

Food for Thought: Japan's Culinary Riddle --- How Curry Rice Conquered a Cuisine Otherwise Refined

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

I'm speaking of Japanese curry, or kare raisu as it is known in Japan. It's the favorite school lunch of Japanese children. Pretty much every train station in Japan has a stall that sells it. Each year pre-packaged curry rice is a \$1.2 billion business.

I have to admit that I love curry rice. But I also regard it as something of a guilty pleasure, to be eaten surreptitiously. There is something so profoundly nasty about the gloopy, flour-thickened sauce, the scraps of meat and vegetables, the thin taste. Elizabeth Andoh, an expert on Japanese food, wrote of encountering "that dreadful curry rice with a terrible smell that nauseated me." It was one of the many things about the food that terrified the food writer and now long-time resident of Japan when she moved there.

There is an explanation for a dish that seems so unlike other Japanese foods and so utterly removed from any other curry in Asia: Curry rice originates not in India, Malaysia or Thailand but in Britain. Sailors from the United Kingdom introduced it to Japan during the Meiji era, from 1868 to 1912, when the two empires began trade contacts. Keiko Ohnuma of the University of Hawaii wrote in the food journal *Petit Propos Culinaires* that the first mention of curry rice in Japan is found in "A Guide to Western Cuisine," a cookbook published in 1872.

FULL TEXT

What images do the words "Japanese food" conjure up in your mind? Delicacy? Subtlety? Do you picture meticulous bento boxes with perfect arrangements of sashimi and sushi? Golden wisps of tempura? Perfectly balanced seasonal vegetables cooked and served with precision and purity? Indeed, all these images apply to what is one of the world's most refined cuisines. So how come one of the most popular dishes in the country is an ocher-colored stew of beef, carrots and potatoes flavored with curry powder?

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The recipe calls for a tablespoon of curry powder cooked with ginger, garlic, onions and butter. Anything from beef to frog's legs could be added to the mild sauce that is indeed very similar to British curry recipes of the time, which often contained cream and flour as thickening. The curry was, and indeed still is, sweetened with apples.

The most popular curry powder -- known as kare ko -- was made by Britain's Crosse and Blackwell company, a brand still known today for its pickled onions and baked beans. Curry powder was essentially a British invention -- a more pallid adaptation of southern Indian spice mixes -- that combines coriander, cumin, pepper, fenugreek, turmeric and sometimes cinnamon, cloves and cardamom. First made in the 18th century, it varied widely in quality and was often adulterated with sago flour that rendered it even less pungent.

Takeshi Moreda, a Japanese food writer, attributes the success of kare raisu to its image as a highly nutritious food. The Japanese Navy adopted it because they saw that British sailors were bigger and more muscular than their own men. The taste was not completely unfamiliar, as cumin, coriander and turmeric were used in Japanese medications and the curry was served with rice. This was also a time when the official ideology was to adopt all things Western and it was when korokke (croquettes), hayashi raisu (rice with beef hash) and katsuretsu (cutlets) were introduced to the diet. Like Western technology, Western food would make Japan strong.

Because it contained imported curry powder, kare raisu remained something of a luxury item until 1912, when the country got its first flour mill. The dish was adopted by the military academies that flourished in the 1920s. It was a cheap, nutritious meal that could use scraps of meat and vegetables and was so popular that academies actually used it as a way to lure young men. Graduates from these schools then took it back to their families, spreading it throughout Japan. It also adapted well to the increasing industrialization of Japanese society that allowed less time for food preparation and encouraged eating outside the home. By 1938, the Hankyu Department Store in Osaka was serving lunch to 45,000 people a day and most of them were eating kare raisu.

The big breakthrough in changing curry rice from a meal eaten out to one consumed at home was the development of packaged sauces, made primarily by S&B Foods Inc. and House Food Corp. S&B is the best-known brand internationally and sells three strengths (mild, medium and hot) of its Golden Curry Sauce Mix. The main ingredients? A delicious combination of flour, lard, beef fat, salt and sugar. Also included are a large dose of MSG, some curry powder, Worcestershire sauce, tomato paste and apples.

These blocks of pre-cooked and dehydrated roux -- they resemble bars of pale chocolate -- are mixed with water to create the curry sauce. After their introduction in 1955, kare raisu became the ultimate home fast food, a dish favored by bachelors in an ever more rushed society.

By the 1970s, boil-in-the-bag technology had changed the face of curry rice, providing immediate access to a ready-prepared curry that just needed to be heated. Now 40% of curry rice consumed in the home is prepared this way. It is still regarded as highly nutritious and warming. Ms. Ohnuma believes some of its success comes from the fact that it is a foreign food that could easily be industrialized and is exempted from the often-burdensome traditions of striving for culinary purity and perfection. Its very un-Japaneseness is what makes it so attractive to the Japanese.

Now curry rice stalls often have different grades of strength of the curry sauce that they pour with abandon over everything from frankfurters to tofu to cheese. Curry rice has also been a bridge to other curries. Although Indian food has never been that popular in Japan, Thai food and some other Southeast Asian dishes have gained a wider acceptance. People have started to eat hotter food and open their palates to spicier, more complex fare.

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