

Be adventurous in your cookery! The influence of Indian Subcontinental cuisines on the Australian plate and palate pre-1950

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In March 2024 Australia Post issued a set of four stamps under the heading of *The Shared Table*. The Overview accompanying the stamps states the intent of the issue:

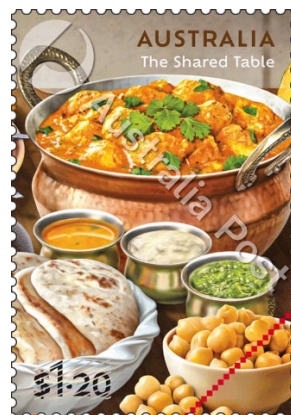
Historically, Australia is not known for its cuisine. Transportation and settlement imported culinary expectations based on British and Irish traditions ... Australia's culinary landscape began to change from the middle decades of the 20th century ...

This stamp issue seeks to counter the historical conception of a dreary Anglo diet, revising this with a more cosmopolitan take on gastronomic culture in contemporary Australia. This means signalling some of the cultural influences that have fired up and shaped our culinary expectations and habits, while also pointing to the abundant fresh produce and artisanal products that are now relatively commonplace to many of us.¹

Each of the stamps depicts ingredients from 'The cuisines that have perhaps most influenced the contemporary Australian plate and palate'. One of the influential cuisines is Indian²:

Indian influence (The Indian Sub-continent)

Staples of Indian cuisine include pearl millet, rice, whole-wheat flour, and a variety of lentils. Different meats are used, and spices such as powdered chilli pepper, black mustard seed, cardamom and coriander.



Depicted are chick peas, naan, what looks like fresh mint chutney, what looks like a yoghurt raita, what looks like rasam and what looks like a dish of butter chicken.

Taking 1950 as the middle of the century I wondered what the Indian Sub-continent cuisines had offered till then to the 'Australian plate and palate' as an option to 'a dreary Anglo diet'.³

I approached answering the question through a close look at recipes and staples/ingredients published in newspapers, magazines, and cookery books.

¹ [The Shared Table - Australia Post \(australiapostcollectables.com.au\)](https://australiapostcollectables.com.au)

² The other three were: Mediterranean, Asian, and Middle Eastern.

³ I take the Indian Sub-continent to include Ceylon/Sri Lanka and Pakistan though the latter did not exist as a separate entity until 1947.

Curries

The obvious place to start looking at the cuisines of the Indian Sub-Continent was curries.

One of the distinguishing features of 19th-century tastes was the place of curry on British tables, and, by natural extension, Australian.⁴

The earliest published recipe for curry was in Edward Abbott's 1864 cookery book *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*.⁵

Curry

Cut meats, fowls, or rabbits into small joints, and fry them brown in a pan with an onion chopped up. When half done take them out and put them into a stewpan, with two table-spoonfuls of curry stuff and a dredge of flour, and let it simmer with the juice of half a lemon, a tablespoonful of butter, and a little ketchup ... a curry in a deluge of broth, with meats floating about like so many islands, is an abomination.

Curry recipes appeared regularly from then till the mid 20th century. For example, Fish Curry (1874)⁶; Curry of Bandicoot (1880)⁷; Curried Eggs (1890)⁸; Baronet's Curry (1899)⁹; Vegetable Curry (1916)¹⁰; Curry Croquettes (1921)¹¹; Curried Rice and Tomatoes (193?)¹², and Lamb Curry (1945)¹³.

While often apples and/or dried fruits are thought to be essential ingredients in Australian curries they are not asked for in the curries above.

Ceylonese curry recipes were rarely published. The first were Rice for Curries, Snipe Curry, Eggs Curried and Fried Red Herrings to Serve with Curry all in 1895.¹⁴ Then A Ceylon Curry (1938)¹⁵.

There were also recipes for other dishes from Indian cuisine and Anglo-Indian cuisine: Dhal (1878)¹⁶, Chutney (1905)¹⁷; Mutton Pilau (1919)¹⁸; Kedgerree (1936)¹⁹; Kofta Curry (1938)

⁴ Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History. Stories and recipes from Australian Kitchens*, Sydney Living Museums, The Mint and NewSouth, 2015 p.210

⁵ 'Curry Powder' Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*, Sampson, Low, Son & Marston London 1864 p.209

⁶ 'Fish Curry' Indian Recipes, *Weekly Times* 5 September 1873 p.3

⁷ 'Curry of Bandicoot' Recipes, *The Queenslander* 18 December 1880 p.778

⁸ 'Curried Eggs' Rawson, Mrs. Lance (Mina) *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book*, William Hopkins, Rockhampton, 1890 p.40

⁹ 'Baronet's Curry', Forster Rutledge, Mrs., Compiler, *The Goulburn Cookery Book*, 1899 p.51

