

Dishing Out History: Cuisine, Empires and Feeding the World

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It's amazing that the British traveled the world for spices, and this is the best they can come up with.



*Tell me what
you eat:
I will tell you
what you are.*

Jean Anthelme
Brillat-Savarin



Food in World History

- While food production has long been a major topic in history, its enjoyment and how it has been experienced has generally been treated as trivial
- Food is a great lens through which to explore power and identity and track and chart the movement of peoples and ideas
- Food exerts a powerful pull on our imaginations – individually and collectively
- Food is also central to social relations – it can be used to include and to exclude

Cuisine in World History

- Historically, cuisine was defined vertically and regionally
 - More a question of status than of provenance
- The idea of a national cuisine is at best anachronistic – at worst a recent invention
 - The modern nation state looks to cuisine as another way of delineating and demarcating boundaries
- Historically, 'Authentic' is a red herring yet Politically, it has a powerful pull
- Arguably national cuisine is an aberration as most cuisines in the world were very dynamic
 - Determined by what was available which in turn was shaped by the interaction between the local and the global
- Focus on Food Pathways and the relationship to imperialism and globalization

”No Source of influence in cookery ... has exceeded imperialism ... the tides of empire run in two directions”

Felipe Fernandez-Armesto



Philip Murphy @philipvmurphy · 1h

From now on, when anyone asks me why I'm so interested in Commonwealth history, I'll refer them to this.



Michael Ledger-Lomas @MLedgerLomas · 1h

Life-sized statue of future Edward VIII as 'Chief Morning Star'. Carved from Canadian butter and displayed (in cold storage) at Wembley (1925).

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Christmas Pudding
“that most British of all
dishes largely made from
non-British Ingredients.”

Powerful symbol of
Victorian society which was
repurposed into an imperial
symbol

Deliberate positioning by
the Empire Marketing
Board in 1926



**Have an EMPIRE
Xmas Pudding**
This is How to Make it.

Take 1 breakfastcupful of each of the following eight ingredients:—
Canadian flour, Australian or South African raisins, Australian
sultanas, Australian currants, Demerara sugar, chopped mixed
peel, English or Scottish beef suet, breadcrumbs. Also 1 English
cooking apple, 4 to 6 eggs (Home laid), 1 teaspoonful pudding
spice (Indian), 1 wineglassful Jamaica rum, sufficient milk to mix,
grated rind and juice of one lemon. One English 3d. bit for luck!

Mix well. Place in greased basin. Cover with greaseproof paper;
tie on cloth and steam or boil 6 to 8 hours.

Here you have a quite simple recipe. It will
make as delicious a plum pudding as you have
ever tasted. And you will enjoy it all the
more if you remember that, by using Empire
fruit to make it, you give a helping hand to the
thousands of British settlers Overseas—most of
them ex-Service men and their families—by
whom that fruit is grown.

Buy
EMPIRE GOODS
ASK—IS IT BRITISH?

ISSUED BY THE EMPIRE MARKETING BOARD

King George V
declared that the
Royal Family's
Christmas would
only feature foods
from the Empire.



The King's Chef, Mr. Cédard, with
Their Majesties' gracious consent, has supplied
to the Empire Marketing Board
the following recipe for

An Empire Christmas Pudding

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---------------------|
| 5 lbs. of currants | * | AUSTRALIA |
| 5 " " sultanas | * | AUSTRALIA |
| 5 " " stoned raisins | * | SOUTH AFRICA |
| 1½ " " minced apple | * | CANADA |
| 5 " " bread crumbs | * | UNITED KINGDOM |
| 5 " " beef suet | * | NEW ZEALAND |
| 2 " " cut candied peel | * | SOUTH AFRICA |
| 2½ " " flour | * | UNITED KINGDOM |
| 2½ " " demerara sugar | * | WEST INDIES |
| 20 eggs | * | IRISH FREE STATE |
| 2 ozs. ground cinnamon | * | CEYLON |
| 1½ ozs. ground cloves | * | ZANZIBAR |
| 1½ ozs. ground nutmegs | * | STRAITS SETTLEMENTS |
| 1 teaspoonful pudding spice | * | INDIA |
| 1 gill brandy | * | CYPRUS |
| 2 gills rum | * | JAMAICA |
| 2 quarts old beer | * | ENGLAND |

*Recipes for a sauce and for brandy butter, also made
exclusively from Empire ingredients, to accompany the pudding
have also been supplied by His Majesty's Chef. Copies can be obtained free on
application to the Empire Marketing Board, 2 Queen Anne's Gate Bldgs., London, S.W.1*



Fragrant, fruity, full of boozy spiciness — the Christmas pudding or the plum pudding is a festive gem that stirs delicious nostalgia

Hindustan Times
27 Dec 2022



Chicken Tikka Masala is the “true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences.”

