in documented use for at least 6,000 years. In India, Vedic societies thought of it as “the herb of the sun” due to its roots’ yellow-orange color.<sup>3</sup> Many have identified turmeric in the *Atharva Veda*, [the Vedic hymn book](#) providing recipes for healing medicines and spells. There, a hymn reads, “O colorer, do thou color this leprous spot and what is pale. The leprous spot, what is pale, do thou cause to disappear.” The “colorer,” according to lexicographers, is commonly thought to be a reference to turmeric. Similarly, in [*Sushruta Samhita*,][Q1995239] ([book](#)) an Ayurvedic compendium, the author suggests treating leeches with a turmeric paste. In addition to being medicinal, the plant was also seen as regal and is featured as decoration in kingly feasts. There is documented evidence that King Kanthirava Narasaraja Rajendra, the seventeenth century maharaja of the Kingdom of Mysore, was entertained by women whose faces were coated with turmeric.<sup>4</sup>

The plant spread beyond South and Southeast Asia. After turmeric’s domestication in Southern Asia, and long before European colonization, it was diffused to Tahiti, Hawaii, and the Easter Islands.<sup>5</sup>



Indian Subcontinent



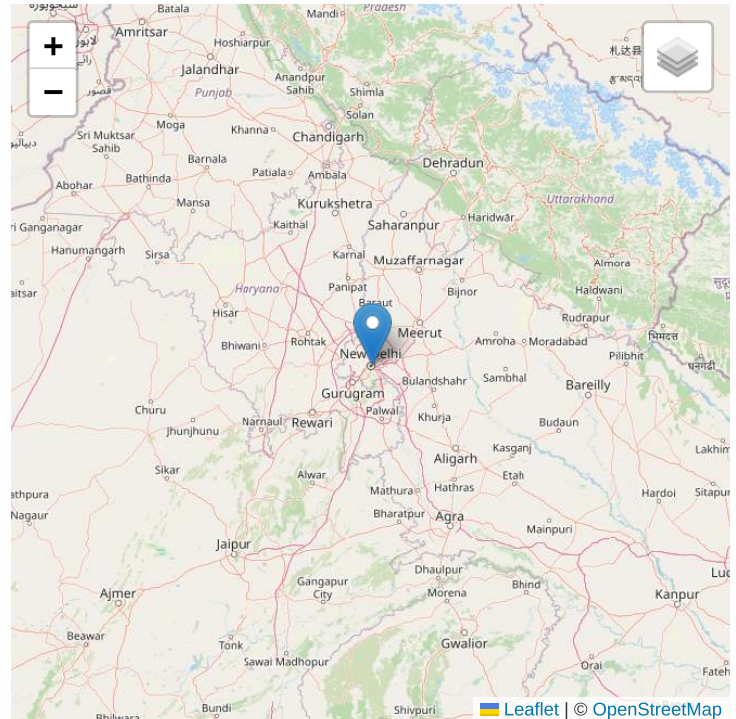
Spread of Turmeric





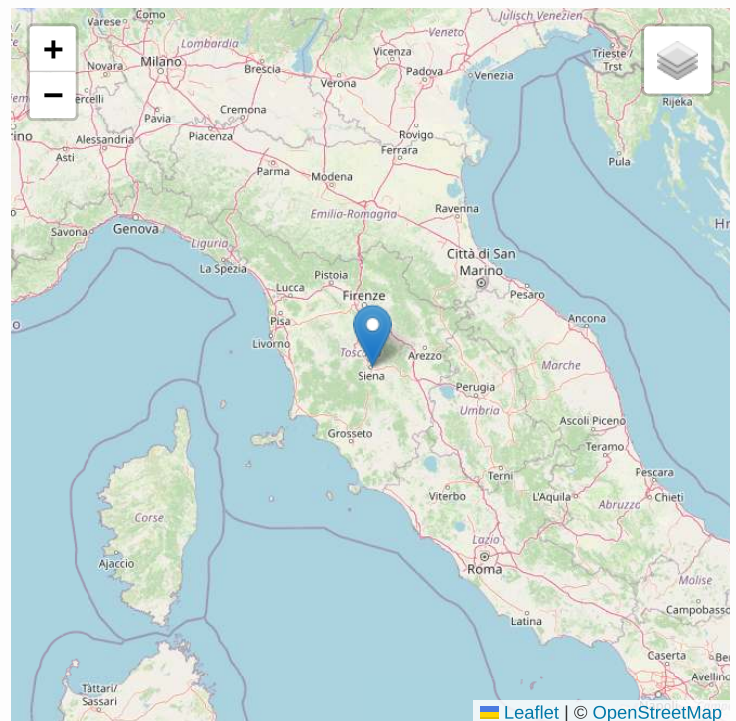
