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The Origins of Some of India's Most Famous Dishes

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... Since some accounts are largely dependent on oral histories, a few facts have gotten blurry as they've been passed down through the years, so bear with us regarding those that have multiple contradictory theories that even food historians can't agree upon. That said, others are wholly reliable and incontestable. One thing is for sure though, trust us when we say that some of the stories we've unearthed are going to leave you utterly satiated.

I. Biryani

The word 'biryani' originates from the Persian word 'birian' which means 'fried before cooking'. Legend has it that [Mumtaz Mahal](#) (1593-1631), in whose memory the Emperor Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal, once visited the army barracks and thought that the soldiers were under-nourished. Therefore, she asked the chef to prepare a special dish, which provided balanced nutrition. After a few rejections, she finally settled on biryani, considering it the 'complete meal' which could be eaten as a single serving.

So, while the first origins of this dish have Persian and Afghani influences, [the Mughals](#) crafted it within the vast Indian subcontinent they ruled for years, proving the potency of the frequented spice route. Also, the next time you visit the Taj, make sure you give Mumtaz a small whisper of gratitude.

Another theory suggests that a rice dish known as *Oon Soru* was found in Tamil as early as the year 2 A.D. *Oon Soru* was composed of rice, ghee, meat, turmeric, coriander, pepper, and bay leaf, and was used to feed military warriors.

Other theories give credit to "[Timor the Lame](#)" (also known as Tamburlaine, Tamerlane, Timour, Timur Lenk, and Timurlenk) for bringing biriyani down from Kazakhstan via Afghanistan to Northern India. An earthen pot full of meat, rice and spices is buried in a hot coal pit, where the dish cooks, and is eventually dug out when it has cooked and become biriyani.

II. Butter Chicken

The origins of butter chicken can be traced back to Old Delhi. It is said to have been first introduced by a man named Kundan Lal Gujral, who ran a restaurant called *Moti Mahal Delux* in Peshawar (now in Pakistan). Shortly after the Partition of India and Pakistan, the restaurant called Moti Mahal moved to Delhi, where the dish continued to be cooked by Chef Simon Mahil Chahal. The story goes something like this: after the restaurant shut down late at night, the restaurant was visited by a VIP guest who asked for 'some chicken dish' to be prepared for him. The chef looked into his supplies and discovered that he only had half of a



Tandoori chicken¹ to cook with. So, hastily, he improvised and tossed it with liberal amounts of butter, tomato, and garam masalas and prepared an unknown dish. What he didn't know was that the dish he had made was for the ruler of Mareelun – who, unsurprisingly, loved it. So, if someone tells you that butter chicken is a 'complicated' dish, remind them that it was made due to lack of ingredients, and not because of an abundance of them, as the legend goes. Today, even within Moti Mahal, there is no one consistent recipe.

After the original owner died, the Moti Mahal in Daryaganj passed out of his family's control. Another chain ran many restaurants under the name of Moti Mahal Deluxe without the involvement of Kundanlal's family. There are now over hundreds of Moti Mahals worldwide. [See also: Viestad, Andreas. "[The secrets to making two of India's most famous dishes, from the family that invented them.](#)" *The Washington Post*. 30 Jan. 2018]

III. Idli



The earliest story of Idli (steamed and savory rice-lentil batter cakes) occurs in the Kannada text 'Vaddaradhane' in 970 A.D., where it features as one of the eighteen items served to a *Brahmachari* (ascetic) who visits the home of a lady.

Yet, the three elements of modern Idli-making are missing in these references: use of rice grits, along with *urad dal* (black gram), the long fermentation of the mix, and steaming the batter to fluffiness.

To get some answers, we have to travel further back into history.

According to the Chinese chronicler Xuang Zang, there were no steaming vessels in India. It is said that the cooks who accompanied the Hindu Kings of Indonesia between 800-1200 AD, brought fermentation and steaming methods and their dish *Kedli* to South India along with them.

While this theory has been entertained by food historian K. T. Acharya, other food historians such as Lizzie Collingham, Kristen Gremillion, and Makhdoom Al-Salaqi (Syria) are skeptical, since references found at Cairo's Al-Azhar University Library suggest that Arab traders brought in 'rice balls' to India when they married and settled down in the southern belt of the country.

The Arab settlers were strict in their dietary preferences; many of them came here when Mohammed was still alive and they were neo-converts to Islam from Paganism. They insisted on *halaal* food, and Indian food was quite alien to their palate.

¹ Originally a Punjabi preparation, tandoori chicken is a soft, succulent dish made by slow-roasting chicken marinated in yoghurt and spices in a special clay or tandoor oven. Tandoor like clay ovens, and chicken bones with char marks have been excavated at the site of the Indus Valley Civilization.

To avoid dietary confusion regarding what is *halaal* or *baraam* (taboo) in food, Arab settlers began to make rice balls as these were easy to make and this was the safest food option available. After making the rice balls, they would slightly flatten them and eat with coconut paste. Sound familiar? Today, idlis are often consumed with a ground coconut chutney or condiment that has been spiced up.

IV. Sambar



We all know that Idli and the accompanying spicy vegetarian stew, Sambar, have become inseparable.

But *sambar*, as a dish, was created as recently as the 18th century! It is said that it originated in the kitchen of the Thanjavur Marathas ruler Shahuji, who had an immense liking for a dish called *amti*.

The dish was special because it had *kokum* as one of its main ingredients. However, catastrophe struck when during one particular season, the *kokum* (which was imported from the western State of Maharashtra) ran out of supply. However, some brilliant adviser in this court suggested that they try *tamarind* pulp for the sourness—an ingredients that the locals swore by.