Robin Cook, British Foreign Secretary, 2001

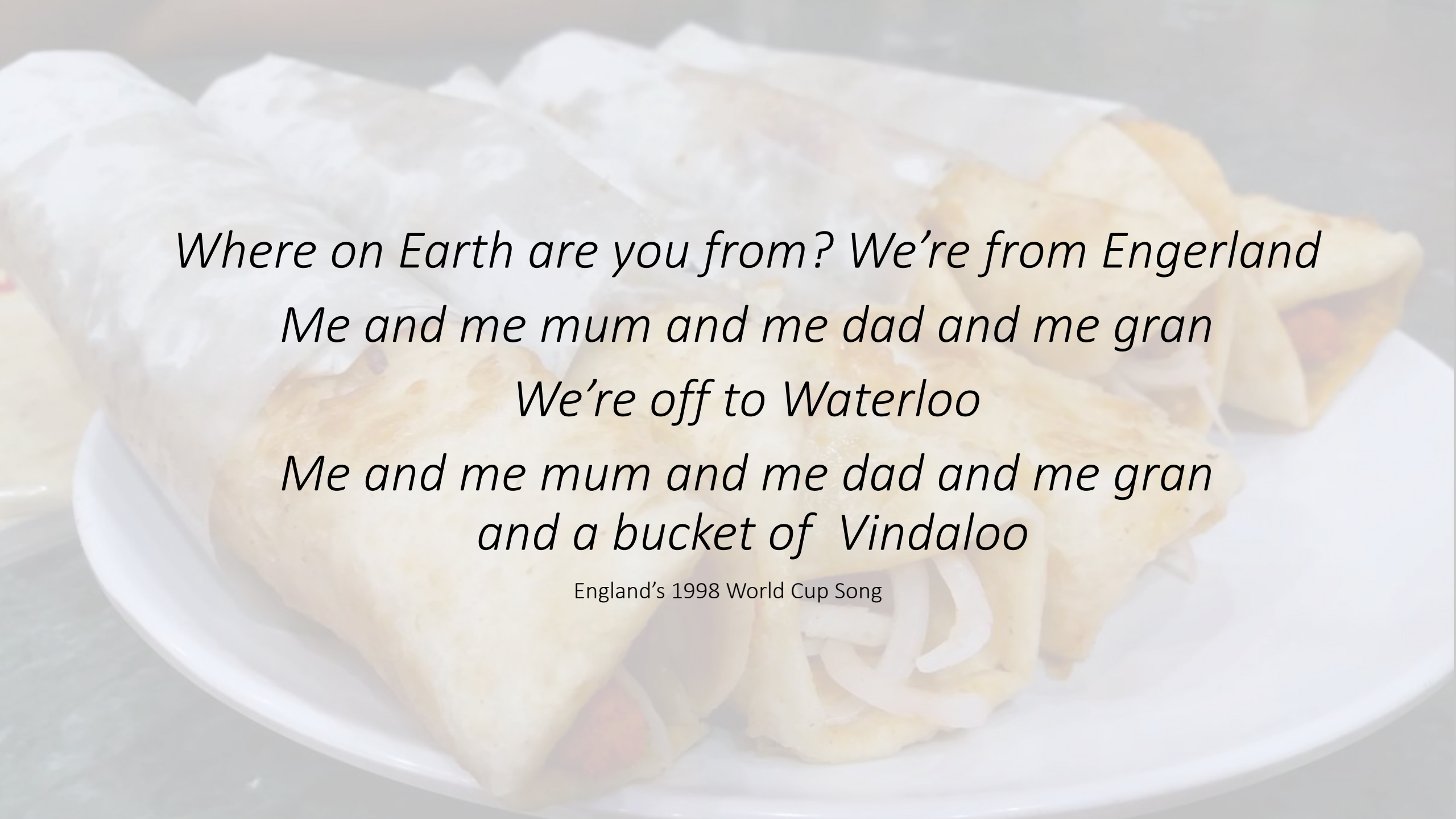
The Battle for Chicken Tikka Masala and Butter Chicken

