



SPICY NATION: FROM INDIA TO





From fish head curry to Indian *rojak*, Indian food in Singapore has evolved over time, drawing influences from the various local cultures, and finding its place in the hearts of Singaporeans.

SINGAPORE



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"The discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness of man than the discovery of a star."

— Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

Indian cuisine is one of the most diverse in the world. India's rich culinary heritage is closely linked with its ancient culture, traditions and mosaic of religious beliefs. Each region in India, despite using almost the same basic spices and herbs, employs a range of cooking techniques to produce unique and tantalising dishes found nowhere else in the world.

A SPICE FOR EVERY NEED

Spices are the heart and soul of Indian cuisine; the use of spices has been an ancient tradition "recorded in Sanskrit texts 3,000 years ago."¹ The secret of Indian cuisine lies in the artful combination of spices, finding the right balance of each spice and tempering them skilfully in order to give each dish its distinct full-bodied flavour and aroma.

Spices are also believed to have medicinal properties. India's ancient Ayurvedic medicine offers a "holistic form of healing"² that lists the five basic tastes: sweet, sour, salty, pungent and bitter. Spices such as asafoetida, anise, cinnamon, cumin, turmeric, clove, fennel, cardamom, nutmeg, fenugreek seeds, mustard seeds, saffron, coriander, curry leaves, bay leaves along with chilli, ginger, onion and garlic (many of which are grown in India) are commonly used to relieve indigestion, infections, the common cold, arthritic pains, and even to keep cholesterol levels in check and protect against heart disease. Spices are so important to India that a dedicated Spices Board was established in 1986 with 32 members and its headquarters in Cochin, Kerala.³

Apart from using spices individually, *masala*, basically a mix of spices, is used to add flavour even to the simplest of dishes.⁴ *Masala* comes in various combi-

nations, from dry mixtures to wet pastes, from the more common North Indian *garam masala*—typically a mix of peppercorns, cumin, clove, cinnamon and cardamom pods—to a fiery South Indian coconut-based *masala*. These *masala* concoctions can range in taste from mild to searingly hot.

Curry, Curry Leaves and Curry Powder



Native to India and Sri Lanka, the curry leaf is an important herb in South Indian cooking. This small, fragrant and dark green leaf has a distinctive peppery flavour that adds robustness to any dish. Curry leaves are chopped or used whole and added to hot oil for tempering, and used as garnishes in salads, curries, marinades and soups to improve the taste. As observed by Wendy Hutton in Singapore Food, the Indians say there is “no substitute for these small, dark green leaves from the karuvapillai tree.” The use of curry leaves is even mentioned in early Tamil literature dating back to the 1st to 4th century CE.

Intriguingly, what we commonly understand as “curry” originates from a Tamil word for spiced sauces. More specifically, it refers to “a mixture of spices including cumin, coriander, turmeric, fennel, fenugreek, cloves, cinnamon, cardamom and often garlic, with chilli [as the] dominant spice.” Curry powder is actually something that the British created for commercial reasons and in fact never existed in India until the 18th century.

A curry could have plenty of gravy from the use of coconut milk, yoghurt or pulverised dhal, or legumes to thin out the spice mixture. Dry curries, on the other hand, tend to be more intense in flavour as most of the liquid used in their preparation has been allowed to evaporate.

NORTH INDIAN DELIGHTS

Although influenced by different religions and traditions, as well as varying regional climates, India’s culinary delights can generally be categorised into northern and southern cuisines.

The Moghuls who ruled northern India for 300 years were Muslims, and this region has many Indian restaurants that do not serve pork. The Moghuls introduced the Persian style of cooking to Indian cuisine, which is why North Indian food is milder and less restrained in its use of spices. Mughali dishes, such as creamy *korma* curries and fragrant rice dishes like *biryani* and *pulao* use exotic spices, and dried fruits and nuts.⁵ It is in also in the north, at the Himalayan foothills of Jammu and Kashmir and Dera Dun, where basmati rice, the long grain rice also called the “the king of rice”, is grown.⁶ This aromatic rice is used in the cooking of *biryani* and complements most Indian food.