# Taking Root Westward

The exact date of turmeric's arrival in the West is unclear. Some scholars claim it was mentioned by the Greek physician Dioscorides (40 CE–90 CE), demonstrating its presence in Europe in antiquity. Nevertheless, turmeric was not imported *en masse* to Europe until the Middle Ages. The spice was first definitively mentioned outside of Southern Asia by early Arabic sources. For instance, the fourteenth century explorer Ibn Battuta [noted](#) that on his travels to Delhi he had seen people take a snake, “slit open its stomach, and stuff it with curcuma (turmeric). This...takes the place of saffron with them. When I saw this small animal and them eating it, I took a loathing at it and would not eat it.”



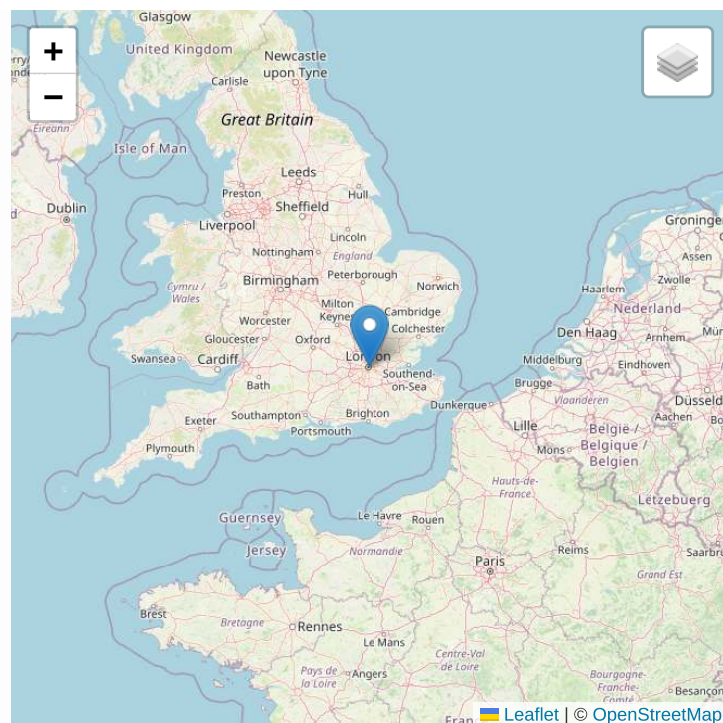
Delhi

By the 1400s, the spice was being imported into Europe in large quantities; Joan Thirsk describes how by 1428, turmeric was a “now familiar” spice imported to Italy.<sup>6</sup> The importance of turmeric in fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe becomes clear in Siena-born doctor and naturalist Pietro Andrea Mattioli’s 1558 Latin commentary on Dioscorides’s [De Materia Medica](#). Mattioli writes, “Experienced physicians identify the other genus of cypress, which resembles ginger and comes from India.” This type of cypress “work[s] wonders on ulcers,...posses[ses] a certain constrictive power which suits them for treating canker sores” and helps to induce “urination or menstruation.” Mattioli further refers to the plant’s “slightly bitter taste, and that it is yellow like saffron when chewed,” suggesting its use medicinally and gastronomically.