- Court case in Delhi between rival claimants as to who first created butter chicken: Moti Mahal vs Daryaganj
- Politicians in Scotland have claimed that it was first made in Glasgow
- Meanwhile restaurateurs and critics have claimed it for Birmingham and Leicester
- In 2001 it was estimated that 18 tonnes of chicken tikka masala were being sold in the UK



Curry House Cuisine Peaked around 2000

- Adaptation of Indian modes of cooking to the British palate
- Tended until the 1990s to be 'cheap and cheerful'
- Set within the context of the rise and threatened fall of the Curry House in Britain
 - 1960 – 300 curry houses in Britain
 - 2011 – 12000 curry houses in Britain
- Dishes often tied a protein to one of four sauces in an ascending scale
 - Korma, Jalfrezi, Madras, Vindaloo (all of which are only loosely related to regional cuisines in India – very very loose in the case of Madras)
- Estimated that Curry Houses employed 100,000 people at their peak – more than steel and coal combined
- Fusion food before fusion food became fashionable



*Where on Earth are you from? We're from Engerland
Me and me mum and me dad and me gran
We're off to Waterloo
Me and me mum and me dad and me gran
and a bucket of Vindaloo*

England's 1998 World Cup Song

Twenty Years Later – Crisis of the Curry House

- Estimated that Curry Houses have been closing at the rate of 2 per week
 - Changing tastes
 - Competition from ‘authentic’ Indian restaurants
 - People began to cook it at home
 - Shortage of chefs and staff
- Covid accelerated their decline
- Efforts to stem the decline
 - Curry Day
 - Curry College
 - Curry Club

Priti Patel: vote
leave and “save
our curry houses
and join the rest
of the world”

