

Turmeric: An homage in notes and recipes.

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This vegetable product is obtained from the *Curcuma longa*, Linn., one of a genus of ornamental perennial rooted, annular stemmed, herbaceous plants of the ginger tribe, which are found indigenous in the open sandy grounds of Malabar and Ceylon.¹ The rhizomes or tubers from which the turmeric of commerce is obtained are of two kinds, one round, the other long or oval ... Both kinds are yellowish externally, and internally more or less of an orange yellow, deepening into reddish brown.²

The bane of my life as a South Asian cook is turmeric with its capacity to stain anything and everything. Looking at the most recent stain my thoughts turned not to how to scrub it out of existence but deflected to the story of turmeric in Australia. I've written a history of chillies in Australia³ but have been pussy-footing about writing histories of other ingredients in curry. I took the stain's refusal to budge as a sign that turmeric wanted me to historicise it.

The first reference I found was in the 'List of Plants in the Colony of New South Wales that are not Indigenous, March 20th 1803.'⁴ I take this to mean that turmeric was grown in the colony as early as this though perhaps not at commercial scale as yet. In May 1824, J. Tawell, Apothecary, Chemist and Druggist, advertised turmeric among the Horse and Cattle Medicines he had for sale.⁵ In 1825 Tawell lists turmeric among 'Dyeing Articles'.⁶ In neither case is it clear where the turmeric was coming from nor in what state – root or powder.

In December 1827, turmeric appears in the 'List of plants cultivated in the Botanic Garden Sydney that are used in commerce [and] medicine'.⁷ In 1844 John Thomas and Co advertise for sale 'green ginger and turmeric for planting'.⁸ For what purpose – medicinal, dyeing or as a spice? In 1874 'Bengal turmeric' which produces 'handsome cylindrical roots', is noted as growing 'in the vicinity of Brisbane', 'used for making curry powder, curry paste, starch, &c. and for several purposes in medicine'.⁹

I cover the first 150 year of turmeric in South Asia cuisines. I'm not interested here in turmeric as a dyeing agent nor a medicine, only with the culinary uses of turmeric in South Asian cuisines.

¹ Turmeric is in fact Indigenous to much of South and South East Asia

² 'Turmeric', *The Queenslander* 23 September 1876 p.25

³ Chillies – A Survey of Published Recipes 1871 - 1921 compost,sydney

⁴ 'Curcuma longa [Curcuma longa] Turmeric. List of Plants in the Colony of New South Wales that are not Indigenous March 20th, 1803' Caroline Simpson Collection, MHNSW

⁵ J. Tawell, Apothecary, Chemist, Druggist, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 27 May 1824

⁶ Tawell's Warehouse, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 27 October 1825 p.4

⁷ 'Curcuma longa [Curcuma longa] Turmeric. List of plants cultivated in the Botanic Garden Sydney that are used in commerce [and] medicine December 1827' Caroline Simpson Collection, MHNSW

⁸ John Thomas and Co, *Inquirer* 1 May 1844 p.2

⁹ Turmeric, *The Queenslander* 18 July 1874 p.5

Culinary uses – curry

The earliest published recipe for curry in the colony I found was in 1835. Turmeric was one of three spices in it.

Warren Hastings Receipt for Curry. Take a quarter of a pound of butter and fry the heart of a hard white cabbage and two large onions, sliced with an apple or any other acid fruit, then put them into a stewpan with a teaspoonful of good cayenne pepper, one of ground black pepper, and one of salt, a table-spoonful of turmeric, the juice of half a lemon, and a little good gravy; then put in the fowl or meat, after it is cut up and fried and let it simmer over a gentle fire for three hours.¹⁰

The earliest reference to curry powder I found was when 'A few cannisters of lately imported curry powder' were advertised for sale in 1813 its composition not noted.¹¹ In 1844 Joseph Keen, a Tasmanian, was selling his curry powder, Keen's Curry. The ingredients for this and mode of manufacturing were protected by patent but in more recent times it has been disclosed that turmeric was an ingredient if not the main ingredient.¹²

