



Turmeric has been linked to reducing inflammation and dementia.

A HOT TOPIC

A world of flavours shines through one of Australia's most popular meals: the rich, complex and diverse dish of curry.

WORDS / SOPHIE HULL

Any time of year, there's something comforting in a big bowl of curry. It's hot, hearty and, when made right, a complex and delicious mix of flavours.

Once, the word curry referred only to Indian food but now we use it to describe flavoursome spiced dishes from all over the world: India, Africa and Asia alike. Some scientists believe our enjoyment of curry dates back 4000 years, making it the oldest continuously prepared cuisine we know of. It has, of course, changed throughout the years due to spice exportation and availability, as well as changing tastes.

Aside from a tasty meal, curry can deliver some interesting nutritional benefits (assuming you aren't cooking with dollops of cream and serving with a large pile of deep-fried pappadums). The rich yellow spice turmeric in particular has been linked to reducing inflammation, dementia and even the risk of cancer. It's also believed to be at least partly responsible for India's low incidence of Alzheimer's.

Several other commonly used curry ingredients such as ginger and garlic have antibacterial properties, which is why it's not just the chilli that gives your sinuses a workout.

Despite the double benefits of health and deliciousness, there is one common barrier to making a home-cooked (and therefore often much healthier version) of this popular dish. Sourcing exotic fresh spices and mixing them together in your mortar and pestle can be time consuming — which is where curry pastes come in. From zingy Thai green curry packed with ginger and lime through to an Indian masala mix with dozens of spices plus a chilli punch, these can offer all of the flavour without the lengthy preparation.

“MADE WITH LOVE”

With five kids, keen cooks Alice and Sam Caines know a thing or two about preparing healthy meals with a few shortcuts. But it was their travels in Southeast Asia and India before settling down that first inspired them to start making their own curry pastes at home on the Sunshine Coast in 2002.

“We fell in love with the food and the fresh flavours,” says Alice Caines. “When we got back to Australia it was lacking. There was nothing fresh — [the curry pastes] had a five-year shelf life.”

With a background in hospitality, the couple started making curry pastes for themselves. When friends and family soon began making requests, they realised they weren't the only ones who appreciated the natural, just-made pastes.

“We've grown from there but all the way through it's been about fresh, authentic ingredients and staying true to that. We don't want to cut corners or compromise. With ingredients, there are cheaper options but we don't want that. Take pureed coriander, for example. We'll pay \$2.50 a bunch rather than cut that corner — it won't be natural and won't taste right.”

As veterans of Eumundi Markets, they've found the area's connections invaluable in their quest to support local produce. “We're

lucky on the Sunshine Coast to have incredible growers. And you get to know people working in markets. Local farmers will say ‘I'll have a go [at] growing turmeric or kaffir lime.’”

Although they sell about 500 jars a week, it's just the two of them producing the pastes, from recipe creation through to labelling.

“It's very small batch,” says Alice. “We're selling what we make that week to keep that freshness. We have mechanised certain things but we still fill and label the jars by hand.”

“At the start we wrote on our jars ‘made with love’ and Sam said, ‘Is that corny?’ And I say no, because it's true.”

They sell through their website (lifegoodcurrypastes.com) as well as at the weekly market. The product ranges from a spicy and sour tom yum paste, inspired by the Thai soup, through to coriander and almond paste with Northern Indian flavours.

They are all gluten free and dairy free. Their latest flavour, butter chicken, was made “by popular demand”.

“[When people asked] at first I thought, ‘Really?’ It wasn't something we ever really ate. But in the end we thought, ‘People want this and love this.’ And there are so many bad butter chicken [pastes] out there.”

“Getting that recipe right did take a couple of years. We didn't want to sell something we wouldn't enjoy ourselves; that we weren't proud to call ours. Now it's our biggest seller and we eat it all the time, too.”

The biggest barrier with customers is helping them understand the unique nature of their product — but “once you taste the fresh one, you can't go back”.

ASLOW BURNER

When Latasha Menon's colleagues kept commenting on the enticing smell emanating from her workplace lunches, she knew she had to do something about it.

Having grown up in Malaysia with Indian parents, she acknowledged her home cooking was quite different from the usual fare in Perth at the time. So before she drove her workmates senseless with food envy, she started a small business on the side bringing in meals for them.

The feedback was so positive she quit her job and opened a restaurant. It was supposed to be a hole-in-the-wall cafe selling only the day's specials, but fate had other plans.

“I lost out on the tender for the little place I wanted,” Latasha recalls. “The planets aligned differently and the hole in the wall became a main restaurant in a foodie area.”

Although she admits she “didn't know what [she] was getting into”, the restaurant was soon a success and after a few years she also started cooking classes.

“[Then] customers started saying, ‘These recipes are great but it's not easy for us to cook; we're very busy.’ I thought, ‘Gosh, they ate the food, they wanted the recipes and now they want me to bottle it. How boring.’”

Latasha rejected the idea until one of her loyal customers pleaded for assistance when he couldn't afford a caterer for his son's birthday. “He nagged me to make curry pastes so that he could cook. I decided to give it a whirl.”

Photography: Getty Images

The pastes worked a treat and for the next few months people kept coming into the restaurant and telling Menon how much they enjoyed the paste-made curries. So, whenever she was making a paste for the business, she started making a few jars extra to sell. Bit by bit the pastes became more popular until Latasha reached her limit.

“I couldn't keep up with the pace of cooking classes, the restaurant and then cooking and bottling [pastes] every night. I had to find a simpler way.”

She approached several manufacturers who said her recipes were not commercial enough. In 2013, she finally found a Sydney company that shared her culinary views. She closed the restaurant and officially launched her product, regularly travelling to Sydney to make a fresh batch.

In Latasha's childhood home, curry was “very much the heart” of her large family. It was mostly vegetarian and always reflected what was growing in their garden with nothing going to waste, from mango pits to banana blossoms.

“The food cooked [was from] my mum and dad's culture from Kerala. It was amazing vegetarian cuisine. [Later] we realised those flavours we grew up with are very difficult to find.”

Although Latasha grew up with the exotic flavours of Asia and India, she's had to develop her own recipes: “[My family] don't write down recipes but we know the principles and techniques behind [the dishes]. We have a basic knowledge of flavours and ingredients work together.”

“Everyone has different recipes and family traditions. We would never have had tikka masala; I had to formulate from my own taste.”

Freshness is also an important part of the taste integrity for Menon. As she says, “They are all real ingredients. I would only put in tomato paste if that was how it was made in the region the paste came from.”

As an example, she points out that “a rogan

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josh from the Punjabi region uses ginger powder [rather than fresh] to make it more warming for you. That's what it calls for.”

Latasha's pastes have a two- to three-year shelf life and, once opened, last for about two months. “The oils, spices and lemon juice or acidic tomatoes — we've found they act as a preservative.”

On top of that, her pastes don't even have to be used as a predictable curry. She delights in the stories of diverse uses that pour in from her customers. “I have an Italian nonna using three of my condiments to make meatballs. She mixes veal, chicken and pork mince with the three condiments. That's what keeps me motivated to play with flavours.”

Sophie Hull has more than 10 years' experience writing and subediting for magazines around the world. Based in Sydney, she keeps an eye out for what's innovative, quirky or plain delicious.