

The Wilder Shores of Gastronomy

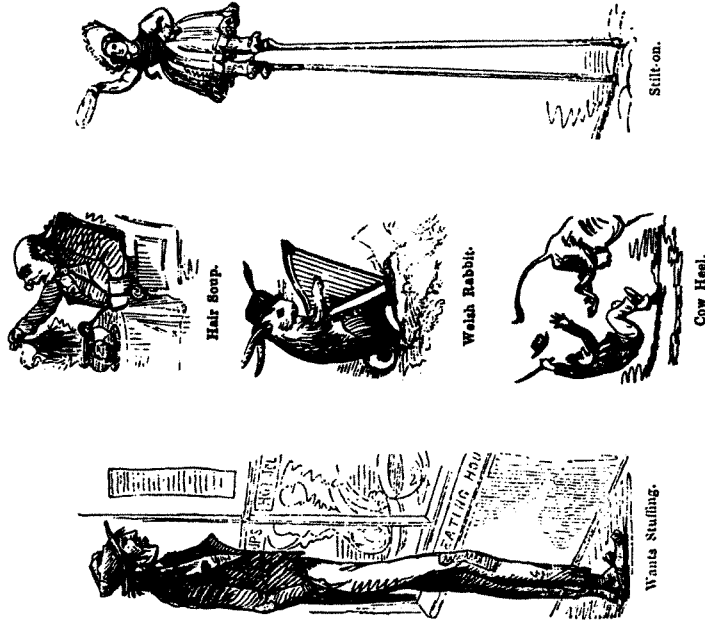
Twenty Years of the Best Food Writing
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A Cornish woman, receiving the words "Smothered in Onions" *literally*, secured a tame rabbit to a corner of her pantry, and continued covering it with the edible *roots*, till she had raised a *cairn* above its breathless corpse!

Curry Rice: Gaijin Gold

How the British Version of an Indian Dish Turned Japanese

KEIKO OHNUMA

When sending this essay the author told us that she wrote it for Professor Rachel Laudan at the University of Hawaii, and that it represented her 'first foray into food writing'. She described herself as a business journalist from San Francisco, spending a year at the University on a fellowship aimed at training journalists to cover Asia. When she heard of Rachel Laudan's pioneering course on food history, she immediately decided that she should study this, since food was essential to the proper study of Asia. She added that one of the guest speakers at the course pointed out pertinently that 'the Chinese didn't need missionaries, they disseminated their culture by opening restaurants'.

A steaming, pungent, mud-yellow sludge poured over rice on a plate: What could seem more out of place than Japan's favorite lunch fare, 'curry rice'? Chunks of carrot, potato and stew meat tumble undistinguishably from the communal vat, streaking diners' plates an appalling ochre. Japanese food historian Elizabeth Andoh recalls being sickened by such first impressions of the national cuisine: 'dreadful curry rice with a terrible smell which nauseated me' and 'funny fish things that scared me'.¹

Small wonder if the dish is rarely mentioned in their cookbooks or restaurant menus abroad. Yet, overlook it as they may, there can be no question the Japanese love their *kare raisu*. Every train station and shopping district has its hole-in-the-wall curry rice stand, and most Japanese eat the dish as often as Americans do pizza. A survey conducted in the early 1980s found curry rice among the top three home-cooked favorites year round, along with *tonkatsu* (pork cutlets) and *yasai itame* (vegetable stir-fry).² Curry is especially popular with children, who voted it the best meal served by the national school lunch program in January 1982.³

Strange as the sloppy concoction may appear to an observer schooled in the 'first principle [of Japanese food] . . . that the ingredients should retain their natural appearance and taste as much as possible',⁴ curry rice fulfills like few other foods the age-old Japanese tradition of cheap, sustaining fare to fuel the hard-working masses on quantities of rice and beer.

Warm, hearty, soothing winter gruel: What could signal the comforts of home to me more succinctly than these cubed potatoes, these hearty chunks of beef piled shamelessly thick on the plate—a friendly introduction to all the Irish, Portuguese, North African, Spanish and plain American stews I would encounter?

It's no accident if the humble *kare* of my childhood helped forge a gastronomic sympathy for Europe: Japan's curry stew originated in Britain and has remained essentially unchanged since it was brought to Japan on board British ships during the rapid opening to the West during the Meiji era (1868–1912). The earliest Japanese recipes for curry appear not long after England gained access to Japanese ports in 1868, around the time of the first cookbooks.

