

# The Telegraph

## Curry: why the British are moving on from Chicken Tikka Masala

*Experimentation by British Indian chefs and a desire to eat more healthily are behind growing consumer confidence when it comes to curry. Skate Cheeks Koliwada, sir?*



The modern Indian: Est. India in Southwark, south London, is moving away from traditional curry house food



By [Olivia Parker](#)

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In 1997, Chicken Tikka Masala was reportedly being ordered by 11 million diners in Britain, about 22 per cent of the population. Lodue Miah of the [Madhuban restaurant](#) in Liss, Hampshire said at the time that if he had 100 diners in a sitting, at least 80 of them would order CTM (as it's fondly known in the industry).

Updated statistics on the number of annual CTM orders do not appear to exist, but the dish's appearance on most of the country's Indian restaurant menus suggests it still has a firm place in our hearts. At least it did until 2011, when a survey by Chaat! Magazine revealed the Jalfrezi, a much hotter dish, to be Britain's [new favourite curry](#).

This, it seems, may have been our first step towards a generally more adventurous approach to Indian food.

Bobby Patel, of Yorkshire's beloved vegetarian restaurant [Prashad](#), says his customers have become "much more inquisitive" of late.

"The most popular dish in our restaurant is Special Chaat [a diced samosa topped with potato, chickpeas and yogurt with a tamarind dressing] for starter and Massala Dosa [a crêpe stuffed with potato and onion curry, served with lentil soup] as a main meal," he says. "Both the customers' palate and understanding of the cuisine has evolved and this drives innovation and creativity."

Shafiul Alom, the Bangladesh-born owner of cool new restaurant [Est. India](#) in Southwark, south London, agrees. He designed his menu to broaden understanding of the "rustic" dishes he hand-picked from around India, and will happily direct customers towards the more challenging ones: Kasundi fish tikka, for example, a tandoor-cooked dish marinated with mustard; or a south Indian Dosa, a long crispy pancake stuffed with chicken or lamb and served with Sambar, a soup-like vegetable sauce. Keema Pav, a bowl of finely minced and richly spiced lamb topped with pomegranate seeds, is another favourite. "Most of my customers are very open-minded and enjoy the culinary journey," says Alom.

***Even the most unusual dishes are finally getting airtime as Indian food fans become bolder. Shamil Thakrar, founder of [Dishoom](#), the "Bombay café in London" with branches in Shoreditch and Covent Garden, says that his Skate Cheeks Koliwada (yes, skate have cheeks) and Kala Khatta Gola Ice (blueberries, chilli, lime and salt – "truly an acquired taste") are as popular as any other dish.***

So what is behind our long overdue embrace of Indian cooking's wonderful diversity?

One reason is a greater understanding of how to make Indian food ourselves. "Travel and food programmes have enhanced customer knowledge," Alom comments.

Immensely popular TV chefs such as Madhur Jaffrey, Anjum Anand and Cyrus Todiwala have helped demystify Indian cooking and straighten out misconceptions (one of Jaffrey's most persistent assertions is that Indian food is not all "curry") through their books and TV shows.

We also want to eat more healthily, even when we order or make a traditional comfort food like curry. When served with pilau rice and plain naan bread, Chicken Tikka Masala contains a huge 1,338 calories, according to a report by Which? magazine – this may explain why we're not as keen on it as we once were.

Dipna Anand, of third generation Indian restaurant [Brilliant](#), in Middlesex, has, in shrewd acknowledgement of the off-putting guilt induced by a hefty curry, begun marking "Healthy Options" in little hearts on her menu. She also includes their calorific value, and finds this has led to a vast increase in orders for lower-calorie dishes such as tandoori: "Order quantities for the butcher have more than tripled for tandoori items since our chef started three years ago," she says. So we are ordering more widely because we are wiser and want to be healthier, but exciting progress in the taste of the food itself has to be the biggest factor in our new spice audacity.

Whether "British Indian" (originating here, such as Korma, Tikka Masala and Lamb Rogan) or "authentic", Indian food is developing in ever more imaginative ways. Enam Ali, owner of [Le Raj](#) restaurant in Epsom, Surrey and founder of the British Curry Awards, says that his chefs' adaptations of recipes have made them "better than the originals in India".

Restaurants are fusing Indian with Mediterranean, French, Scottish and Japanese food. Dishoom makes fabulous cocktails using chai syrup and spices such as coriander and cardamom. The Cardiff-based Indian chef Stephen Gomes, regarded as "the Heston of Indian food", has won many awards at his [Moksh](#) restaurant with outlandish recipes such as Chocolate and Orange Chicken Tikka, or Hyderabadi Minced Lamb and Potato with Chilli Beetroot Foam. Curry made and adapted in Britain is now so good that it's even becoming a major export. Ali relates an experience in Prague recently where he saw a Czech chef cooking curry with a Patak

sauce, a brand founded in Britain. “Curry is served in five star hotels around the world,” he says, “and they’re not using recipes from India, they’re from [Britain].”

There were a record 40,000 nominations for the top prizes in Ali’s latest British Curry Awards in November, suggesting that more and more of us want to champion the achievements of our local Indian chefs around the country.

To top it off, Indian restaurants themselves seem to be smartening up. The new Est. India is a good example: its simple elephant motif wallpaper and latticed doors are appealing without being pretentious. Dishoom takes a much more showy approach to decor with its 1930s Bollywood posters and art deco checkerboard flooring, and its fantastic open kitchen, where diners can watch chefs twirling roti breads above their heads and flinging them on spherical cooking domes, a great sight.

It has been years since British Indian restaurants were merely somewhere for “cheap spicy food to go with beer”, as Madhur Jaffrey described them on arrival in Britain in the mid-Fifties. But now they are branching out, experimenting and winning over the world in more exciting ways than ever, and we're embracing it.