Many British
Asians did vote for
Brexit

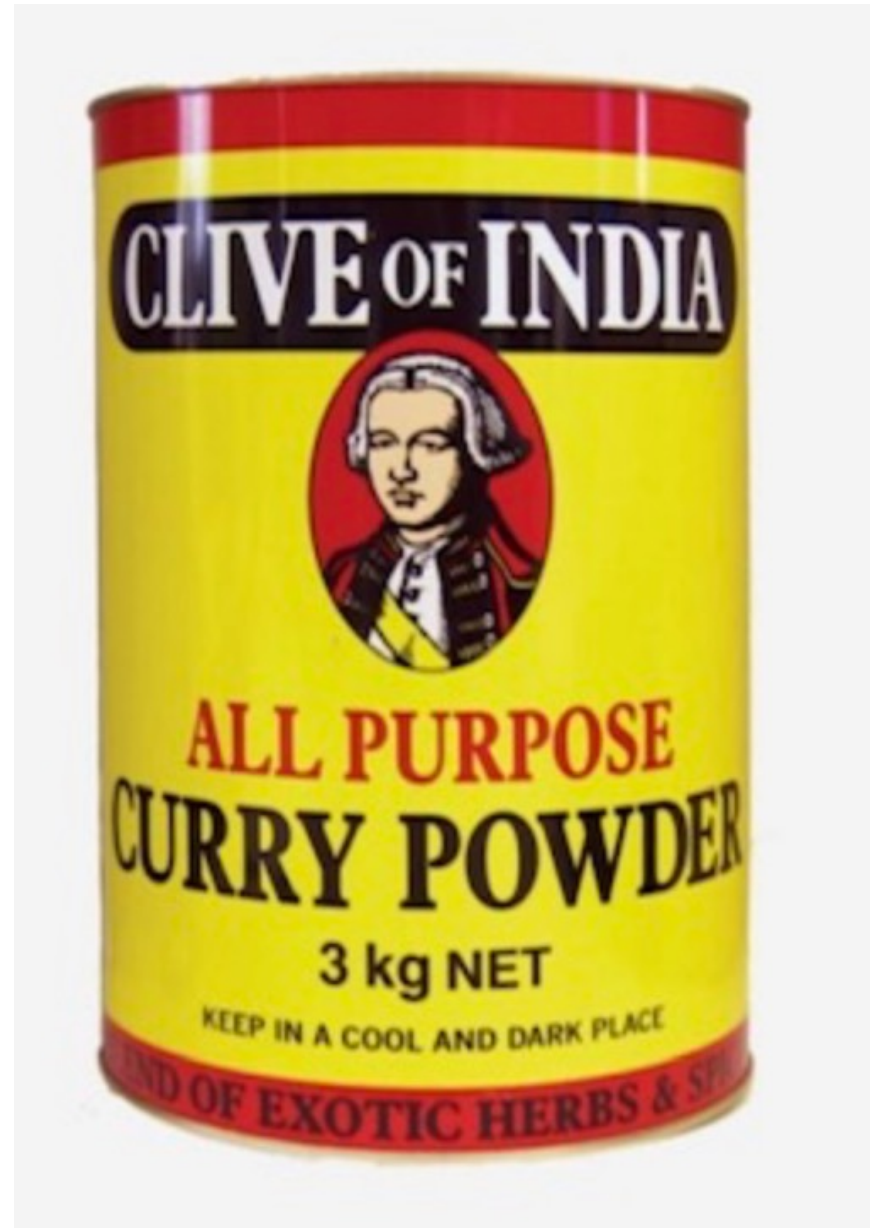


But what is curry?

No consensus on a definition

- Kari (Tamil) sauce or pepper water
- Kariapuha (Tamil) leaf of the curry plant
- Turcarri (Hindustani)
- Curryup (ancient Tamil) black seasoning
- Cuirreach (Gaelic) racetrack
- Keuerie (old French): cookery [*Forme of Cury* 1390]
- Hobson-Jobson: “meat, fish, fruit or vegetables, cooked with a quantity of bruised spices and turmeric ... and a large mess of rice.”
- Madhur Jaffrey actively disliked the term – referred to it in 1974 as being as insulting as chop suey to Chinese cuisine
 - Yet continues to publish books with curry in the title including her *Ultimate Curry Bible*
- The term curry persists largely because it so easily evades definition
- Makes it the quintessential global food

But even more controversial is
curry powder



Britain's Encounter with Indian Cuisines

- History marked by convergence, then divergence, and now convergence
- Indian Food was also very dynamic
 - Regional characteristics
- Much of what we think of as Indian Food is relatively recent
- Impact of the Columbian Exchange
 - Chiles c.1540
 - Potatoes c.18th century
 - Tomatoes c. 18th century (known as Angrezi sabzi)
 - Cauliflower c. 19th century
 - Kidney beans c. 17th century
- Even chai (tea) only arrived in the 1830s via China

Thomas Roe at the Court of Jehangir 1619

- Contemporary reports stressed the similarities in courtly cuisine
- Chiles were just starting to appear – ironically Mughal sources commented on the British overuse of chiles at the time



18th
 century: a
 Recipe from
 Warren
 Hastings'
 notebooks

Receipt for making
 Thebaub Khetace.