¹⁰ 'Vegetable Curry', *The Wingham Chronicle and Manning River Observer* 24 June 1916 p.6

¹¹ 'Curry Croquettes' Recipes, *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 23 December 1921 p.6

¹² Curried Rice and Tomatoes, Gibbs, Miss A. *Miss Gibbs' Cookery Guide*, The Central Press 193? p.61

¹³ 'Lamb Curry' Come Into the Kitchen, *The Land* 24 August 1945 p.23

¹⁴ 'Curries' Household Hints and Recipes, *Tasmanian Herald* 31 July 1895 p.3

¹⁵ 'A Ceylon Curry' The Proper Way with Curry, *Warwick Daily News* 4 April 1938 p.2

¹⁶ 'Dhal' Household Hints, *The Week* 2 February 1878 p.27

¹⁷ 'Chutney' Recipes, *Sunday Times* 28 May 1905 p.14

¹⁸ 'Mutton Pilau' Useful Receipts, *Forbes Times* 8 February 1919 p.2

¹⁹ 'Kedgerree', *News* 28 July 1936 p.8

Chuppatties²⁰(1938), Cabab Roti (1938)²¹, and Mulligatawny (1920)²². In July 1938, the *Weekly* published a recipe for 'Kofta Curry' which didn't call for apples or other fresh fruit, for dried fruit, or curry powder.²³ It did call for green chilli, green ginger, and garlic, closer to South Indian spicing. It reversed the generalising of all 'spicy dish(es) with a thick sauce or gravy' as 'curry' using the vernacular name of the dish - kofta, albeit it adds 'curry'. It is partnered with a recipe for Chuppatties (chapatis) which also is unusual, most of the recipes 1933 -1962 calling for rice to accompany and not a flatbread.²⁴ In 1938 the *Weekly* published a recipe for 'Cabab Roti' (identified as a Mohammedan Dish) which gave instructions for making roti flatbread and for cooking spice marinaded steak cubes on skewers – cababs/kebabs.²⁵

Curry Powder

It's curious that the Indian influence lists four individual spices - powdered chilli pepper, black mustard seed, cardamom and coriander - and not curry powder. Individual spices were the exception to the rule in Australian curries over these years.

For a fish curry you should not use powder, as ginger spoils the flavour.²⁶

The earliest reference to curry powder was in 1813 when J. Laurie advertised that he had for sale 'A few Cannisters of lately imported curry powder'.²⁷

Curry powders were also made in the home, from published recipes or those handed on by friends – most with assurance of authenticity.²⁸

Abbott published the first Australian recipe for it in 1864.

Curry Powder

... The following are our proportions:- Mustard seed, one ounce and a half; coriander, four ounces; turmeric, four and a quarter ounces; black pepper, two and half ounces; cayenne, one ounce and a quarter; ginger, half an ounce; cinnamon, cloves, and mace, each a quarter of an ounce.²⁹

Curry powders continued to be sold. Vencatachellum Curry Powder recommended in a recipe in 1904³⁰ was on sale in 1947.³¹

²⁰ 'Chuppatties' Four Curry Specials, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 30 July 1938 p.8

²¹ 'Cabab Roti' These Dishes Have a Foreign Flavour, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 24 December 1938 p.8

²² 'Mulligatawny' Useful Hints, *The Land* 30 January 1920 p.15

²³ In May 1938 'Kofta' was in a list of curries but no recipe was given. 'Some Real Indian Curry Recipes', *The Sun News Pictorial* 9 May 1938 p.46

²⁴ 'Chuppatties', Four Curry Specials, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 30 July 1938 p.8 The sole recipe for chapatis I found prior to this 1938 one was in 1899 - 'Chapatis' Home Recipes *Daily Telegraph* 5 August 1899 p.2. I think it is reasonable to assume that no one reading the *Weekly* in 1938 will have come across it.

²⁵ 'Cabab Roti' These Dishes Have a Foreign Flavour, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 24 December 1938 p.8

²⁶ 'Fish Curry' Indian Recipes ... p.3

²⁷ 'Curry Powder', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 4 December 1813 p.2

²⁸ Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History* p.210

²⁹ Abbot...*English and Australian Cookery Book* p.210

³⁰ 'Curried Eggs' Vegetables Cookery, *The Colac Herald* 13 May 1904 p.4

³¹ 'What's In A Name?', *The Advertiser* 14 April 1947 p.4

Spices

In 1923 the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* published 'How to Make Good Curries', a step-by-step guide to making curries from individual spices.³² To do this or make one's own curry powder one had to purchase the spices. The earliest reference I found for sale of spices was in 1821 when J. Tawell, Apothecary advertised 'cinnamon, cloves, nutmegs, allspice. pepper, ginger, English caraway and coriander seeds'.³³ Individual spices continued to be sold over the years prior to the middle of the 20th century. In 1925 Crofts Stores advertised cayenne, chillie, nutmeg, ginger, cinnamon, cloves, and caraway seeds.³⁴ In 1939 Ingles Pty Ltd advertised sale allspice, black pepper, chillies, cayenne, cinnamon, ginger, turmeric, mace, and nutmegs.³⁵ In 1947 Watkins Quality Products advertised sale of spices.³⁶

