



Curry: A Tale of Cooks And Conquerors

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From Reader Review Curry: A Tale of Cooks And Conquerors for online ebook

Amanda says

Great book about the history of Indian cooking. I nevered realized that I was really eating mostly British concoctions that Indians have adopted over the years. I think I read the book in a couple of days, I enjoyed it so much.

Katie says

Lizzie Collingham needs to focus.

Aspasia says

Curry as Westerners know it is not the same curry as used in India. Collingham explains the historical significance behind India's most popular dishes along with a chapter on the history of tea. The Portuguese and British occupations of India along with the tide of history have brought curry to England and the US with many hybridizations along the way.

Shikha says

A solid three. Lizzie Collingham describes what has already been proven in other areas, such as language, religion, and traditions -- that South Asian cuisine is ever-evolving, influenced by so many who have come through and conquered the subcontinent over hundreds and hundreds of years. So many fascinating details - the relatively recent arrival of what are now ubiquitous Indian ingredients, such as tomatoes, onions, and chillies. One of the more interesting factoids - that the British successfully introduced tea into India only in the 1930s, within my grandparents' lifetime. Tea became a quintessential component of Indian culture only in the last century.

Lizzie Collingham went on a few tangents, but what bothered me more was that she sugarcoated the British Raj experience in India and the British back home in the UK a bit, and really didn't call them out as racists until the last chapter. I'm sure there is a darker story underneath all of this exchange of food, the treatment of "Hindoo" cooks, and farmers that this book didn't really delve into.

One interesting part of this book was the inclusion of recipes - new and old. I may try some of them. I'll likely skip the 800 year old recipe for roasted black rat - I'm sure I wouldn't do it justice.

Sally Anne says

So damned interesting. If you are interested in food, culture, history, and anthropology, don't miss this one. Also, INDIAN FOOD!

Joynab Rimu says

A savory book about the savory dishes of subcontinent! It was Finger licking good! :D

Pablo Roman says

This is such a lovely, well written book. The author can really tell a story that is really engaging. Her historical facts about the development of much loved Indian cuisine is peppered with really interesting asides and anecdotes. At times it feels like you're going down a rabbit's warren - but that's the beauty of it! History isn't all dates and emotionless facts particularly not history about food!

This book is truly delicious!

Arjun Ravichandran says

Despite the intuition that its quasi-offensive title was merely intended for marketing purposes, the title turns out to be fairly apt as you make your way through the book.

For starters, 'curry' (a loanword from the Tamil, which simply meant 'spicy') was never a thing for Indians, it was a British imposition on a complex and varied food culture that they had neither the capacity nor the inclination to fully assimilate, adopting the word to refer to any spicy broth. Curry then became the chief symbol for British attempts to domesticate Indian food, being the impetus for Anglo-Indian cuisine, and eventually making its way back to Britain where it enjoyed its heyday in popularity during the Victorian era. Curry also has its modern signification in British pub culture, again highlighting how far from its native shores (and how mutated it had become), Indian food had travelled.

With a single astutely chosen word, the author thus demonstrates the intermingling of two diametrically opposed cultures, brought together through colonialism and the compulsions of global trade, the misunderstandings, false appropriations and creative combinations resulting from this, as well as the continuing after effects of this potent combination - truly, a tale of "cooks and conquerors".

The author begins by noting what Naipaul himself once noted about Indian history, that it is a long and sordid account of one invader after the other, and deduces for the readers' benefit, that what we consider "Indian cuisine" today is, firstly a misnomer (a motif that the author bookends the text with, noting that the subcontinent is riven with complex but localized food traditions, and furthermore, Indian cuisine differs with the innumerable castes and communities present) and secondly, insofar as we can talk about an Indian cuisine, then most of the classic dishes, and even some of its fundamental ingredients, are not Indian at all, but foreign importations.

I was pleasantly surprised at the author's ambition of elucidating the complex evolution of Indian society and culture through the eras of invasion and imperialism and into modernity, through the prism of food. Her approach of naming the chapter after an emblematic food, and then exploring the history, politics and

transmutation of that food into its modern avatar, did justice to her ambition. (Of course I should not have been surprised, given that the author is a Cambridge-trained historian)

For example of this approach, the second chapter of the book, 'Biryani', is not simply an account of the dish and the various ways of preparing it - rather, it begins with the founder of the Mughal dynasty, Timur, who initiated an era of Indian history that combined the best of the Central Asian nomadic culture of which he had partaken of during his exile, the refined Persian culture which he felt most in tune with, and the North Indian Hindustani culture which he himself despised but which was adopted by his successors. It was this fusion that resulted in Mughal culture, and in microcosm, in Mughal cuisine (which, in the eyes of the rest of the world, is taken as emblematic of Indian cuisine as a whole), the prime example of this cuisine being biryani.