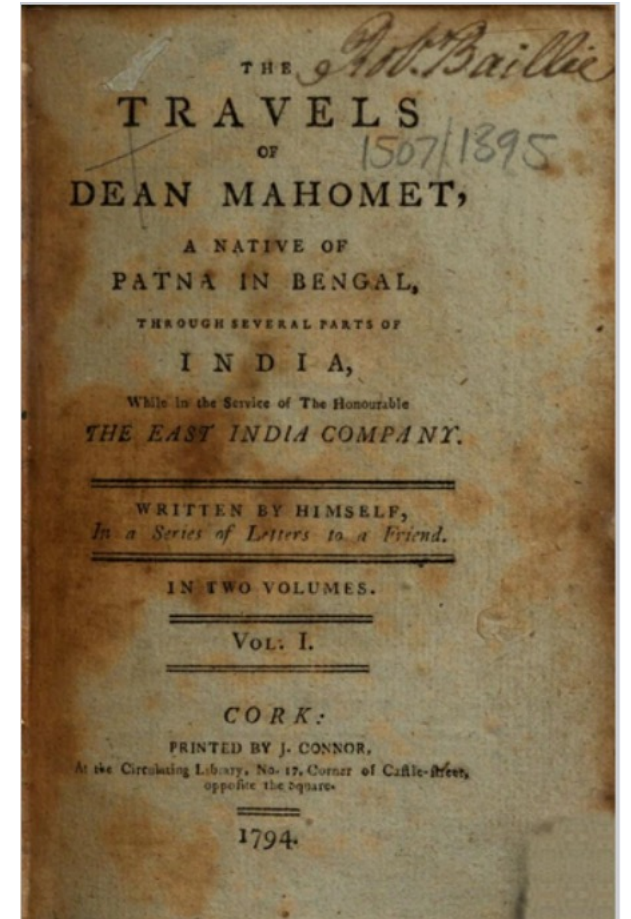
| | | |
|--|----|------------------|
| Keema, or minced meat | 1 | Seer |
| Salt, Chilly, Bl. Pepper, ad libitum | | |
| green ginger, pounded | 2 | Pirruum |
| garlicke . . . d ^o | 3 | D ^o |
| parowoot, d ^o | 3 | D ^o |
| yolks of Eggs | 3. | |
| Thry | | D ^o 1 |
| Cream | | D ^o 2 |
| fried Onions | | D ^o 2 |
| Cloves, Cardamoms, Cinn: pounded ea | | D ^o 3 |
| Onions pounded | | D ^o 4 |
| Buttor, of y ^e size of an Egg | | |
| ^{Coriander} Carum seed pounded | | Mashes 9 |
| D ^o green, Fennel & Mint, each | | D ^o 9 |

mix well. wth 5 or 6 Pise of Water boil in a
 Saucepan till dry. — grind it well on a Stone.
 (Sill: butta) form it into cakes, & fry them wth
 Buttor, taking care if they do not stick to y^e
 Pan. N^o of Buttor wth the boiling & cover y^e cakes
 lay y^e cakes on a Dish, & squeeze some Lime
 Juice over each. * has found it in Limen: books

First Self-Described Indian Restaurant in London

'Mahomed, East-Indian, informs the Nobility and Gentry, he has fitted up the above house, neatly and elegantly, for the entertainment of Indian gentlemen, where they may enjoy the Hoakha, with real Chilm tobacco [from a village in present day Pakistan], and Indian dishes, in the highest perfection, and allowed by the greatest epicures to be unequalled to any curries ever made in England with choice wines...'

The Times, 27 March 1811



*Oriental
Herald,*
1828

“from the excellence of the dishes that the Indian condiments are capable of producing, coupled with the cheapness with which rice is now to be had in this country, we think it probably that at no distant period curry and rice will become one of the national dishes of England.”

