

How curries as flavoured our lives

Freelance food writer and blogger Ishay Govender-Ypma visited SA to get a taste of how curry permeated different cultures for her book, 'Curry'. Buhle Mbonambi finds out more

WHAT I love about the book is how you curated all these stories from "ordinary" South Africans. How did you find them?

The majority of contributors were referred to by the communities to which they belong: journalists, guides, librarians, community leaders, neighbours and religious organisations.

Naturally, I know many cooks and chefs in large parts of the country but even the more popular chefs in the book came with their community's recommendation. Luke Nair and Richard Poynton, for example, who've over the years been the illustrious caterers for so many youngsters how to cook and continue to inspire eaters and home cooks. We travelled across South Africa, knocking on doors and making countless phone calls and asking people we encountered. These people knew their towns and cities better than we could, so we trusted them. And we sat with the folks they nominated, listening to their stories and tasting the curries.

Do you think more South Africans now love cooking more than before?

I think TV shows since the late 1990s have done wonders for the cooks across the globe, including South Africans. I felt inspired to cook, leaning from Nigella Lawson and Jamie Oliver when I was at university in my late teens. Following MasterChef SA, a curious thing happened – the hunger to learn new techniques and to cook has been replaced with using food TV as a quick escape. That's why food TV is so popular and cookbook that carefully illustrate the how, which were at one stage an indispensable part of every TV cook's show, are on the decline in sales. I can't that we are cooking more (that peak came and went a few years ago) but believe we are more interested in food as a fuel, expression of culture and history and a vehicle for good health than ever before.

Did you have to work hard to convince people featured in the book to tell their curry story?

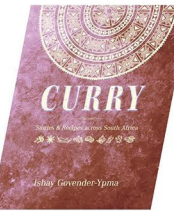
For the most part people were excited about getting involved. Naturally, I never expected everyone to be familiar with my work, and so knew I'd have to take some time to talk them through the process and what I do and how I envisioned the result. I believe in details and thorough preparation (that's the legal training, I guess), so I took a folder with me with images of others, and of some curries. They found that encouraging. Now my WhatsApp Facebook requests from contributors who've seen their stories are pretty high.

There's this feeling only people in KwaZulu-Natal know what a good curry is but your book says otherwise with contributors from every where. Was that a major part of the book to dispel myths about the Durban?

It wasn't a concern at all because I knew the answer and I knew food writers and historians who understand the dish and its roots

would know that too. I did get to see a few incredulous looks at the Durban launches, which rapidly changed to expressions of surprise followed by understanding after I explained the origins of the word, curry. By nature, we are territorial about food and about who makes the "best" version. But once you understand that curry is a British construct, based loosely on some spiced gravy-based dishes they encountered during the time of the Raj in India, which, over time, they exported to the world along with curry powder; a blend of convenience that Indian cooks never used traditionally – they always roasted and ground spices.

This makes you question how ownership can be placed on a dish that has no true owners. Chilli was brought to India by the Portuguese from the New World in the 1500s, along with tomatoes and potatoes. So-called curries in India bear no resemblance to the Durban curry. So who can call it "authentic"? Luke Nair said at the Oyster Box launch that there are so many regions in India with their own variety and style of cooking that one can't deem any one dish the best version or the right way of making "curry".



When did you fall in love with food?

I've always loved eating and sharing meals, though I didn't get much chance to do this until I left for university. It was then, saving my pennies to host a dinner every few months with friends, I realised how wonderful it is to treat people whose company you enjoy to a good meal.

Do you remember the first meal you made?
Potato curry with peas. I might have been 7.

So does a curry have to be spicy/hot for it to be delicious?

Not at all. Just like the Durban curries made by people across the province differs from home-to-home, the spice level differs. The amount of chilli doesn't determine if it's a curry or not. Neither does the cooking method of the ingredients you use.

How important is the spice mix in a curry?

This book was never about judging the best curry but rather about good curries that were accompanied by interesting stories, and so we left it up to each cook to determine. Certain profiles of curry, Durban or Cape Malay for

example, may have some stricter requirements are specific spices used. Most South Africans use a boxed curry powder mix like Rajah or Pakco and supplement this with other herbs and spices. Many are adamant about spice shops or grinding by hand. For others, it's a combination determined by circumstance, how much money is available and who's coming to dinner. We cover the definitions of the spice mixes, the types of curry and commonly used terms in the Spice section of the book.

Turmeric is having a major moment in food trends this year. Besides its curries, where else is it great to use this wonder spice?

(For the record, I'm rolling my eyes at the world's obsession with turmeric). It is excellent in curries, essential in pickled fish, and if you go by my mother's and all my aunts' collective wisdom – heat with milk, ginger and honey for a persistent cough. All of India smears it on, mixed with milk or honey as a DIY face mask, but I haven't yet.

So before anyone cooks a curry, what is the first thing they need to do/have in their cupboard?

The most prudent thing to do, as you would with all cooking, is to read the recipe, to see what the Store cupboard essentials (and every contributor will have a different set), include oil (any), aromatics such as cinnamon, cardamom, coriander and cumin seeds and masala, garam masala. Onions, fresh chillies, garlic, ginger, curry leaves and whatever protein or vegetable you are using are the next components. Of course, you need a liquid (some use none and cook with the lid on) and tomato if using, and salt. Fresh coriander is not essential, however, a lovely garnish to add before serving.

Where did you have your best curry?

My grandmother's house when I was a child. Both grandmothers. My paternal grandmother's fish curry and my maternal gran's cornish hen curry.

Do you have a favourite curry?
My mother's mutton curry with double beans.

Why do you think this book is an important addition to the books about foods in South Africa?

I think through the stories that people share we can get a good sketch of the land and the people who make it, the shared past, the sorrow, joy and hopes we share. There were many years shed when I recorded stories. I took it as a sign of faith in my, this trust people placed in sharing their life's stories. It also served as a harsh reminder of how little healing our people have experienced post-apartheid – for the most part we've simply had to "get on with it" in order to survive.

It became apparent that there very well may be room for a sequel to this book – in what form I'm not sure yet.

Curry is published by Human & Rousseau and retails at R395.



SPICE OF LIFE: Ishay Govender-Ypma criss-crossed South Africa, meeting various communities to sample their curries.