This approach is carried throughout the book ; each chapter, whilst ostensibly focusing on a foodstuff, uses this focus in order to reveal the broader panoply of social and cultural turbulence that birthed the dish.

This is a good book for fans of Indian cuisine, those who want a culinary-infused history of India from the 16th century thereabouts, and maybe even those who enjoy a light sociological analysis of food.

Othello says

Scholarly work on Indian cuisine from a historical perspective. Excerpts from 15th and 16th century accounts of European travelers are a treat to read. One may observe how written English changed across centuries, in the excerpts that the author posted verbatim.

I must say the author has done an enormous amount of research for this book. Almost every important statement is backed by a reference to the book or essay in the (chapter-wise) bibliography at the end. It's almost as if the author has tried to recreate a culinary timeline of Indian cuisine in general and curry in particular; and that's a laudable effort.

When we say "curry" we do not point to a specific dish from India. It's a very general term that indicates a style of cooking, which is not really indigenous, but affected by the waves of foreign influences in India. Portuguese, Mughal, Persian and Central Asian styles of cooking have mixed with traditional styles to mold Indian cuisine as we know it today. I came to know a lot of things like - Indian cuisine is very popular in Britain, and Japan but not in the US, and the reasons thereof. I used to think that Biryani was the idea of the nomadic Bedouins of Arabia, who needed something nutritious, easy to cook and easy to carry during their travels in the desert, but was surprised to find out that Biryani was invented in the Mughal royal court.

The chapter on Chai was highly enlightening as well.

Overall, a very good read for those who are interested in Indian cuisine and the role of curry in it.

Ken says

This was a fascinating exploration of the foods that I've come to think of as Indian, and how those foods have been influenced by worldwide trade and imperialism. The book itself is organized by chapters: Chicken Tikka Masala, Biryani, Chai, etc., and each chapter delves into a rough history of each dish and its influences. Much to my surprise, many historical recipes and contemporary recipes are included as well, in

case one wished to execute a variation of a dish in one's own kitchen.

After reading the book, I came away with a great curiosity of what British food was like in the early days of the spice trade, before it became influenced by European gastronomy and blandified, before the Imperial powers sought to maintain their Britishness and British cuisine in India. At the same time, I'm wondering what Indian food was like before the introduction of the chili pepper (I must seek out the indigenous long pepper). As a resident of the Silicon Valley, I suppose I can try out a variety of Indian restaurants, from random curry houses to, say, Udupi Palace, which is more reflective of contemporary Indian restaurant food in India.

Quite a good read, though I thought the chapter on Chai / tea was a bit shallow. It seems that a whole book could be written on this one subject alone.

Plumpernickel says

I took a week to complete Lizzie Collingham's "Curry - A tale of cooks and conquerors". This exceedingly thorough and well-researched book is about the story of "Curry" and how it evolved. I have read many books on food history but never have I read a historical book on just one dish! The book is divided into mouth-watering chapters titled Chicken Tikka Masala, Biryani, Vindaloo, Korma, Madras Curry, Curry Powder, Cold Meat cutlets, Chai, Curry and Chips and Curry travels the world.

I am very curious about Indian food because it is what I grew up eating, yet every Indian household has a different food style. I want to know how, why, what, when for every single dish. This book was an eye opener. I learnt that cashews, papaya, pineapple, guava etc. are not native to India, but were introduced by the Portuguese. I also learnt that the Portuguese have influenced Indian food in many indirect ways by way of introducing tomato, cauliflower, cashew, milk based desserts and most importantly chillies. Half the fruits we now eat in India were introduced by the Mughals who were from Turkey. South Indian cuisine is derived mostly from temple cooking (no wonder it is healthier and more Ayurvedic in nature). I learnt how the nawabs of Oudh (Awadh) were extreme bon vivant gourmets. How biryanis and pilaus came into being. I learnt that coffee was introduced to India much before tea and even during Mughal times, India had coffee houses! I learnt how India became a tea drinking nation. It was all due to the unwavering promotion of the British formed Indian tea board, the story of which I found riveting and interesting. How to make people change their food habits? Keep throwing promotions day in and day out, by way of free food!