Coming from Britain, these feature pre-mixed curry powder, a relatively mild British concoction that was originally packaged and sold by the East India Company, whose ships plied the spice route. Among the early versions, *Seiyō Ryōri Tsū* ('The Western Cooking Expert') of 1872 described a curry stew nearly like the home-cooked *kare raisu* of today: beef or chicken heated in a roux of flour, curry powder and stock, sweetened with apple, and stewed for several hours.⁵ Add a dash of cream, and this is scarcely distinguishable from the Curried Fowl recipe that appeared in the first (1861) edition of the British cooking classic by Mrs Isabella Beeton, which called for chopped onions, apple and chicken fried in butter and cooked in a stock containing flour and curry powder; cream and lemon juice were added just before serving in a ring of rice.⁶

Imported verbatim from the British, Japanese curry has nonetheless—like all foreign foods and ideas—evolved according to cultural idiosyncrasies. Presentation is one important difference: although *kare raisu* is always served on Western plates with Western utensils (usually a spoon), '[a] significant factor . . . is the fact that the rice is not totally covered with the curry stew,' according to historian Andoh, '[a]lthough it gets mixed later.' Even fast-food curry chains keep the stew to one side of the plate. 'The pure white rice is important to the Japanese,'⁷ Andoh notes. Tradition also dictates the addition of pickled vegetables (*fukujinzuke*) on the side, without which a Japanese meal would appear 'incomplete'.⁸

Mild as the spice mix may have been, it is a wonder the lean, vegetarian Japanese would take to a taste so foreign to anything in their own cuisine. Some might credit the extraordinary atmosphere of the times for the sudden fascination with things Western, such as deep-fried pork cutlets (*tonkatsu*), potato croquettes (*korokke*) and hashed beef (*hayashi*) rice—all of which have become enduring favorites.

Japanese food historian Lucy Seligman notes that many of the *yoshoku*, or Western, dishes dating from the Meiji and Taisho (1912–26) eras go well with rice.⁹ They also happen to draw heavily on the new foods being introduced to supplement the spartan Japanese diet of rice, fish and pickles—foods such as Irish potatoes, tomatoes, onions, eggs, chicken, butter, beef and pork, many of which the Japanese would not eat willingly until the modern era.¹⁰ But of all the *yoshoku* dishes, none begs for the accompaniment of rice—or sake—with quite the urgency of *kare*.

One story from curry history illustrates this happy pairing. The backwards name 'curry rice' (over the original 'rice curry') is credited to the pioneering American schoolteacher Dr William S. Clark, one of dozens of Western technical experts hired by Sapporo Agricultural College (now Hokkaido University) in 1877–8 to help settle the wilderness of Japan's northern island. Clark reportedly served curry to encourage more rice-eating among his charges, who supplemented their diet with wheat and millet.¹¹ Since all rice had to be imported to the snowy hinterland, the story presupposes an influx of rice that the boys would be encouraged to eat.

Over the next three decades, the Japanese military latched onto *kare raisu* for much the same reasons. The strong flavors proved an ideal way to use up leftovers in a cheap, easy, substantial meal that incorporated vegetables, rice and meat on one plate. With its lingering image of luxury and progress, *yoshoku* dishes like curry rice became so trendy during the Taisho era that the army used it to draw conscripts. The convenience, price and heartiness also made the dish a favorite in rural areas at harvest time.¹²

One suspects that the same qualities made curry stews an ideal shipboard food for Japanese steamship lines traveling to Europe. It was on board such a ship in 1930 that Osaka merchant Kazuma Kobayashi tasted the dish and begged the chef for the recipe. When he opened the Hankyu Department Store in Osaka a few years later, Kobayashi put *kare raisu* on the menu, winning thousands of converts. By 1938, when he expanded the cafeteria, Hankyu could serve 45,000 customers a day. Their top choice? Curry rice, shrimp fry and cutlets.¹³

Ask Japanese today why they are so fond of curry rice—a rude, sloppy meal out of keeping with their aesthetic—and they can't pin down the attraction beyond convenience, bulk and price. 'It's the cheapest lunch, everyone likes it, it has both potatoes and meat', my mother said of the quick spread of *kare* from the cities to the countryside after World War II. 'But it's never *gochiso* [feast food for guests].'¹⁴