In 1850, E. Solomon and Co advertised for sale 11 bags of "Curry Stuffs" - chillies, turmeric, coriander seed and garlick (sic).¹³

In 1864, Edward Abbott published his recipe for curry powder in which turmeric was an ingredient in *The English and Australian Cookery Book*...¹⁴

To Make Curry Powder

A correspondent says, the best I have ever tasted out of India is made as follows:—Turmeric, two ounces; coriander seed, six ounces; ginger, half an ounce; cinnamon, two drachms; cayenne, six drachms; mace and cloves (mixed), one drachm; nutmeg, two drachms; and fennel seed, one and a half ounce; all of course to be powdered and thoroughly mixed.¹⁵

Turmeric was used in other culinary powders as well.

Custard Powder

Custard powder may be made by mixing, with 21bs. of sago meal, 4oz. of powdered turmeric and ½ drachm each of bitter almond powder, cassia, and mace.¹⁶

Baking Powder

All the following recipes are recommended:-No.1 Dried carbonate of soda, 8oz.; dried tartaric acid, 6oz; powdered turmeric, 1oz; carbonate of magnesia, 2oz.¹⁷

¹⁰ 'Warren Hasting's Receipt for Curry' Extracts, *The Sydney Herald* 27 August 1835 p.3

¹¹ 'Curry powder', *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 1 May 1813 p.2

¹² 'A Keen Curry History', www.mccormick.com.au

¹³ E. Solomon and Co, *Adelaide Times* 21 February 1850 p.2

¹⁴ 'Curry Powder', Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"* 1864 p.209

¹⁵ 'To Make Curry Powder', *The Australasian* 31 December 1864 p.3

¹⁶ 'Custard Powder', *Western Mail* 2 July 1887 p.19

¹⁷ 'Baking Powder' Housekeeper's Room, *Globe* 18 March 1886 p.2

Culinary uses - pickle

Other than in a curry powder, a popular use for turmeric was for pickling. This is an early published recipe for Indian Pickle.

Indian Pickle: - This is a mixed pickle which is characterised by being highly flavored with curry powder or turmeric, mustard, and garlic. The following is a favorite recipe: Take a hard white cabbage (sliced), two cauliflowers (pulled to pieces), some French beans, a stick of horseradish sliced, about two dozen small white onions, and a dozen young cucumbers. Cover these with boiling brine, and next day drain the whole on a sieve. Put into a large jar or basin, and add of curry powder turmeric, 2oz; garlic, ginger, and mustard seed, of each 1oz; capsicums, ½ oz; and sufficient hot pickling vinegar. Mix all these thoroughly and bottle.¹⁸

Culinary uses - chutneys.

Marrow Chutney

One marrow, 1 quart vinegar, 12 shallots, 8oz. Demerara sugar, 2 garlic, 1 oz. turmeric, 1 oz. ground ginger.

Cut marrow into cubes, sprinkle with salt, and leave for 12 hours. Drain off all water. Boil vinegar, shallots, sugar and garlic together for 10 minutes, then add marrow and boil for 20 minutes. Mix ginger and turmeric together into a paste, and add. Bottle off and tie down while hot.¹⁹

Culinary uses - sauces

Chilli Sauce

This is a little different, from catsup, but is equally nice. Skin twenty-four ripe tomatoes, and chop them, finely, with six onions and six green pickles. Put upon the fire and boil. And skim for half an hour. Then add five or six capfuls of strong vinegar, four tablespoonfuls of sugar, four tablespoonfuls of salt, two tablespoonfuls each of ground mustard, cinnamon, ginger, and turmeric, one tablespoonful of ground cloves, and three tablespoonfuls of white mustard seed, and the same of celery seed. Boil an hour slowly, and bottle tightly. It is delicious with bread and butter for lunch.²⁰