Shahji experimented creating the dish with *tuvar dal* (pigeon peas), vegetables, spices and the tamarind pulp. He served this to his cousin, Sambhaji, who was visiting him. The court loved the dish so much that they created a whole new supply of tamarind, and named the dish *sambhar* after their guest, Sambhaji.

Another theory suggests that the Maratha ruler Shivaji's son Sambhaji, attempted to make *daal* (lentil dish) himself when his head chef was away. "He added a little tamarind to the dal that he made and the royal kitchen dared to correct him on the fact that tamarind was not used in dal," says S. Suresh, the State of Tamil Nadu convenor, at INTACH (The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage), who has lectured on Tanjore's Maratha history. "He loved his own concoction, which was then referred to as sambar," adds Suresh.

V. Paneer



Paneer, or hung cottage cheese, is a vital ingredient in most Indian dishes, *Palak Paneer* (spinach with cottage cheese) being the most famous of them all, especially in the umpteen vegetarian households that speckle the country. However, few people know that paneer, legend has it, was actually an accidental invention.

As the story goes, the Mongols were out on a long trip, riding horses that were carrying milk in *Mushkis* (bags made of raw hide). However, the heat of deserts and the rennet in the leather turned the milk into paneer. They tasted the resultant product (kudos to their spirit of adventure) and found it to be rather delicious.



It was brought to India in subsequent years by the Mughals and was mixed with various Indian spices and vegetables, which eventually became a staple as we can all attest to today. Of course, that's not all! Vedic literature refers to a substance that is interpreted by some authors, such as the renowned Indian chef Sanjeev Kapoor, as a form of paneer.

According to Arthur Berriedale Keith, a kind of cheese is "perhaps referred to" in the *Rigveda*. However, another source, Otto Schrader, believes that the *Rigveda* only mentions "a skin of sour milk, not cheese in the proper sense". Based on texts such as *Charaka Sambhita*, BN Mathur wrote that the earliest evidence of a heat-acid coagulated milk product in India can be traced to 75-300 CE, in the Kushan-Satavahana era.

According to them, paneer is indigenous to the north-western part of South Asia, and was introduced in India by Afghan and Iranian travelers. Paneer may also have a Portuguese influence, with a technique known as "breaking milk".

VI. Pav Bhaji



Pav Bhaji as a dish originated in the city of Mumbai, legend has it. Every day, numerous textile mill workers would have lunch breaks that were too short for a leisurely meal. As they had to return to rigorous physical labor immediately after, a light lunch was preferred to a heavy one. Noticing this, a local vendor created the dish using leftover ingredients from other dishes on his menu. Roti (Indian flatbread) or rice, which would be saved for other dishes, was replaced with *pav* (buns). Vegetables from other curries were amalgamated into just one spicy mixture, the 'bhaji'.

The tasty, spicy dish was an instant hit with these mill workers, and eventually found its way into restaurants only to become one of the most iconic street food dishes that recall the city of Mumbai.

VII. Samosa



The samosa is one of the most famous snacks in India today. However, its origins can be traced back to Central Asia. If legend is to be believed, various traders travelled to India using ancient trade routes from Central Asia. Since heavy food could not be carried around, they started cooking small, crisp mince-filled triangles that were easy to make at the campfire during night halts, and were also convenient to be packed into saddlebags as snacks for the next day's journey.

Eventually, these savory pastries found its way to India through spice route travelers.

In vegetarian parts of the country, locals replaced the ground meat filling with vegetables or potatoes. Soon, the samosa was a huge hit, both among the locals and kings, as one of the theories goes.

It is also said that the triangular potato/meat-filled savoury dish actually has origins in the Middle East.

Originally called 'sambosa', the Indian samosa was actually introduced to the country sometime between the 13th and 14th century by traders of the Middle East.

VIII. Vada Pav – The Real Fast Food



Vada pav, like the Pav Bhaji, can also trace its origins back to Bombay. As various food history documentations claim, this dish is credited to Ashok Vaidya, a snack vendor who ran a street stall just outside the Dadar train station. Since Dadar was an important station, it was constantly spilling over with hordes of commuters. In a moment of culinary innovation, Vaidya reportedly came up with this recipe in 1971 to satiate the hunger of the hustling crowd in desperate need of a snack that could be consumed on-the-go. In a way, it was like his own version of fast food.

He served it up with a fiery red chutney (condiment) that could include coconut, peanuts, chillies, garlic and tamarind pulp. Safe to say, the rest is history.

IX. Kebabs – A Quick Fix



Shami kebabs



Shish Kebabs



Hara Bhara Kebabs

Although Kebabs are the pride of the Middle East and also find a place in the hearts of every Indian, one theory claims that the dish itself was invented during the Medieval Era in Turkey. The story says that in order to save meat during their travels, the soldiers cut it in small pieces, grilled it on their swords and ate it with some bread. However, curiously, the term 'kebab' is said to have originated from the Arabic 'kabāb' which means to char or burn, while the Turkish version of the term is 'kebab'. Still, it's hard to trace the origins of kebabs in general, since this over-arching dish has many, many different forms, from the *shami kebab* (which reportedly comes from Pakistan) to the *shish kebab* to the typically Indian *hara bhara kebab*. The people who believe kebabs come from Turkey insist that soldiers used to grill chunks of freshly hunted animals skewered on swords on open field fires. The name was firstly discovered in a Turkish script of *Kyssa-i Yusuf* in 1377, which is the oldest known source where kebab is stated as a food item.