Indeed, the dish is more akin to Japanese 'comfort food'. The fact that it is eaten hot and in quantity places it firmly within a meal structure dating back over 350 years, in which rice and miso soup form the staple—the only foods

eaten hot and in quantity—while side dishes of fish, meat, vegetables and pickles (*okazu*) are offered sparingly, at room temperature, as relish.¹⁵ A curry recipe published in a magazine in 1905 marks the evolution from soup + rice to stew: It directed the making of a plain miso soup with bits of meat, thickened slightly with flour, flavored with curry powder and poured over rice.¹⁶ Even as late as the 1940s, home cooks who couldn't bother with chicken bones and beef broth simply cooked curry in *katsuo-bushi*, the ubiquitous Japanese fish stock that forms the base of nearly all soups, sauces and stews.¹⁷

In short, a typical warm gruel composed of rice, soup and bits of pickles and meat, at once familiar and foreign, *kare*'s cloistered image reflects Japan's schizoid sense of its own culture. On the other hand, we have the carefully cut and lovingly arranged platters of sushi, the artfully composed place settings and serene kimono-class hostess—all triggers of a minimalist aesthetic that Westerners love to photograph and Japanese love to promote. On the other, there is the daily reality of trying to eat lunch in central Tokyo with millions of other office workers, 'an exercise of considerable logistical proportions', according to one observer. 'The custom of carrying a box lunch prepared at home is now quite rare . . . The vast majority of office workers flock outside to eat meals that can be ordered and consumed quickly.'¹⁸

Dinner, the account goes on to note, is often a two-tiered affair, with mother and children eating first, and the hard-working 'salaryman' father returning late to eat alone.¹⁹ As more women go to work outside the home, few have time to devote to the painstaking preparation of traditional Japanese fare. Lucy Seligman cites a popular saying that describes the modern Japanese diet: '*Okaa-san yasuma, Haha kitoku*' ('Mother, take a rest, Mother is near death'). The acronym lists popular convenience foods, beginning with *gmuretsu* (omelettes), *kare raisu*, *aisukurimu* (ice cream) and *sandoicchi* (sandwiches).²⁰

It is this daily reality that finds salvation in curry rice.

None of the aforementioned qualities—rice, warmth or sustenance—could have made curry a household word were it not for technological advances that made the dish accessible to the masses as it brought down the price.

The flour used for thickening was the first hurdle. Japan did not have milling machinery until 1895, and significant flour production began only after 1905.²¹ In 1931, the Japanese finally succeeded in duplicating the manufacture of England's C&B (Crosse & Blackwell) curry powder.²² But the dish really owes its phenomenal postwar success to some singular food processing innovations that turned the packaging of curry rice into a ¥122 billion industry,²³ feeding the fortunes of two of the nation's largest food companies.

S&B Foods Inc and House Foods Corp—both billion-dollar companies that operate US subsidiaries—originally dealt in spices, including curry powder.²⁴ The instant curry roux they began selling after World War II is still unique to Japan.²⁵ These suet-like cakes of spices and flour suspended in animal fat put foolproof, home-cooked curry within reach of anyone who could boil water. Resembling fat chocolate bars, scored for easy separation, they embody the ultimate in bachelor cuisine—Japan's answer to bottled spaghetti sauce.

Interestingly, a comparable product introduced in 1927 had failed to generate anywhere near the same response. An enterprising Indian national exiled in Japan, Rass Bihari Boas,²⁶ began marketing a ready-made Indian-style curry lunch after his marriage to the daughter of Soma Aizo, founder of Nakamura confectioners. The company's so-called 'genuine rice curry for the masses' came packaged with rice and stew in separate pouches. Nakamura's Indian-style curry apparently failed to capture the niche that has put S&B Curry in supermarkets from Asia to the US West Coast.²⁷

In the 1970s, Japan's curry merchants reaped another industrial windfall with the advent of the retortable pouch, a preservation technology embraced in Japan largely for want of alternatives such as freezing. Similar to boil-in-bag meals, hermetically sealed retort pouches hold foods without refrigeration or the damage to texture caused by canning. Retorts have become a way of life in Japan,²⁸ where they account for some 40 percent of packaged curry sales.²⁹

Evolving along parallel but separate lines, Western foods have always been more amenable to such industrial experiments than their Japanese counterparts. They are never *gochiso*, as my mother puts it, and thus exempt from culinary laws of purity and perfection. Spaghetti, ramen, pancakes, hamburgers: all make frequent appearances on school lunch menus, company cafeterias, stand-up train station eateries, as well as in the packaged food aisle. Favored by the young, these faddish foods invite a rebellious improvisation that seems to snub its nose at the rigid formality of *kaiseki ryori*, ceremonial Japanese fare that carries all the weight of tradition.

