

Where Chowringhee Lane meets Cumbria

Anglo-Indian cuisine is a marriage of Western recipes modified with a dash of Indian spice. Experts trace the roots of this unique cuisine



Pepper lamb chops

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A CULINARY CAULDRON
Although the sun may have set on the British Empire a long time ago, its culinary legacy in India remains as strong as ever — thanks to the everlasting popularity of Anglo-Indian cuisine; an art borne from a cross-pollination of Indian and English ingredients. Long before culinary gurus thought of “fusion food”, it was the Anglo-Indian cuisine that actually pioneered the principles of modifying Western recipes with a smattering of desi tadka.

TOO MANY COOKS
So how do chefs and food pundits define Anglo-Indian food?
“There is a lot of confusion about what exactly constitutes Anglo-Indian cuisine. It is expansive; from Western staples like revved-up roast chicken to toned-down versions of rasam and pepper water, from mulligatawny soup to East-Indian and Mangalorean curries,” says culinary expert Karen Anand.

“Anglo-Indian dishes are English ones which khansamas adapted to India, such as roasts smeared with pice and marinated in vinegar. In between grew a third grey area developed by the Anglo-Indian and East-Indian community, adopted by Goan and Mangalorean families — things like crumbed chops and patties with spiced mince, covered with a layer of mash pota-



Dak bungalow curry



Scotch eggs

to,” she avers.
Many cooks from these households later found work in Mumbai and Kolkata clubs and hotels and re-created some of these dishes as tasty, lip-smacking versions of English food. And thus began a genre that was branded as “continental”.

In Bengaluru, Bridget Kumar — the unquestionable doyenne of Anglo-Indian cuisine, whose cookbook *Anglo-Indian Cuisine: A Legacy of The Past* is a bible for Anglo-Indian food lovers — talks about the role of spices and masalas in lending zest to bland European fare.

“Soups were seasoned with cumin and red chillies, roasts were cooked in whole spices like cloves, pepper and cinnamon, rissoles and croquettes came to be flavored with turmeric and garam masala. The concept of “curry” started out as a watery concoction, with the addition of a few spices to meat and vegetables; it became the ‘food fashion’ of the time. Worcestershire sauce, mulligatawny soup, meat jal-frezi were some of the first culinary inventions of those early cooks or khansamas to cater to the new craze for Indian spice-flavoured fare,” she says.

Another interesting facet was the strong regional variations that evolved over time. Local ingredients and flavours were incorporated in the dishes while the core ingredients remained

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— CHEF ASHISH BHASIN



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“It is an extremely unusual blend of tastes that makes this cuisine so unique

— CHEF ATUL KOCHAR



unchanged no matter where the dish was prepared. “Thus coconut-based curries were the mainstay in Anglo-Indian dishes in the South, while mustard oil and freshwater

fish were popular ingredients in the Anglo-Indian recipes of Calcutta and West Bengal,” informs Lakshir Singh, Sous Chef, Saffron, Shangri La Hotel, Bengaluru.

THE ROMANCE OF THE RAJ
In the Wodehousian era, when Anglo-Indian cuisine was invented, the dishes bore humorous and colourful names that would perhaps amuse some of our contemporary chefs. Railway Lamb or Mutton Curry, The Dak Bungalow Curry, Grandma’s Country Captain Chicken, Colonel Standhurst’s Beef Curry, Devil Pork Curry, Posthole Mince and Embassy Pudding are some examples. Many of the dishes also have alliterative titles like doldol, kalkal and ding-ding. It harks back to an era where the aroma of custard powder and crumb



Mulligatawny soup

chops frying in the kitchen was an integral part of some kitchens. Although popular at clubs, Anglo-Indian cuisine is hard to find on restaurant menus. In Mumbai, I stumble across the popular ‘Railway Mutton Curry’ on Michelin-star chef Atul Kochhar’s menu at his trendy suburban restaurant NRI. The dish itself has an interesting lineage. “This dish was first introduced on the Indian railways as a less spicy version of a Bengali dish called Mangsher Jhol. During early 1900s, most long-distance trains were salon cars which were equipped with a full-fledged kitchen and pantry that served a la carte

menus to their customers. These kitchens in those days were mainly run by Bengali and South Indian cooks, who prepared spicy mutton curries for the patrons of first-class coaches. As the spiciness of this dish was not easily appreciated by the English, the cooks had to make changes in the recipe by adding either tamarind and coconut milk, or using yoghurt to finish the dish,” explains chef Rohit Nair of NRI. A stone’s throw away at The Trident BKC, executive chef Ashish Bhasin reveals that a few Anglo-Indian dishes are mainstays on his buffet menu at 022. “Patrons love classics such as Scotch eggs or Dimer Devils

“Mustard oil and freshwater fish were popular ingredients in the Anglo-Indian recipes

— LAKHBIR SINGH



“The concept of “curry” started out as a watery concoction, with the addition of a few spices

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as they are popularly called and Chingri Kabiraji (batter-fried prawns stuffed with mince).”
Whilst many food trends crumble faster than a cookie, this unusual style of cooking has stood the test of time. As Atul Kochhar sums it up, “Anglo-Indian cuisine is an inspiration because it draws influences from the British and Indian subcontinent. It is an extremely unusual blend of tastes that makes this cuisine so unique.”



Chingri (prawn) kabiraji