Another popular dish in North India is *tandoori* chicken, traditionally cooked in a *tandoor* (clay oven). It is simply prepared with yogurt and spices yet this tantalising dish is a favourite with many diners. A popular Kashmiri dish, *roghan josh* is lamb marinated in yogurt and spices. *Mishani* is a seven-course lamb dish that is widely served in Kashmiri weddings and it is an item most sought after in wedding menus.

Punjab, also known as the breadbox of India, is famous for its assortment of leavened and unleavened bread, such as *naan*, *chapati* bread, and *tandoori rotis*. Interestingly, it was the Moghuls from Persia who introduced *naan* (“bread” in Persian) to northern India.

FIERY SOUTH INDIAN FOOD

The time-honoured food traditions of South India continue till this day and it is not unusual to see South Indians sitting cross-legged on a floor mat eating off a stainless steel plate (*thali*) or a fresh banana leaf. South Indian dishes are often spicier than their North Indian counterparts, and often include coconut (used to make chutneys and curries) and rice, which is a staple food in the south. South Indian dishes do not use as much ghee (clarified butter) and yoghurt as North Indian ones. Many spices, such as fenugreek, dried red chillies, mustard seeds

and peppercorn, used in South Indian cooking lend the cuisine its fiery reputation. Common South Indian dishes include *dosa* or *thosai* (crispy savoury pancakes), *idli* (steamed rice cakes), *sambhar* (lentil curry) and *vadai* (fritters).

INDIAN SWEETS



Whether in the north or south, sweets, most of which are highly calorific and contain lashings of sugar and ghee, are traditionally served after meals. *Payasam* (in Tamil) or *kheer* (in Hindi), made of rice or wheat vermicelli, is commonly eaten during festive occasions and weddings. The *payasam* served at Ambalappuzha Temple (see text box) in Kerala is especially famous among Hindu devotees.⁷ Other traditional Indian sweets include *gulab jamun*, *mysore pak*, *halwa* and *laddoo*. *Gulab jamun* are little balls of milk powder and plain flour deep fried and drenched in sugary syrup, and usually served at North Indian weddings. *Mysore pak*—made of ghee, gram flour and sugar—hails from Mysore, in the southern state of Karnataka. It is often referred to as a royal sweet as it was concocted in the kitchen of Mysore Palace for the king. There are several variations of *halwa* with either semolina, wheat flour, mung bean or carrot as its base while *laddoo* are bright orange ball-shaped confections offered as a *prasad* (gift) to guests at weddings and religious occasions.

THE ORIGINS OF VEGETARIANISM

The roots of vegetarianism in India can be traced to religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. Many consider “Indian cuisine ... to be the cradle of vegetarian culinary art.”⁸ Gujaratis, who are mostly vegetarian, have perfected the art of vegetarian cooking. Using the simplest ingredients, they transform the most basic dishes into mouthwatering delicacies. Typically, a Gujarati meal begins with cumin-spiked buttermilk, followed by hot fluffy *roti* (unleavened bread), accompanied by a variety of lentils, vegetables, curds and pickles.

The South Indians also offer an astonishing variety of vegetarian dishes. Both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have a “strong vegetarian bent to their cuisine.”⁹ In Kerala, during an ancient harvest festival called the Onam festival, as many as 24 vegetarian dishes are served at just one sitting. Indian cooks take great pride in creating exciting vegetarian dishes out of exotic greens like snake gourd, ridge gourd and the pod-like drumstick or *murungakai* in Tamil, as well as more prosaic leafy vegetables, lentils, dried beans of all kinds, and unripened jackfruit and plantains.

INDIAN VEGETARIAN RESTAURANTS

Multicultural Singapore is a paradise for food. Among the many local cuisines available here, Indian food is one of the favourites. The early Tamil immi-

A Legendary Dessert

According to Hindu legend, Lord Krishna transformed into an old sage one day and challenged the arrogant king of the region of Kerala to a chess game. The wager for the game was rice. Eventually, the king lost the game as well as his kingdom’s precious rice reserves. Lord Krishna revealed his true identity and told the king that instead of giving him his rice, he should instead serve *payasam* — a dessert porridge made of rice, ghee, milk and brown sugar, and garnished with raisins and cashew nuts — to pilgrims who visited the Ambalappuzha Temple in Kerala. At many Indian vegetarian restaurants today, a variation of *payasam* made of broken bits of wheat vermicelli instead of rice is served as a sweet ending to the meal.