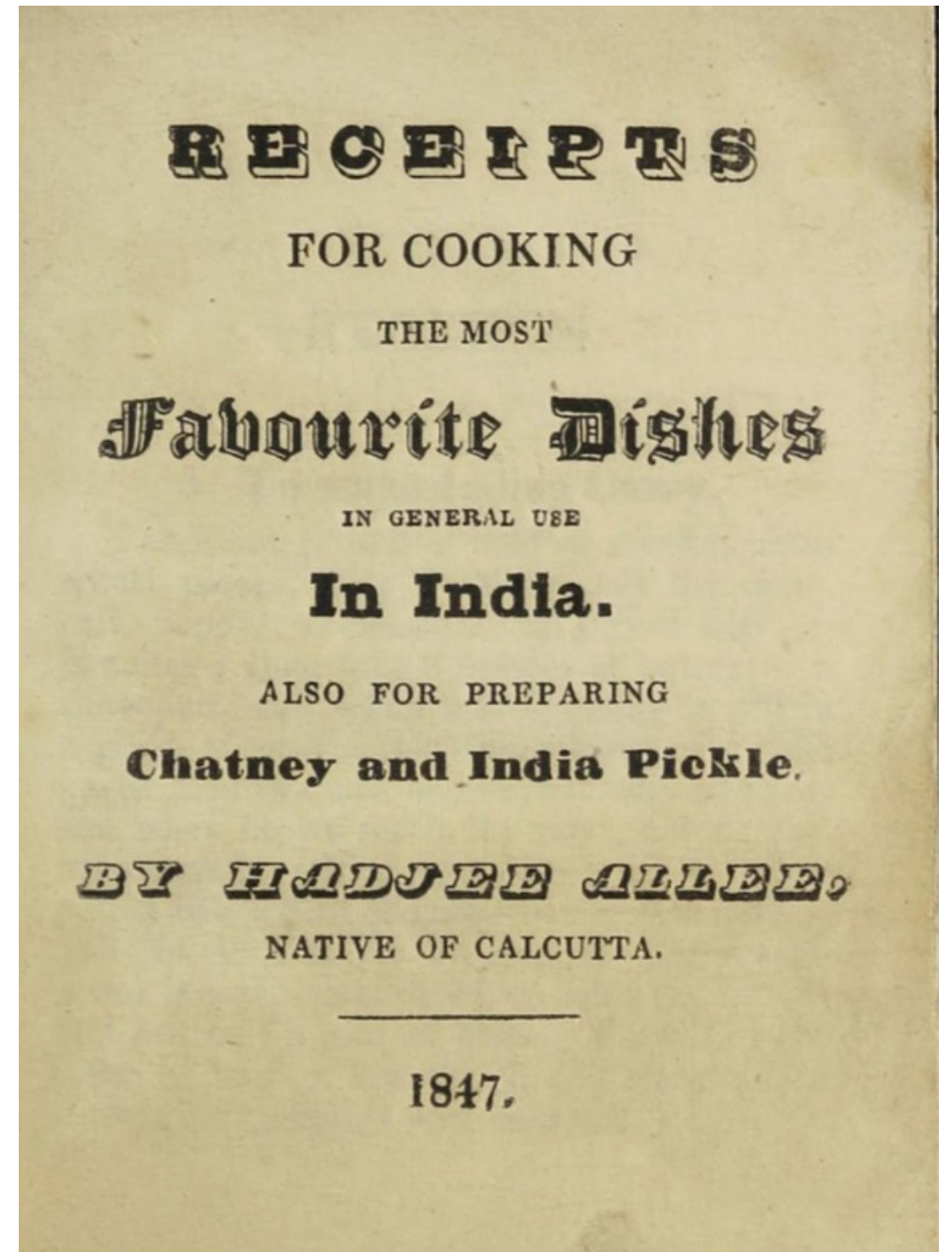
“A Poem to
a Curry”,
William
Makepeace
Thackeray
Punch, 1846

Three pounds of veal my darling girl prepares,
And chops it nicely into little squares;
Five onions next procures the little minx
(The biggest are the best, her Samiwel thinks),
And Epping butter nearly half a pound,
And stews them in a pan until they're brown'd.

What's next my dexterous little girl will do?
She pops the meat into the savoury stew,
With curry-powder table-spoonfuls three,
And milk a pint (the richest that may be),
And, when the dish has stewed for half an hour,
A lemon's ready juice she'll o'er it pour.

Then, bless her! Then she gives the luscious pot
A very gentle boil – and serves quite hot.
PS – Beef, mutton, rabbit, if you wish,
Lobsters, or prawns, or any kind fish,
Are fit to make a CURRY. 'Tis, when done,
A dish for Emperors to feed upon.

- First cookbook to mention curry was in 1747 – Hannah Glasse, *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Simple* (both Washington and Jefferson had copies)
- First widely advertised curry powder appeared in Sorlie's Perfumery Warehouse in 1784



Indian Cuisine enjoyed
Royal Patronage

The two leading
Victorian cookbooks
both devoted several
chapter to curry

Eliza Acton, *Modern Cookery*
(1845)

Isabella Beeton, *Household
Management* (1861)



Big Surge in
Britain after 1960
-spurred by
immigration –
particularly
Sylhetis – and
changing eating
habits in Britain

