

Anything and Everything. Doris Ady and ‘Curries from the Sultan’s Kitchen’

Curries From The Sultan’s Kitchen¹

This book is an important milestone in the publication of cookery books in Australia and New Zealand, for it is written by a newcomer who has brought her skills and knowledge of Asian food to our countries ...

So wrote Margaret Fulton, doyen of Australian cookery, in her Introductory Note to Doris Ady’s 1968 *Curries from the Sultan’s Kitchen*. It was the first Australian cookery book to deal solely with the cuisines of South Asia – Indian, Pakistani, Burmese and Sri Lankan.

Born in Burma, Ady’s family escaped a Burma under Japanese occupation during World War 2 and lived in India. She returned to Burma in 1946 then settled in Australia in 1958. She and her husband ‘Tiger’ Ady established a spice import and retail business – the Burra Bazaar.

From chatting to the friendly customers Doris Ady was impressed with the interest shown in Asian cuisines. Australians returning from trips to Asia, having tasted the delights of spicy food first hand, were eager to recapture the experience in their own kitchens.²

With no experience in cookery writing Ady responded to this by writing her first cookbook *Curries from the Sultan’s Kitchen*. (I will call it *Sultan* from hereon)

The book was written:

... primarily for the Australian and New Zealand housewife,³ for whom I have the greatest admiration, who is game to tackle anything and taste everything, and whose adventurous spirit has raised up the standard local cuisine to international heights. She has received strangers from all over the world into her family circle, and has been quick to profit from the experience.

There is one branch of cooking, however, in which she is a little inexperienced, that of the cuisine of Southeast Asia.⁴

She gives reasons why the housewife should become experienced in this cuisine.

...we are involving ourselves more and more in Asian affairs – Australian and New Zealand women will find themselves entertaining their husband’s business friends, as well as students from Asia. They will want to know the kinds of dishes to set before a homesick traveller. Their husbands will be travelling to South East Asian capitals and coming back with a taste for exotic, foreign foods.⁵

This is the first instance for these times to suggest the social environment’s impact on foodways.

¹ Ady, Doris, *Curries from the Sultan’s Kitchen. Recipes from India, Pakistan, Burma & Sri Lanka*, A.A. & A. W. Reid, 1968

² Ady, Doris, *Curries from the Burra Bazaar*, A.A. & A. W. Reid, 1983 Inside back cover. This was Ady’s second cookery book. I deal only with her first book in this article.

³ Ady uses the term housewife through the book. I chose to leave it like that.

⁴ Ady... 1968 p.9

⁵ Ady... 1968 p.9

Situating *Sultan* in Australian cook books on South Asian to 1968.

There had been from time to time curry recipes published in newspapers and magazines. The only real precursor to Ady's book was In 1968 when the *Australian Women's Weekly* published a 16 page supplement the 'Indian Curry and Rice Book' written by Mrs. Jane Nutta Singh.⁶ Ady's scope is wider and deals with things Nutta Singh did not, like sweets and accompaniments.

Structure of the book

The body of *Sultan* is three chapters one for each cuisine. India and Pakistan form a single chapter. Each chapter begins with a description of the cuisine or dishes or an aspect of the cuisine. Then come the recipes for that cuisine. Rounding off with a section on Accompaniments for that cuisine.

She has a separate chapter on Rice, Chapatis, Parathas, and Rice Sticks.

She has a separate chapter on Sweets – and Wine.

Ingredients

In *Sultan* the cuisine chapters are preceded by a Glossary of ingredients.

'Most of the ingredients in this book,' she wrote, 'are not used in everyday cooking, therefore I feel that a brief description of each will be helpful.'⁷ The entries vary in length and content.

Cloves. Used for flavouring savoury rice dishes etc. But of course not eaten.⁸
Maldivian fish. A specialty of Sri Lankan cooking, this fish comes from the Maldivian Islands, southwest of Sri Lanka. There it is caught . cleaned and baked in burning , hot sands, till it finishes up looking like a piece of driftwood. – a primitive but effective method of preserving fish in a country where refrigeration is practically unknown. When required for use it is ground or pounded into a coarse powder used as a seasoning for Sri Lankan curries and sambols. ...⁹

She reassures the housewife that 'all the spices mentioned are available, under several well-known brand names, in many shops and delicatessens.'¹⁰ ¹¹At least this is true in the large cities. In a politically charged comment she says:

'They will be available in the smaller towns when the country housewife starts to demand the things that her city sisters enjoy. The hand that rocks the cradle is gentle but powerful.'¹²

Chillies

Ady is a fan of dry chillies as they 'provide more bulk to the curry gravies – thickening agents such as flour and cornflour are not used in South-East Asian cooking.'¹³ Many of her recipes call

⁶ Nutta Singh, Jane, 'Indian Curry and Rice Book', *The Australian Women's Weekly* 1 May 1968 p1 – 16. I am yet to find a copy of Nutta Singh's cookery book.

⁷ Ady... 1968 p.11

⁸ Ady... 1968 p.12

⁹ Sultan... p.15

¹⁰ Ady... 1968 p.10

¹¹ Appendix 1 is a list of spices and when they were first published in Australia.

¹² Ady... 1968 p.10

¹³ Ady... 1968 p.11

for dry chillies and chillie powder. For testing the hotness of fresh chillies she suggests 'it helps if one member of the family is willing to bite off the tip and give a verdict.'¹⁴ (Did I say that she has a dry sense of humour?)