grants opened their first Indian vegetarian eatery, Ananda Bhavan Vegetarian Restaurant, in 1924 along Selegie Road to satiate the appetites of homesick Indians. Known as the “most authentic old world restaurant,”¹⁰ the original Selegie Road outlet has since closed but there are five branches, the largest of which is located along Serangoon Road. Its signature dishes cover a wide range of traditional dishes such as *thosai*, *idli*, *chapati* (bread made from whole wheat flour) and *puri* (deep fried bread).

Komala Vilas, another vegetarian restaurant, opened in 1934, and has been proclaimed by some as the most popular vegetarian restaurant in Singapore. The restaurant owner, Mr Gunasekaran, says the reason why Komala Vilas has remained popular is because it has successfully retained its traditional flavours all these years without any compromise. His late father Mr Rajoo, whose hometown is in Thanjaur (renowned for its good food)

in Tamil Nadu, South India, was the founder of Komala Vilas. “Komala” was the name of his boss’s wife and “vilas” means home. So Komala Vilas means a home for good Indian vegetarian food.

Komala Vilas’ speciality is the *masala thosai*; so popular that even non-Indians love it. It is a crisp, savoury, thin pancake eaten with potatoes spiced with *masala*. Other accompaniments include *sambhar* (lentil curry) and coconut chutney. The restaurant hardly advertises and it has been through word of mouth that Komala Vilas has expanded to three locations and is now a household name in Singapore.

When Mr Gunasekaran noticed more and more people ordering *masala thosai*, he added more varieties. The menu has since expanded from simple *thosai* to other South Indian dishes like, *idli*, variations of *thosai* (crisp thin Indian pancake), *rava thosai*, (*thosai* made with semolina flour) pepper *thosai*, *uttappam*, (thick pancake)

(TOP AND CENTRE) The interior and exterior of Komala Vilas in 1986. The restaurant has since been renovated and has five branches. Courtesy of ISEAS Library, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore and Sharon Siddique.

vadai (a savoury snack made from dal, lentil or gram flour and deep fried), as well as North Indian meals with an assortment of chutneys. Its subsidiary, Komalas, run by Mr Gunasekaran's brother, employs a fast food concept to vegetarian food.

SINGAPOREAN INDIAN FARE

Some of the most renowned Indian restaurants in Singapore are Samy's Curry, which opened in the 1950s, Muthu's Curry in 1969 and Banana Leaf Apolo in 1974. These three restaurants are known in particular for their mouthwatering and eye-poppingly hot fish head curry. Few people are aware that fish head curry is actually a Singaporean concoction. Eating the fish head is not something common among ethnic Indians, as only those who could not afford to buy the whole fish would eat the head. On the other hand, the Chinese had long ago discovered the delectable sweetness of the flesh from the head and cheeks of a fish; the Teochews for instance eat steamed fish head with ginger and pickled vegetables. Enterprising Indian restaurateurs must have noticed this peculiar habit and decided to experiment cooking fish head with curry spices instead, leading to the birth of this fusion dish.¹¹ No one could have imagined its popularity.

The genesis of fish head curry can be traced to an Indian migrant, Mr M.J.

Gomez, who originally came from Kerala. He "began humbly with an eating shop in Mt Sophia which was, back in 1952, a relatively quiet little suburban backwater behind the Cathay cinema. The most famous dish, prepared by Gomez, was fish head curry, a culinary delight reputedly unknown in Singapore before his arrival."¹² Mr Gomez used the huge heads of *ikan merah* and grouper in a piping hot and spicy curry dish complemented by chunks of eggplant and lady's fingers, and flavoured with onions, garlic, ginger, turmeric, chilli and curry leaves. Fish head aficionados know that the tastiest part of the fish head are the fleshy pockets at the side of the head, where the meat is the sweetest and most textured.¹³

