

[FOOD](#)

Anglo-Indian Cuisine is More Than Colonial Food

For decades, it was dismissed as a relic of empire. Now, it's getting a second life.



Renaissance Bangalore Race Course Anglo Indian Food Festival (Courtesy of Bridget Kumar-White)

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Karen Martin was a child when she first tasted her grandmother's steamed Anglo-Indian bread pudding. She remembered her grandma carefully breaking up bread and adding milk, eggs, and a dollop of butter, before waiting another 20 minutes for the concoction to set in a water bath. But when the young Karen took a bite, she wrinkled her nose. "I simply said 'yuck'...and did not eat it," she recalled. Undeterred, her grandma tried again, this time adding brandied cherries and precious nutmeg. That second taste sparked something: curiosity about her family's culinary traditions.

After India's independence, Anglo-Indian cuisine, a somewhat controversial bridge between British colonial tastes and Indian ingredients, faded from public life. Dishes like pepper water, country captain chicken, and ball curry slipped out of the mainstream as anti-British sentiment grew and thousands of Anglo-Indians left.

But now, something unexpected is happening. In cities like Kolkata, Chennai, and Kochi, Anglo-Indian food is making a comeback — the [Empire](#) be damned.

Martin's grandmother was Anglo-Indian, a community that arose as colonial-era British officials and immigrants had kids with Indian locals, mostly Indian women. That association with the British Raj has never gone away — and often has a negative connotation. "People from my family were...too afraid to say, 'I'm Anglo-Indian,' because there were judgments passed," the Bengaluru-based Martin said. "I do know a lot of people [that say], 'You're Anglo-Indian, colonizer, you have that blood in you.'"

The community traces back to early European contact with India.

After [Portuguese explorer](#) Vasco da Gama reached Calicut in 1498, Portuguese rulers in India like Afonso de Albuquerque encouraged intermarriage with [Indian women](#). Their descendants, Luso-Indians, later blended with communities of mixed British and Indian descent in cities like Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata, forming what would later become the Anglo-Indian community. The community also [arose](#) independently after the East India Company established its first major administrative center in [Madras](#) (now Chennai) in 1639.

The Anglo-Indian community also birthed a distinctive cuisine, with British, Goan, Portuguese, and regional Indian influences — which, some argue, is the most Indian thing about it. After all, absorbing various influences from multiple cultures through time is an ever-present tendency in Indian cuisines. "Anglo-Indian cuisine is often misunderstood as 'colonial food,'

but it is actually a cuisine of resilience and identity," Amandeep Singh, executive sous chef at The Westin Mumbai Garden City, told *The Juggernaut*. "For India, [Anglo-Indian food] represents coexistence." The cuisine is known not only for its strange names, but also its distinct techniques. Think: thinner gravies, slow braising and stewing, marinated meats, and vinegar-forward flavors.

"Anglo-Indian cuisine doesn't make use of everything in the kitchen. We just bring out the strength of one spice. Like, say for a pepper dish, it will be only the pepper and the particular meat," Bridget White-Kumar, a cookbook writer from Bengaluru, told *The Juggernaut*. "Slow cooking and roasting were brought in by the British, as they had time for the meat to cook in its own juices."

One of the reasons for these less complex spice formulations is because some British women who arrived in India started telling local Indian cooks to temper Indian dishes to suit their simpler palates. Hannah Glasse's 1747 book, *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, for instance, recounts this phenomenon. "I have taken upon myself to instruct them in the best manner I am capable," she writes on making "currey" the Indian way.

"British memsahibs often guided their cooks to adapt local recipes into something closer to what they were familiar with," Vinesh Gupta, general manager of The Den in Bengaluru, told *The Juggernaut*. "Dairy ingredients like milk, butter, cream, and cheese were added to soften strong spices. Fresh herbs were sometimes used instead of heavier masalas."

"While Indian cuisine celebrated bold spices and layered flavors, British tastes leaned toward milder, more restrained seasoning," Gupta explained. "Local cooks began tailoring traditional curries and preparations to suit British preferences, softening spices, adjusting textures, and refining presentations, without entirely losing the soul of Indian cooking."

Many British East India Company officers were also craving food from home. So Indian cooks, or khansamas, reworked European dishes with local Indian ingredients and cooking traditions. Indian cooks transformed *khichdi* — a rice and lentil dish sautéed with turmeric, salt, and ghee — into kedgeree, adding smoked fish, boiled eggs, and chicken stock. Or, take the British expectation of a light, brothy soup at the start of every meal. Indian cooks served up peppery mulligatawny (derived from the Tamil "milagu tanni," or pepper water). Mulligatawny is made with lentils, curry powder, apple, and coconut milk — adding tamarind or lemon to tone down the fiery black pepper, making it feel almost like a rasam.