Guides to using spices were published. In 1928 *The Western Australian* published 'Food Facts. Spices'.³⁷

Spices and 'pleasant herbs' were once luxuries 'considered as suitable gifts to kings. They give flavour to, food but do not add to its nutritive value. The importance of spices and condiments when judiciously used by cooks of experience, is that the flavour of insipid food can be very much improved by their suitable addition.

In 1940 the *Herald* published 'Add spice to your cooking'³⁸.

Be adventurous in your cookery! Such a lot can be done with spices , sauces, — pickles. The most familiar recipe can be transformed by a little skill in flavoring and garnishing. Romance and mystery centre in the spice box. The very names are intriguing — cinnamon and cloves, paradise, coriander, aniseed and caraway, nutmeg, and allspice. Very few cooks can say offhand where each spice comes from.

Staples/ingredients

Chilli is undoubtedly the most recognised staple of Indian and Sri Lankan curries. In 1806, J. Harris advised the readership of the *Sydney Gazette* that he had for sale one bale of chillies.³⁹ ⁴⁰ The earliest recipe I found for using chillies was in 1867 for Relishing Cutlets or Steak that called for pickled green chillies(1867) .⁴¹ Other recipes for fresh chillies included Chilli Wine(1888)⁴²; (Baked Chillies, Chilli Toast and Chilli Beer (1927)⁴³; Chillie Chutney (1932)⁴⁴ ; Chilli Syrup (1932)⁴⁵; Pickled Chillies, Chilli

³² 'How to Make Good Curries', *Townsville Daily Bulletin* 3 November 1923 p.9

³³ 'J. Tawell, Apothecary', *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 5 May 1821 p.1

³⁴ 'Crofts Stores' *Record* 31 January 1925 p.5

³⁵ Ingles Pty Ltd. Spices etc. *Examiner* 25 March 1839 p.11

³⁶ *Kyabram Free Press and Rodney and Deakin Shire Advocate* 19 October 1945 p.9

³⁷ 'Food Facts. Spices' *The Western Australian* 17 July 1928 p.4

³⁸ 'Add spice to your cooking', *The Herald* 17 January 1940 p.13

³⁹ *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 30 November 1806 p.1

⁴⁰ I have published my research on the chilli: Van Reyk, Paul, [Chillies – A Survey of Published Recipes 1871 - 1921 - Compost](#)

⁴¹ 'Relishing Cutlets or Steak' Recipes, *The Australasian* 1867 16 November p.7

⁴² 'Chilli Wine' Wicken, H.F. *The Kingswood Cookery Book*, George Robertson and Company, Melbourne and Sydney, 1888 p.398

⁴³ 'Chilli Dishes' *Table Talk* 7 July 1927 p.57

⁴⁴ 'Chillie Chutney' *Sunday Mail* 3 January 1932 p.16

⁴⁵ 'Chilli Syrup', *Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs Gazette* 8 June 1932 p.4

Sauce and Chilli Vinegar (1932)⁴⁶. Chilli vinegar was being imported by at least 1826.⁴⁷ Abbott gave a recipe for Chili Vinegar in *The English and Australian Cookery Book*.⁴⁸ There was one recipe asking for chilli powder - Chicken Chili Con Carne (1933) .⁴⁹

Lentils had been in the colony since at least 1811 as 'dhol' (dhal).⁵⁰ It was an item in the suggested rations for Indians labourers travelling to Australia in 1837.^{51 52} The earliest recipe I found for lentils was in 1870 on how to make dhal.⁵³ In 1877 it is listed as a vegetable from which to make a salad.⁵⁴ Arguably then, lentils also came to the Australian table contemporaneously from at least two different cuisines. Other recipes for lentils prior to the 1940's included: Lentil Roast⁵⁵; Lentil Soup⁵⁶; Lentil Salad⁵⁷ Savoury Lentil Loaf⁵⁸; Celery and Lentil Puree⁵⁹.