The Gomez eatery eventually closed, but with the opening of Muthu's Curry in 1969, the fish head curry craze was revived. From a small coffee shop in Klang Road, the restaurant now has three outlets at Race Course Road, Suntec City and Dempsey Road. Today, fish head curry is one of Singapore's most iconic foods. This single dish from Muthu's Curry has won numerous accolades such as "Best Local Dish" by the Singapore Tourism Board, "Best Fish Head Curry" by *Makansutra* and "Best Local Food — Fish Head Curry" by *Singapore Tatler* from 2010 to 2013.¹⁴

Nasi briyani is another favourite Indian dish in Singapore. Islamic Restaurant along North Bridge Road is

one of the oldest culinary institutions in Singapore, started by the late Mr M. Abdul Rahman in 1921. Prior to the opening of his restaurant, he had been the "head chef for the Alsagoffs" serving the renowned *briyani* to foreign guests of this prominent Arab family in Singapore. This dish eventually became the signature dish for Islamic Restaurant. Patronised by many of Singapore's leaders such as former presidents Yusoff Ishak and S.R. Nathan, Islamic Restaurant is still a favourite haunt of foreign politicians like Malaysia's Prime Minister Najib Razak.¹⁵

Another example of a hybrid Indian dish is *mee goreng*, which is yellow wheat noodles fried with chillies, potato cubes, bean sprouts, tomato ketchup and spices. It may have been adapted from Chinese fried noodles, *char kway teow*, to suit the Indian palate. The Tamil-Muslim Chulia community originally from Madras (present-day Chennai) popularised the dish, and this is why it is associated with the Indian-Muslim community in Singapore.¹⁶ Indian *rojakh* is another "fusion" food unique to Singapore (in Malaysia it is referred to as *pasembor*). Apparently, the Tamil-Muslims who came from Thakkali in Tamil Nadu were inspired by *mee siam* gravy and decided to adapt it by using mashed sweet potatoes as a thickener. This spicy and sweet gravy is served as a dipping sauce for deep-fried chunks of tofu, potatoes, tem-



The Ubiquitous Roti Prata



Roti prata is the most popular and common Indian food in Singapore. Indian migrants brought this griddle-toasted flatbread to Singapore and “by the 1920s, this dish was established throughout the Malayan peninsula.”¹⁸ It is thought to have originated from Madras where it is known as parota. Some believe that it originated from Punjab where it is called prontha or parontay. In South India and Bengal, it is called parotta, porotta or barotta, while in Sri Lanka, it is known as kothu parotta. In Mauritius and Maldives, it is called farata and in Myanmar as palata. Across the causeway in Malaysia, it is known as roti canai. While some believe “canai” refers to “Chennai”, others say “canai” is derived from the Malay word for the process of kneading and shaping the dough.¹⁹

peh, hard-boiled eggs and flour fritters. *Sup kambing*, or mutton soup, is another Indian-Muslim fusion dish that takes its cue from Chinese cuisine. Soup is almost never served in Indian households, but in this hybrid dish, chunks of mutton is slow-cooked in a robust, peppery soup and served with cubes of crusty French loaf.

Indian food is one of the world’s oldest cuisines with a long and rich tradition. With the spread of the Indian diaspora to Singapore, Indian cuisine here has evolved, picking up Southeast Asian ingredients and nuances in flavour. Authentic Indian restaurants abound in Singapore, but of more interest to culinary historians is the impact of Indian food on the local food scene and the interesting amalgamation of Indian and regional flavours that result in uniquely Singaporean dishes. In this sense, food can be seen as a physical manifestation of Singapore’s multicultural soci-

ety, where the influence of one cuisine upon another results in something quite extraordinary.¹⁷●

Roti prata is a crisp and flaky flatbread that is often eaten with a Hyderabad-style mutton rib curry cooked with lentils called dalcha. Over time, Singapore has evolved into a prata paradise with many innovative incarnations of prata available in Indian-Muslim stalls as well as restaurants. Prata shops like Thasevi Food in Jalan Kayu and The Roti Prata House in Upper Thomson among others offer numerous varieties, from egg prata and chicken floss prata to combination flavours like cheese and mushroom, cheese and pineapple, cheese and chicken and even ice cream. There is also a prata buffet available at Clay Oven restaurant in Dempsey Road. The humble roti prata is even listed at number 45 on the World’s 50 Most Delicious Foods readers’ poll compiled by CNN Go in 2011.²⁰

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