Other dishes came about as Indian locals improvised to meet British dining needs — such as for a quick meal while in transit. “[British officers] had to travel everywhere, and they stayed at rest houses or dak bungalows. The caretaker there also doubled up as a cook, and he had to make do with whatever ingredients were on hand,” White-Kumar, the cookbook writer, told *The Juggernaut*. This is how we get dak bungalow chicken, a sort of hastily assembled, one-pot curry with browned onions, a few whole spices, and a light gravy — often finished with boiled eggs. Dak bungalow cooks had to be extremely resourceful. “Most of the time, it was the local villagers who supplied the goat meat and chicken,” White-Kumar added.

And as travel expanded, such as the British railways [after 1853](#), so did Anglo-Indian cuisine. Spencer’s Catering Company, founded in 1863, would make food for British officers traveling by train. It was their cooks who created railway mutton curry. Instead of being intensely spiced, this dish was milder, tangier, and more stew-like. It also featured (once again) tamarind, which added a gentle sourness that cut through the meat’s richness, and pared back the spices to essentials like pepper, turmeric, and a few whole aromatics. Tamarind’s high acidity also inhibits the growth of bacteria, leading to less spoilage.

“It was an ordinary Tamil, South Indian mutton dish that they tempered down with the addition of tamarind for the dish to last a little longer on the journey,” White-Kumar explained. “It was not cooked on the train, but on these major platforms, where the train halted.”

By the second half of the 19th century, Anglo-Indian cuisine had made it, traveling from dak bungalows and train stations to the echelons of the British-Indian elite. Take the prestigious Tollygunge Club founded in Calcutta in 1895. The “British-only” social club was as well known for its lavish golf course as it was for its Anglo-Indian dishes. “Tollygunge Club was iconic, and it holds a special place in my memories of Anglo-Indian cuisine,” Gupta shared.

It was also in this era that people started putting down on paper what exactly Anglo-Indian cuisine was. The first major Anglo-Indian cookbook, [Culinary Jottings for Madras](#), was published in 1878. The author, Colonel Arthur Robert Kennedy-Herbert, an Anglo-Indian, was clearly writing for a gentrified elite. As he wrote in his introduction: “Our dinners of today would indeed astonish our Anglo-Indian forefathers...Quality has superseded quantity, and the peppery curries and spicy oriental compositions of the olden time have been gradually banished from our

dinner tables." And later, "When spice is necessary, the amount should be mentioned exactly; the cook ought never to be allowed discretionary use of it."

The interesting names behind Anglo-Indian dishes have their own stories, too, with some even making it to *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* (1886). "The Portuguese also taught us how to dry meat. And that is called 'ding ding,' because we used to string the meat and hang it to dry, and as the meat was drying, they used to dash against each other, making a ding sound," White-Kumar said with a smile. Meatball curry — spiced beef, mutton, or chicken meatballs cooked in tomato-onion gravy and finished with coconut milk — is known as "bad word curry" because older generations deemed the word "ball" to be slang. One signature sauce is called "devil chutney," "mother-in-law's tongue," or "hell flame" — because of its trademark fiery brightness. Then there's *doldol*, a halwa-like sweet made with rice flour, coconut milk, sugar, and ghee until it forms a jelly.

But by 1942, everything would change. The Quit India Movement surged as many Indians, including some of Martin's relatives, joined the mass call against British rule. While a small number of individuals expressed sympathies, the broader Anglo-Indian community was cautious and pragmatic, reflecting anxieties about their status as a minority with British roots in postcolonial India.

And so, from 1947 — when India finally gained independence from the British — onwards, many Anglo-Indians left and not just for the U.K. "Ultimately, they realized that the India that they grew up in had changed, and most of them migrated to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand," Kurush F. Dalal, a culinary anthropologist, told *The Juggernaut*. Martin's grandmother's cousins moved to the U.K., and Martin remembered "cute parcels" coming from London for her grandmother that had a fruit cake in a tin. The community was once estimated at 300,000; today, minority rights groups estimate that it's dwindled to about 150,000, living mostly in Chennai and Kolkata.

Martin admits that, to this day, Anglo-Indian cuisine, like Anglo-Indians themselves, is often misunderstood. Anglo-Indian food isn't just simplified Indian food. "These dishes reflect a tradition of resourcefulness and adaptation," she added. Part of this misunderstanding also has to do with some Anglo-Indian meals featuring ingredients that are a bit taboo. "[Anglo-Indians] would also eat different meats, including foods that are

forbidden today," Dalal, the culinary anthropologist, explained. "One of the most interesting dishes was something called a kutti pi, which was actually an unborn lamb from the womb of a goat that had been slaughtered." And what of the Anglo-Indians who stayed behind? They initially didn't care much for preserving culinary traditions that were largely oral and rarely standardized, Dalal explained. That's one reason those recipes are so precious today.