I end my quick review with this excerpt from the book, "Although they barely changed the WAY Indians eat, the British radically altered WHAT they eat and drink". If you want to understand India and Indian cuisine, this book is a must-read.

Alex says

Lise digs it and it does look awesome.

monig says

I thought this was a good book and worth the read if you're an Indophile, but I do have some criticism.

Collingham gives us a quick and dirty history of curry, which ends up of being the history of India, the spice trade, imperialism and colonialism (particularly the British colonization of the region), as well as the immigration of Indians to Britain and the Americas. Obviously, that's much to cover in one 250+ page book ... too much to cover.

I felt like I was being whisked through a historical timeline, only allowed the bullet points.

There are some nice anecdotes, particularly early on and later on in the book, but there was no real connection. Though Collingham obviously knows her stuff, she doesn't make you feel India.

Still worth a read, though. Loved the addition of recipes!

Alicia says

This is an easy read filled with fun facts as it traces the development of Indian food. I can't think of a more fascinating cuisine than Indian, shaped by regional tastes, religious concepts of purity, and new ingredients introduced by foreigners.

Three snippet facts which interested me most in this book:

1. The idea that foods grown in the native soil imbue the strength and energy of that soil to the eater.
2. The Indian origins of Worcestershire sauce and how it was 'invented'.
3. How at the beginning of the 20th century, the vast majority of Indians were not tea drinkers and regarded it as simply an herbal remedy/medicine. I can't imagine an India without its daily and multiple cups of chai. Fascinating how the Tea Association sought to win the Indian market, the ingenious tactics they employed, and how they ultimately triumphed.

Rebecca says

Some history books do not so much alter your worldview as fill your head with a plethora of interesting trivia, some of which you will spout at your friends for a few days, and most of which will disappear in a month or two. Regrettably, I think most of the interesting factoids I've learned from this book are doomed to such a fate.

The book is a little disjointed--I often felt as if the author was on the verge of a grand unifying theory but could not quite wrap her arms around it. Instead, it stumbles from one era to the next. Far more of the book had to do with European influences than I had expected; however, the Europeans started having a strong effect on the cuisine far earlier than I'd realized, so I suppose that's fair.

Some interesting, useless factoids I have learned:

- Chili peppers are native to the Americas and were introduced to Asia by the Portuguese. It was the discovery of scotch bonnet chilis that convinced Columbus he'd found the Indies--he thought they were the source of black pepper, an entirely different plant native to India. Trinidad has adapted curries from Indian immigrants to use their native scotch bonnets instead of some of the other chili varieties used in India,

bringing the transfer full circle.

- British food used to be quite spicy--the Middle Ages featured enormous quantities of cinnamon, black pepper, and other spices, as well as sweets mixed with savories. The rise in prestige of French cooking and the pallid imitation of it led to the blandification of British cooking. Early British officers and merchants in India embraced Indian cooking--it wasn't until the rise of middle class values and of canning that they switched to preferring socially prestigious but wretched tinned British imports to native dishes. So British cooking wasn't always that wretched--social snobbery made it so, despite the best efforts of the world to help them.

- The word "factory" comes from the warehouses of British textile agents, or factors.

- Most of the "Indian" restaurateurs (perhaps as many as 90%) are actually Bangladeshi, from one specific reason, due to some peculiarities of immigration laws and labor shortages. Most of the food we're accustomed to thinking of as "Indian" is a Britishized version of Mughlai cooking. But given the incredible cross-pollination of cultures, identifying an "authentic" Indian cuisine is basically impossible. It's always been adapted and tampered with by foreigners and conquerors.

Lots of other fun facts abound. Also, quite a lot of recipes, which are helpful in charting some of the changing styles, but I doubt will result in many meals. (Some of the ingredients sound rather hard to come by outside of India, while some of the instructions or measurements, especially of older recipes, are rather archaic and difficult to understand.)

It would help a great deal if you go into the book with at least a framework of Indian history in mind. In the times and places which I was already familiar with, I had a much easier time following what was going on than those with which I was less familiar.