Coconut, creamed, frozen

In both books she advises the housewife to use frozen coconut - 'it is available in the frozen food cabinets of the top gourmet stores, and is so convenient to use that it makes the preparation of coconut milk in any other manner as antiquated as shelling peas by hand.'¹⁵

Curry Powders

Her recipes in *Sultan* This is quite a break from most recipes for curry to date which do call for it. They all use unground individual spicing. For example the recipe for Madras Prawn Curry in *Sultan* calls for chillies, peppercorns, Indian curry leaves, turmeric, cumin, fenugreek, chilli powder, and bottled tamarind sauce.¹⁶ In *Sultan* she suggested that the housewife keep a jar of curry powder just in case. She warns about buying cheap curry powder which will probably have been adulterated with something like sago to allow a price reduction

Sri Lanka

I am going to look at *Sultan* through one cuisine, Sri Lankan. It's the cuisine of the first ten years of my life, augmented by my own cooking of Sri Lankan food, my recipes online for Sri Lankan food, and teaching it to others.

Her opening words are not an introduction to the cuisine but a description of making coconut milk which many Sri Lankan dishes use. Here also as in the Glossary she strongly recommends using frozen, creamed, or desiccated coconut.

She gives 14 recipes for curry, one for soup (Mulligatawny Sri Lankan version), five vegetable dishes, and two sambols, a dessert and two cakes.

The curries

She calls for curry powder in three of the 14 curry recipes, in two instances it is Sri Lankan curry powder she asks for. See the earlier note on curry powder. She doesn't give a recipe for Sri Lankan curry powder. The rest of the curries use whole spices. For example, Chicken Curry calls for cinnamon sticks, cardamom pods, curry leaves and whole cloves.

Six of the recipes call for chilli powder, three call for dried chillies and two call for fresh chillies or capsicum. This is in line with her earlier comments on chillie.

All call for frozen coconut cream.

Three of the curries are vegetable with one of them being for asparagus. Two, surprisingly are for liver.

Three ingredients will be unfamiliar to the housewife: coriander leaves, fenugreek, and Maldivian fish.

These are very different curries to what the housewife will be used to. Trying them out they will be following Ady's wish for them to tackle anything and taste everything.

¹⁴ Ady... 1968 p.11

¹⁵ Ady... 1968 p.12

¹⁶ Ady ... 1968 p.34

Vegetable dishes not curried

Here she introduces the housewife to mallungs, a common dish of lightly spiced shredded leafy vegetables.

Accompaniments

The main one here is chilli dense Seeni Sambol, an accompaniment very every meal. Ady says of it 'providing you like strong tasting foods, you will find yourself spreading it on toast for a quick lunch snack or on savoury biscuits as cock tail savouries.'¹⁷

Rice, Chapatis, Parathas, Rice Sticks

Sri Lanka has two 'breads' – two versions of the roti. Ady doesn't give recipes for these. She deals with rice cooking at some length giving recipes for Coconut Rice, Savoury Yellow Rice, Chicken Biriani, and Pilau Rice. These may not be known to the housewife.

Sweets

She gives a recipe for Vattalappam, the Sri Lankan dessert of milk and jaggery (palm sugar), for Sri Lankan Love Cake, and Christmas Cake.

These will be very unfamiliar to the housewife.

Discussion

Ady was at something pivotal for South Asian Cuisines. She is well advanced on Nutta Singh, but will in a matter of three years be superseded by Charmaine Solomon and first her South East Asian Cook Book¹⁸ and then eight years later by Solomon's Complete Asian Cook Book.¹⁹ But her contribution to South Asian cuisines should be acknowledged. She was the only one prepared to comment on the social forces that were calling for cuisine as found in South Asia and South East Asia. Hers was the first to deal with Sri Lankan and Burmese food to any extent. She broke decisively with prior published recipes that called for curry powder. She introduced the housewife to sweets and desserts in the cuisines. Her intent was to have the housewife 'tackle anything and taste everything'. By 1980 more than 40,000 copies across seven reprints had been sold.

¹⁷ Ady ... 1968 p.100

¹⁸ Solomon, Charmaine, *South East Asian Cookbook*, Hamlyn 1972

¹⁹ Solomon, Charmaine, *The Complete Asian Cookbook*, Paul Hamlyn 1976

Appendix 1. List of ingredients for South Asian cuisines and their first appearance in Australian records

Pepper – 1803
Cloves – 1806
Chilli – 1806
Chilli powder – at least by 1960
Tamarind – 1808
Nutmeg - 1808
Mace - 1813
Ginger – 1816
Cinnamon - 1816
Coriander - 1821
Cayenne – 1822
Saffron - 1822
Mustard seed – 1823
Garlic – 1823
Turmeric – 1824
Fenugreek - 1824
Cardamom - 1825
Cumin - 1826
Fennel – 1832
Coconut - 1837
Chillies dried - 1838
Paprika – 1882
Amchur - 1883
Desiccated coconut – 1876
Tamarind - 1887
Rosewater – 1890
Asafoetida - 1890
Fenugreek - 1894
Besan/Lentil flour – 1920
Creamed coconut - 1940
Atta flour - 1948
Curry leaves – 1964
Garam Masala - 1964