

Title:

Curry - A Journey

Word Count:

615

Summary:

My introduction to the delights of curry.

Keywords:

curry, Indian food, experiences

Article Body:

Due to a childhood in the Middle East, I was practically brought up on curry. My first memories of it are eating curried goat in the fire station of Dubai airport in about 1962. My dad was the airport manager and the Chief Fire Officer and his family were our good friends and neighbours. The firemen cooked for our two families - fiery hot curry for the adults and a much milder version for us kids. Some of the men were of Arabic origins and some of Indian so I think the resulting meal was something of a mixture.

I remember we were offered chairs and cutlery but we preferred to sit on the floor and in the traditional manner, ate only with our right hands. This posed something of a problem for my mother as she was left-handed - she avoided making inexcusable gaffes by sitting on her left hand until the meal was over.

We learnt to roll rice into balls and with the aid of chapattis (wheat flour flatbreads), scooped up the curry and popped it into our mouths without making too much mess. I don't think I ate curry again in that way until many years later when I visited Goa and, at a spice plantation, was once again faced with banana leaf plates and fingers only. Bizarrely, in a nearby clearing, was a pink porcelain, pedestal hand basin with a hose pipe attached to the tap, fully supplied with soap and hand towels.

During those days of being expatriates in foreign lands, the British developed a liking for curry lunch on a Sunday. Doubtless this originated in India in the days of the Raj but still found its way to the Middle East and Africa. A group of friends would gather either at one of their houses or the local club. There would be beers or gins and tonics first (cola or fizzy orange for the kids). There wouldn't be a choice of curries, as I recall, it was always chicken and no matter where we ate it and it always tasted the same. The

accompaniments didn't vary much either but we didn't mind. There would be poppadoms, mango chutney and a variety of sambals - chopped fruits and salad stuff which might include any or all of banana, pineapple, apple, tomato, cucumber, onion, desiccated coconut, peanuts and raisins or sultanas. With luck there would be chapattis too.

My next curry experiences were back in England. How different it all was. Indian restaurants furnished in red velvet with flocked wallpaper in gold. All sorts of different curries - not only the main ingredient but the mix of spices and flavourings. There were choices of plain or spicy poppadoms, different breads and vegetable curries and dahls as well, no sambals though! On the down side, these curries were often rather greasy and we always thought of them as being terribly fattening - naughty but oh so nice! The saviour, if conscience got the better of us was Tandoori-cooked meats. These were marinated in yoghurt and spice paste and cooked in a Tandoor (an earthenware charcoal oven), so were in effect grilled and much healthier.

Change again then when I finally visited India in 1988 and discovered that meat curries were the exception rather than the rule. Many Indians are vegetarians so paneer (similar to cottage cheese) is popular as are the many dishes made with pulses and vegetables. There was no trace of the greasiness found in restaurants in the UK and the flavours were quite different too.

This voyage of discovery culminated in a determination to learn how to reproduce Indian food in my own home but more of that in another article.