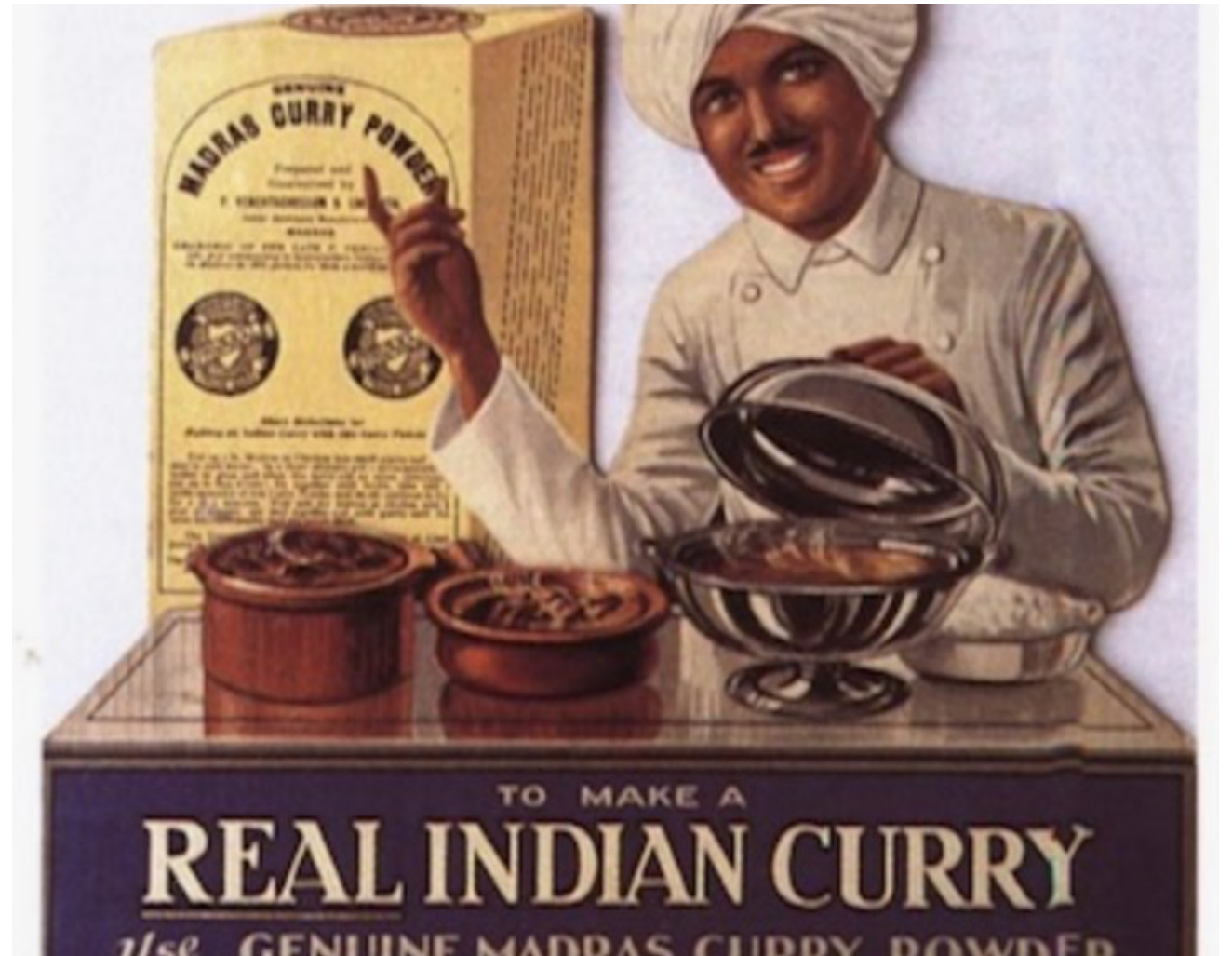


- Curry quickly expanded throughout the empire but was adapted to local conditions
- Several vectors – emigration, indentured labour, military and naval deployments including to Japan and Germany



Paradox of how globalization created national cuisines while simultaneously undermining them.

‘Liquid Modernity’



FURTHER READING

- Lizzie Collingham, *Curry: a Biography*, London, 2005
- Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of Empire: How Britain's Quest for Food Shaped the Modern World*, New York, 2017
- Marlene Epp, *Eating Like a Mennonite: Food and Community Across Borders*, Montreal & Kingston, 2023
- Colleen Taylor Sen, *Curry: a Global History*, London, 2009
- Sejal Sukhadwala, *The Philosophy of Curry*, London 2022
- Anya Von Bremzen, *National Dish: Around the World in Search of Food, History, and the Meaning of Home*, New York, 2023
- *Gastronomica*