Perhaps nowhere is this irreverent attitude more apparent than in a modern fast-food eatery like curry House Coco Ichibanya, a rapidly growing chain of 300 stores that has opened its first US outlet on Honolulu's Waikiki Beach strip. The restaurant offers curry selections including cheese, banana, frankfurters, fried chicken and squid, all drowning in a soupy brown sauce even more distant from its British ancestor than instant curry roux (though the restaurant's molded take-out trays do include a tiny well for pickles).

Customers can choose from seven levels of spiciness and varying quantities of rice, from the standard 300 grams to 600 grams ('max. for a lady'), 900 grams ('max. for a man'), to the 1300-gram challenge—free to anyone who can wolf down a veritable lake of lumpy mud and nearly three pounds of rice in 20 minutes. How very Japanese!

True to the wording, the Coco chain is popular with men, who take a certain macho pride in ordering their curry extra-spicy, even though *kare raisu* is traditionally so mild as to make Indian or Thai dishes intolerably hot to the average Japanese.

As surely as my childhood love of *kare raisu* formed a bridge of familiarity to chili con carne, chicken cacciatore, Irish beef stew and Moroccan couscous, to urban Japanese are venturing beyond Western fare in the 1990s to a new interest in curries from India and Southeast Asia—a fitting reflection of the nation's renewed ambition to regional leadership status.

Meanwhile, across the Pacific, those clever curry roux blocks—like Nissin's cup ramen before them—continue their steady advance across US supermarket shelves.

Footnotes

1. Elizabeth Andoh, interviewed in 'Gochiso-sama!', Spring 1995.
2. Kosege, 1984.
3. Kosege, 1984. The kids' top choices were curry rice (46 percent); *yakisoba*, or chow mein (35 percent); hamburger, and spaghetti with meat sauce. Another survey found children's favorite foods to be hamburger, ramen and curry rice (Higuchi, 1988).
4. De Mente, 1995.
5. Kosege, 1984.
6. Beeton, 1861.
7. Andoh, 1995.
8. Leibenstein, 1983. Also Andoh, as quoted by Seligman, addressing the Culinary Historians of Ann Arbor in February: 'The rules of the game are that a basic Japanese meal consists of rice, miso soup and pickles.' ('Gochiso-sama!', 1995).
9. Seligman, 1994.
10. Lvov, 1975. It wasn't until the Showa era (1912–89) that most Japanese would eat tomatoes, according to Lvov, although the Tokyo government encouraged their cultivation. 'Even in the Taisho Period, people held their noses to avoid the smell of tomatoes, and added sugar to them when eating them to disguise their taste' (p 244). As Seligman notes, tomatoes figure prominently in three favorites of the Meiji era—*kare raisu*, *omuraisu* and *hayashi rice*—in the form of ketchup (Seligman, 1994).
11. Kosege, 1984.
12. Seligman, 1991.
13. Seligman, 1991.
14. Ohnuma, 1995.

15. Leibenstein, 1983.
16. Kosege, 1984.
17. Ohnuma, 1995.
18. *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, 1993.
19. *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, 1993.
20. Seligman, 1994. The complete list includes omuretsu (omelettes), *kare raisu*, *aishukurimu* (ice cream), *sandoicchi* (sandwich), *yakisoba* (chow mein), *supagetti*, *medamayki* (fried egg), *hambagu*, *hamu-eggu*, *yakigyoza* (potstickers), *tosuto* (toast), *kurimu supu* (cream soup). In the 1980s, she writes: 'this multicultural hodgepodge of foods became part of the typical weekly menu in households throughout Japan.'
21. *Japan Year Book 1946-48*.
22. 'House Foods Guidebook'.
23. House Foods Corp.
24. *Japan Company Handbook*.
25. *Asahi Shimbun Weekly (Aera)*, 1992.
26. The name is taken from an article in Japanese, so the transliteration is unclear.
27. *Asahi Shimbun Weekly (Aera)*, 1992.
28. Hui, 1992. As well as the difficulties of distribution and display space, freezing may have been unacceptable in Japan because it affects food texture. Retort technology, developed by the US military in the 1950s, never gained favor in this country except for backpacking food and military rations, where retort pouches have completely replaced cans.
29. House Foods Corp. 1995. According to the company, curry roux accounted for ¥74 billion in sales in 1993, retort pouch curry for ¥48.5 billion. The same year, House Foods had 70 percent of the market.

Sources

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