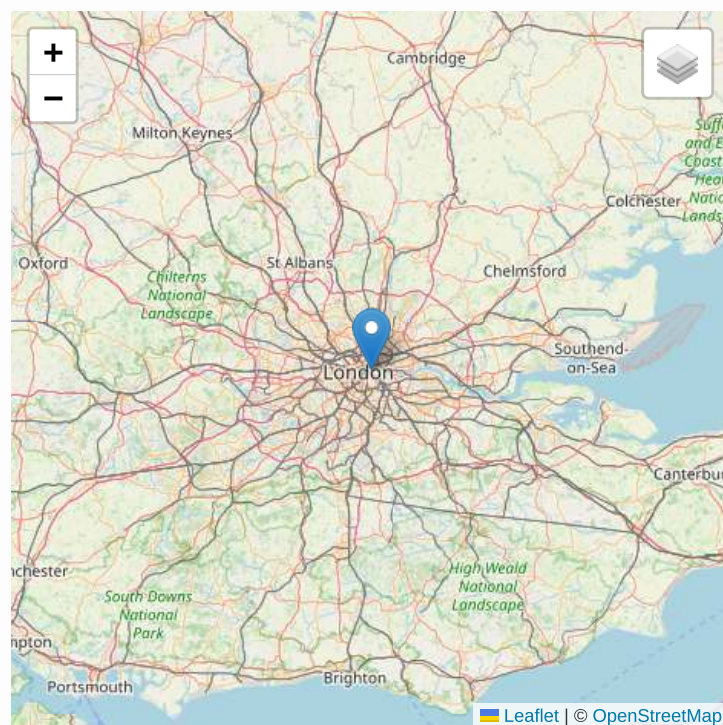
Mattioli's Birthplace

Even as the spice became common in Europe, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many European sources continued to view some of its uses with both curiosity and disgust. For instance, John Pechey, in a [1694 herbal of plants used in “physics and surgery,”](#) wrote that turmeric’s color, in spite of its perceived similarity to the Mediterranean plant saffron, emphasizes its strangeness to a European audience: “People of China...make an Ointment with this root,” which men and women rubbed on their bodies. Pechey continues, “this may seem very odd [to] those that are unaccustomed to it, by reason of the yellow color.”



London

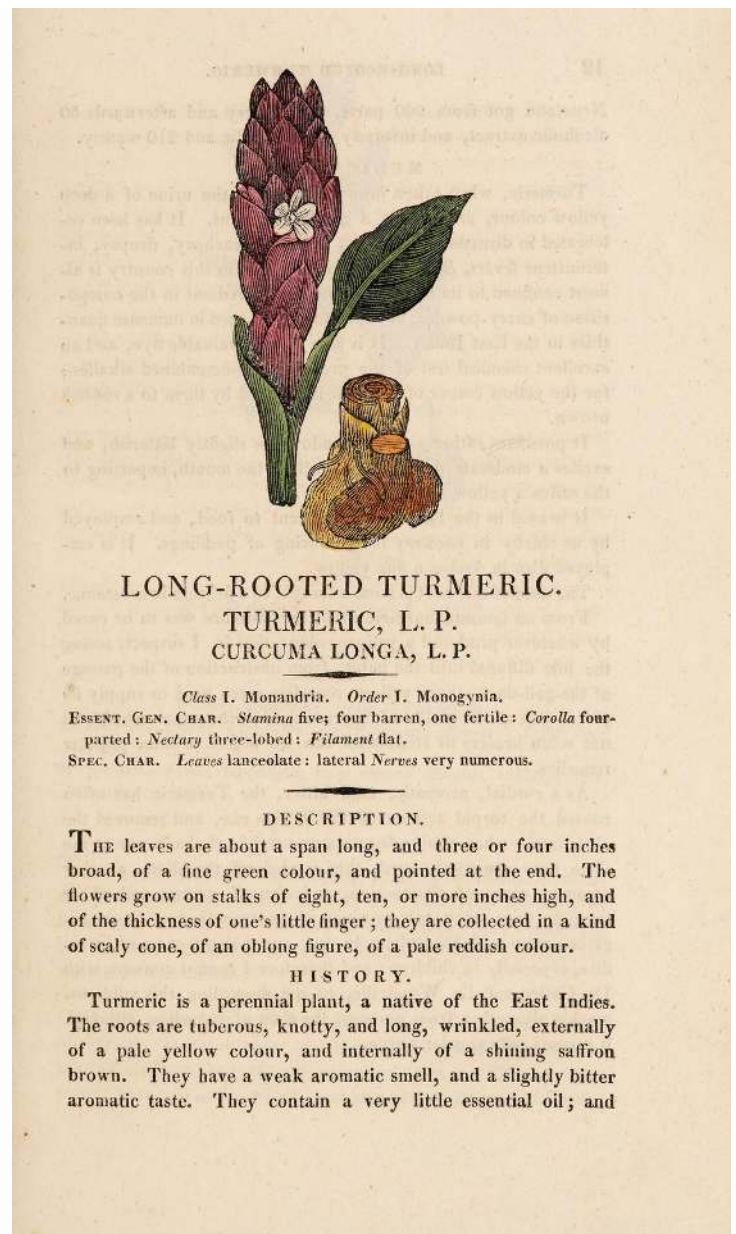
As [Cargo Sheets](#) from the Folger Shakespeare Library demonstrate, at the time of Pechey’s writing, turmeric was being imported into Britain in large quantities by the East India Company, and sold at the East India House to grocers and traders. It may be inaccurate to draw a distinction between what was used as cuisine and what was used as medicine. One letter-writer, [in a 1600 epistle](#) to English lawyer and colonizer John Winthrop, suggests using the “turmerick,” along with “barbarie [barberry] bark” boiled in beer with saffron, in order to cure yellow jaundice. Others suggest that turmeric is especially useful when dealing with bodily obstructions. In his [1792 tract on medical botany](#), by William Woodville writes that “this root has had the character of being a powerful aperient and resolvent: it has been commonly prescribed in obstruction of the liver, and other chronic visceral affections.” “The disease,” Woodville continues, “in which it has been thought most efficacious is the jaundice,” and he notes that the plant has been “highly recommended by several practical writers.”