The earliest reference to rice was in 1803 where it appears in a list of imports.⁶⁰ The earliest recipes for it are in Edward Abbott's 1864 *The English and Australian Cookery Book*: Rice (an explanation of how to cook rice and serve it with curries)⁶¹, Rice Sauce⁶², Rice Pudding⁶³, and Rice Cake.⁶⁴ Mrs. Rawson also had a recipe Rice, to boil for curry (1890)⁶⁵ and recipes for Rice Pudding⁶⁶ and Rice Cake⁶⁷. Both Rice Pudding and Rice Cakes are dishes from Anglo-Celtic cuisine. What that means is that rice came to the Australian table from at least two cuisines – Indian and Anglo-Celtic.

I could not find a recipe using pearl millet.

Restaurants

I found just these three references to an Indian restaurant.

In 1843 the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a poem which said of Dunsdon's Restaurant:

⁴⁶ 'Piquant Chilli Recipes' *Examiner* 4 April 1932 p.9

⁴⁷ 'Chilli vinegar' Robert Mather, *Colonial Times and Tasmanian Advertiser* (Hobart) 1 September 1826 p.4

⁴⁸ Abbot, *English and Australian Cookery Book* p.199.

⁴⁹ 'Chicken Chili Con Carne' Ways With Young Chickens, *Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs Gazette* 8 March 1933 p.4

⁵⁰ 'On Sale at the Warehouse of My Hayes', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 13 July 1811 p.1

⁵¹ 'Minutes of Evidence on Indian and British Immigration', *The Sydney Monitor* 9 August 1837 p.4

⁵² 'Immigration Minutes of Evidence, Indian', *Colonial Statistics, The Colonist* 17 August 1837 p.2

⁵³ 'Cooking Vegetables', *Evening Journal* 17 August 1870 p.3

⁵⁴ 'Salad', *The Queenslander* 7 July 1877 p.10

⁵⁵ 'Lentil Roast' A Recipe, *Daily Advertiser* 28 April 1941 p.3

⁵⁶ 'Lentil Soup' The Kitchen, *The Braidwood Dispatch and Mining Journal* 7 March 1915 p.3

⁵⁷ 'Lentil Salad' Recipes, *West Coast Recorder* 9 May 1935 p.7

⁵⁸ 'Savoury Lentil Loaf' Best Recipe for Week Ended May 10 1943, *Worker* 31 May 1943 p.11

⁵⁹ 'Celery and Lentil Puree' *Wartime Recipe*, 11 May 1945 p.4

⁶⁰ Ship News, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 5 March 1803 p.2

⁶¹ Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*, Sampson, Low, Son & Marston London 1864 p.15

⁶² Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*, Sampson, Low, Son & Marston London 1864 p.31

⁶³ Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*, Sampson, Low, Son & Marston London 1864 p.55

⁶⁴ Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*, Sampson, Low, Son & Marston London 1864 p.74 and 152

⁶⁵ Rawson ... *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry* p.39

⁶⁶ Rawson ... *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry* p.101

⁶⁷ Rawson ... *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry* p.78

His prime roast and boil'd, rich pies, and rare stews
Are equall'd alone by his soups and ragouts.
Fowls, ducks, turkeys, geese, are deliciously dress'd,
And his curries possess the true Indian zest;⁶⁸

In 1845 Gills Restaurant advertised the earliest instance I found of a restaurant serving Indian cuisine:

M'GILL respectfully apprises the public that he has engaged the services of an East Indian Cook, for the express purpose of preparing Mulligatawny Soup and Currie for the visitors to his Commercial Ordinary, and that these articles, so prepared, have been pronounced by old Residents in the Presidences to be the acme of perfection.⁶⁹

In January 1888, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the opening of the 'Anglo-Indian Restaurant and Private Hotel'.⁷⁰

I continue to look for further leads.

Conclusion

The influence of Indian Subcontinental cuisines on the Australian plate and palate pre-dates the middle of the 20th century. Further changes were to come in the second half the century. Contributing to this would be the publication in 1968 of Doris Ady's *Curries from the Sultan's Kitchen. Recipes from India, Pakistan, Burma & Sri Lanka*.⁷¹ Significantly Ady writes that the ingredients in her recipes are available 'under several well-known brand names, in many shops and delicatessens – also they are sold in bulk in a great many health food shops.'⁷² The search continues for the first Indian owned spice shop and more early Indian restaurants in Australia.

I acknowledge the assistance of historian Jacqui Newling with notes on the early references to 'dholl' and for generous support as always for my work.

⁶⁸ 'Impromptu', *Sydney Morning Herald* 6 June 1843 p.3

⁶⁹ 'Gill's Restaurant' *The Australian* 4 November 1845 p.4

⁷⁰ 'The Anglo-Indian Restaurant and Private Hotel, *Sydney Morning Herald* 20 January 1888 p.13

⁷¹ Ady, Doris, *Curries from the Sultan's Kitchen. Recipes from India, Pakistan, Burma & Sri Lanka*, A.A. & A. W. Reid, 1968

⁷² Ady, *Sultan's Kitchen* p.11