

THE CASE FOR CURRY POWDER

The critics are wrong. Curry powder is authentically Indian—and it deserves a place in your pantry.

BY VISHWESH BHATT

RECENTLY I SHARED A RECIPE FOR MY pumpkin and peanut soup with a friend. The recipe calls for curry powder, among other seasonings. I told my friend that, while I generally toast and blend the spices for my own curry powder, he could use a fresh, store-bought brand without compromising the finished soup. “Is curry powder an authentic Indian ingredient?” he asked. My answer is yes, of course. Plenty of scholars and culinarians agree, yet curry powder also has vocal critics in the United States.

In her 2019 article “The Subversive, Surprising History of Curry Powder,” Rohini Chaki highlights the popularity of the condiment in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and the American colonies. She says that dishes seasoned with this spice blend were especially popular in the American South. Several recipes in Mary Randolph’s popular 1824 cookbook, *The Virginia Housewife*, call for curry powder, and Randolph even includes instructions for home cooks to blend their own.

I suspect that the popularity of curry powder among white colonists gave rise to the misperception that it was a white colonial invention, a commonly held belief among its detractors.

Indians who immigrated to the United States after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 are among the loudest critics of curry powder. But I’ve come to believe that Indian Americans who dismiss curry powder as inauthentic are ignoring the much longer history of South Asians on the North American continent.

Lower-caste Indians were brought here as indentured servants as early as the settlement of the Jamestown Colony in the early 1600s. By the end of that century, the evil of slavery had become established practice in the American colonies, and Indian indentured servants were no longer needed for agricultural labor. Some former indentured servants from the Indian subcontinent found work on trade ships. Others were forcibly moved to the Caribbean colonies to work in the brutal sugarcane industry. Still others stayed on as household servants and cooks in white homes. And commercial curry powder likely has its origins in these homes. We know that serving dishes made with exotic spices, including curries, was a way for white hosts in the colonial era to show off their wealth and culture. We know that Indian servants were present in some of these houses, executing the menu requests of their female bosses.



So Indian servants likely mixed the first curry powders on this continent, but they lacked the power to capitalize on their recipes. Instead, white bosses with access to spice traders were able to profit from their servants' knowledge. A similar dynamic would play out in the coming centuries as whites appropriated and profited from the recipes and foodways of enslaved Africans.

The overall number of Indian indentured servants and their descendants remained relatively small in North America. While Indian diasporas grew and flourished in nearly every other corner of the British empire, from East Africa to Great Britain to Trinidad, it was not until the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 that a significant Indian diaspora established itself in the United States.

This post-1965 wave of South Asian immigrants came mostly from the upper castes. By and large, they had benefited from the colonial system that had ruled and subjugated the majority of the subcontinent for centuries. I see their rejection

of curry powder—and its origins in the history of indentured servitude—as a reflection of class prejudice, whether conscious or not. Acknowledging that history would be to admit that the scions of upper castes have been complicit in a system that subjugated entire nations.

Today, Patel Brothers, the largest Indian grocery store in the United States, sells bottled curry powder. It's an undeniable part of who we are and how we cook as Indian Americans. And I reject the argument that premade spice blends are, by definition, inauthentic. Back in South Asia, several such blends—garam masala, chaat masala, and more—are household staples.

It is time to give curry powder its due, alongside the earliest Indian immigrants to this country. It is time to recognize our history and to acknowledge our flaws and our prejudices. I encourage cooks from all backgrounds to reclaim curry powder as an authentically Indian gift to the culinary world. 🍛

Angie Mosier

Vishwesh Bhatt is the chef of SnackBar in Oxford, Mississippi, and the author of I Am From Here.