East India House in London



Turmeric's popularity as a medicinal agent seems to have decreased by the early nineteenth century. In Robert John Thornton's 1810 work, *A Family Herbal*, he notes the fallacious nature of the claim that turmeric could cure jaundice, writing, "from an ignorant suspicion that the jaundice was to be cured by whatever produced a yellow colour, that is, I suspect, seeing the bile diffused into the habit, from obstruction of passage of the gall-duct, these yellow remedies were used to supply its place, just as the yolks of eggs are used in the same complaint." He continues, writing that, turmeric "posses[es] only slender virtue." An 1817 medicinal dictionary echoes this assessment of turmeric's change in status: "it is now very seldom used medicinally" and is mainly used as "an ingredient in the composition of Curry Powder," as well as a dye. From the 1800s on, turmeric was thus chiefly employed in the West as a culinary and dyeing agent. What was the significance of this use, and how did it function discursively in the broader age of empire?



⋮ Turmeric in Robert John Thornton's Herbal

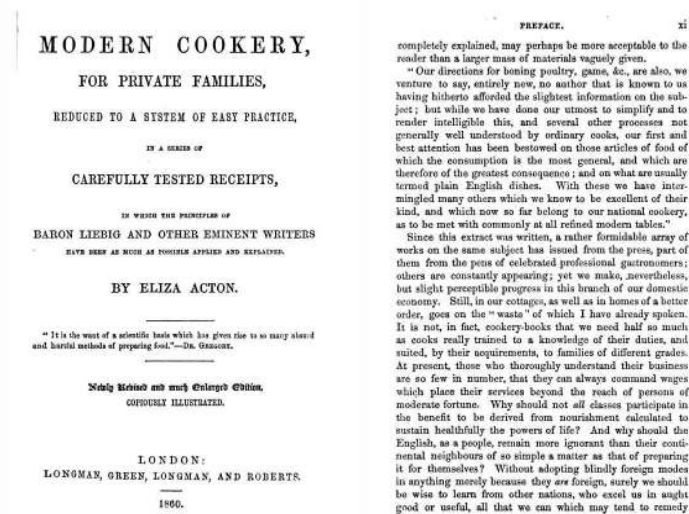


# Colonizing the Table

The British recipe books held by the [Folger Shakespeare Library](#) demonstrate the ways turmeric was used to domesticate the empire while allowing the British to benefit from its “exotic” territories. That turmeric was used to allow British eaters to “orientalize” and exoticize India becomes clear in discussions of the plant’s yellow roots. Many recipes for Indian pickles use turmeric primarily as a coloring agent, not a pickling agent. For instance, after providing a (most likely) eighteenth-century recipe for chopped pickled vegetables, “Indian lile,” considered an early precursor to the British dish “piccalilli”—the author also includes a recipe for a “pickle,” instructing the reader to find “[1 ounce of fresh capsicum either green or red. Salt it. 3 days & dry it in the sun. Turmeric root powder 1/2 ounce—put all into a stone jar, with a sufficient quantity of best vinegar almost to fill it.](#)” It is interesting that the author does not specify the color of the capsicum, saying either green or red function well. Perhaps this is because the author understands that the turmeric will overpower whatever color is inherent in the capsicum, meaning that either will match a perceived Indian original. Indeed, almost all of the other recipes for turmeric in the Folger’s recipe books refer to the dish’s perceived Indian origins. In this sense, the color of the dish matters because it marks the dish as “Indian.”

Other recipes make the use of turmeric as a coloring agent even more explicit. Susanna Kellet’s [1780 recipe for “a curry of chickens,”](#) calls for pepper, salt, cayenne, “a small table spoonful of curry powder” and “two small teaspoonfuls of turmeric to colour.” Historian Stephanie Maroney has pointed out that “presumably, there would already be turmeric in the curry powder, so to add two more teaspoons would make the dish very orange and exotic looking.” As the turmeric is added specifically “to colour,” the dish is “visually mark(ed) as different from ‘traditional’ English food.”<sup>7</sup> Through this recipe, we see how turmeric’s yellow color was explicitly understood as a means through which dishes could be signified as Indian, or at least non-English. Similarly, in a [mid-18th century recipe for “Frangas incapadas,”](#) an anglicized recipe for Portuguese chicken soup, the author instructs that the rice upon which the soup is served should be “half coloured with turmeric.” In what is perhaps a nod to Portuguese colonization of the “East Indies,” it becomes clear how turmeric is used to signal the “exotic” origin of dishes.

The use of turmeric within the broader pantheon of curry powder spices did more than bring the exotic to Britain—it also worked to, in the words of Zlotnick, “domesticate” the exotic.<sup>8</sup> As Zlotnick notes, Eliza Acton, one of the most influential English cookery authors, wrote in her 1845 work *Modern Cookery* of curries of allegedly English origin, claiming that, with “plain” English dishes “we have intermingled many others which we know to be excellent of their kind, and which now so far belong to our national cookery, as to be met with commonly at all refined modern tables.” Acton makes explicit the notion of bringing foreign dishes into the fold of English national cuisine by including a recipe for turmeric-laden curry powder. In the cookbook’s section on curries, she discusses British “potted meats,” and how presumed Indian dishes and spices intermingle with British dishes to bring India into the fold of Greater Britain.



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# The Foreign Becomes Domestic

As Deborah Lupton writes in her work *Food, the Body, and the Self*, “by taking food into the body, we take in the world.”<sup>9</sup> Eating foods spiced with turmeric provided one means through which British consumers could take in the larger empire, both exoticizing it for their own benefit while domesticating it as a British property. This is not to argue that turmeric was solely imported or popularized for ideological reasons—as Marcy Norton has shown, “new tastes emerged out of the social matrix” created by imperialism writ large.<sup>10</sup> Turmeric, as an important ingredient in South Asian cuisine, was one such foodstuff whose popularity, at least in Europe, most likely increased due to contact with South Asian foodways. And yet, the cultural significance of turmeric, as an exoticized yet domesticated good, demonstrates the ways plants functioned not only as catalysts for imperial expansion, but also as a means through which ideas about the British Empire were diffused.

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