Other uses

Turmeric was also used in places I could never have imagined it would be. As a butter colouring agent.²¹ In 1907, turmeric as a colouring agent was at the centre of a case of fraudulent trading under the Victorian Pure Foods Act, a jar of mustard failing to list its ingredients accurately turmeric being one.²²

¹⁸ Indian Pickle Answers, *Weekly Times* 14 March 1896 p.16

¹⁹ Marrow Chutney For the Women, *West Coast Recorder* 17 January 1935 p.7

²⁰ Chilli Sauce Recipes *Evening Journal* 16 December 1882 p.1

²¹ Butter Colouring *Glen Innes Examiner and General Advertiser* 18 October 1881 p.4

²² Adulterated Mustard *The Age* 18 May 1907 p.17

There was a recipe for Non-Effervescing Lemonade as a Cool Drink for Summer:

Non-Effervescent Lemonade

Take 1oz tartaric acid, 20 drops oil of lemon, 5g turmeric, and 1lb sugar. Mix the turmeric and oil with a few ounces of the sugar, then add to the bulk. Sift through a fine sieve. One ounce of this mixture stirred into 1 pint of water will produce a delicious lemonade.²³

During the days of rationing during World War 2 this was put forward:

An Egg Substitute

This is the day of "substitutes" and "next-best-things", in cookery, for the true Australian housewife is never at a loss in any kitchencraft problem. She does not make "mountains of [molehills]" when certain ingredients are unprocurable, but finds others to take their place. Now that eggs are scarce and dear, readers may like to try an egg substitute which is not widely - . known, and has been sent by a regular contributor to "Cookery Nook." Make up the following powder and allow 1oz to each lb. flour when making cakes and puddings: Sift together 4 oz each cream of tartar, carbonate of soda (or its substitute) and rice powder (if procurable), 2 oz each tartaric acid and cornflour, and 1-4 oz turmeric. Store in airtight tin.²⁴

Culinary uses – sambals

While outside of the time frame – 1968 - I include this use to complete turmeric's role in South Asian cuisines, in sambals, the accompaniment at any curry meal. Doris Ady's *Curries From The Sultan's Kitchen* was the first cookery book published to deal comprehensively with South Asian cuisines. Ady gave recipes for a Sambal of Green Beans²⁵; Peas and Lettuce Sambal²⁶; Dhal²⁷; Cauliflower Pakoras²⁸; and Tomato Pickle²⁹.

Turmeric now

Turmeric powder continues to be a significant ingredient in commercial and home-made curry powders in South Asian cuisines. It's been used out of the context of a curry e.g. Chicken Korma³⁰, Chicken Princess³¹, Green Vegetables With Coconut (Mallung)³². It's also popular as a caffeine free latte, in opposition to regular caffeine lattes, where it is joined by other spices – cinnamon, ginger and black pepper.³³ Fresh root turmeric appears now in speciality grocers and farmers' markets used in dishes across cuisines as an alternative to using turmeric powder.

²³ Cool Drinks for Summer Non-Effervescent Lemonade, *The Brisbane Courier* 17 December 1925 p.13.

²⁴ 'An Egg Substitute', *Advocate* 10 Jan 1944 p.6

²⁵ Ady, Doris, *Curries from the Sultan's Kitchen* A.H. and A. W. Reed 1968 p.55

²⁶ Ady ... 1968 p.56

²⁷ Ady ... 1968 p.58

²⁸ Ady ... 1968 p.59

²⁹ Ady ... 1968 p.62

³⁰ Chicken Korma, *Australian Women's Weekly* 1 May 1968 p. 13

³¹ Chicken Princess *Australian Women's Weekly* 5 June 1974 p.92

³² Green Vegetables With Coconut (Mallung) *International Cuisine The Canberra Times* 30 January 1986

³³ 'Easy Turmeric Latte Recipe (Golden Milk Drink) + Instant Latte Mix' *Don't Mess With Mamma*