"If I had not written down the exact recipe, it would have probably been lost with her," Martin told *The Juggernaut* of her grandmother's bread pudding. "There is a fear of losing out on traditional recipes that mean everything to us. Food is the one most tangible [connection] to the community."

Others are stepping up to help preserve Anglo-Indian legacy. One initiative from the [IIT Madras Centre for Memory Studies](#), the app MemoryBytes, "features a dedicated section on cuisine, highlighting food as a form of everyday archive and a medium through which the Anglo-Indian community remembers, narrates, and sustains their histories," faculty coordinators Avishek Parui and Merin Simi Raj told *The Juggernaut*.

There's also been a commercial revival. Chennai-based [Anglo Aunty's Kitchen](#), founded by Dinesh Kanna in February 2025, crafts small-batch chutneys and condiments. Their signature devil's chutney merges the classic Anglo-Indian sweet-spicy profile with some fun surprises. "Our signature devil's chutney is made using raisins and chili and is a sweet, spicy hot sauce," Kanna told *The Juggernaut*.

In Bengaluru, 1882 Alfresco at DoubleTree by Hilton, which also started in 2025, has a dedicated menu for Anglo-Indian dishes, including railway mutton curry, mulligatawny soup, kedgeree, pepper chicken, ball curry, and bread pudding. In Kochi, [Brunton Boatyard](#) is working with local families to revive Anglo-Indian dishes. "Many of these dishes survive only in personal memory or handwritten notes," Saiju Thomas, general manager at Brunton Boatyard, told *The Juggernaut*. The team documents these recipes carefully, trains their kitchen in their techniques, and adapts them for their diners. One of the most beloved dishes at Brunton Boatyard is their "first-class railway mutton curry." The recipe uses bone-in cuts of mutton shanks, instead of boneless pieces, to add more flavor. They slow-cook the meat for five hours and serve it with a rice pilaf, sautéed spinach, corn masala, and kulcha buns.

Similarly, when Taj Hotels added the [Nadesar Palace in Varanasi](#) — which the [British East India Company](#) built around the 18th century — to its portfolio, Anup Gupta, executive chef at Taj Lakefront Bhopal, strongly felt that the food should reflect the palace's history. "I spent time speaking with the royal khansamas, who shared stories and cooking methods that had been passed down through generations," he told *The Juggernaut*.

Food is one of the Anglo-Indian community's last tangible links to its past. But how do we acknowledge colonial-era cuisine without glorifying the British Empire that brought it?

For Martin and others, you can't really separate the cuisine from its fraught colonial origins. But it still has meaning. At the end of the day, the food also reflected the creation of new families and British-Indian traditions. "It's food that was eaten with the families, wherever that was," Martin said.

Much like Anglo-Indian bread pudding, the cuisine reflects not just English roots, but that very Indian tendency to lean into jugaad, or improvisation. Whether it was Indian cooks who innovated or British memsahibs who came up with strange instructions, the result was a unique marriage of flavors and techniques. Instead of hard-to-find vanilla, many families turned to freshly grated nutmeg and raisins. And, without ovens, they steamed the bread on the stovetop, producing a softer, more delicate texture.

"Today, whenever I make bread pudding, it brings back those memories of my grandmother's kitchen," Martin reflected. The taste isn't just of bread, milk, and eggs, but of nostalgia, heritage, and how history gets passed down from one generation to the next.

[Bindu Gopal Rao](#) is a food writer based in Bengaluru.

Country captain chicken, courtesy of Bridget White-Kumar

This recipe originated in India during the British Raj as a simple spatchcock poultry or game dish. It was a mild stew cooked with browned cuts of chicken (mostly a young capon or castrated rooster), sliced onions, and curry powder. Many other ingredients were added later to make it more palatable or spicy.

Ingredients

- 1 chicken cut into medium-sized pieces
- 3 large onions, sliced finely
- 2 teaspoons chili powder
- ¼ teaspoon turmeric powder
- 2 tablespoons oil

- Salt to taste
- 1 teaspoon garlic and ginger paste
- 2 small sticks of cinnamon
- 4 cloves
- 1 teaspoon crushed garlic
- 6-8 whole peppercorns
- 2 dry red chilies, broken into bits

Method

- Heat oil in a pan and fry half the quantity of the onions till golden brown. Remove from the pan and keep aside.
- In the same oil, add the rest of the onions, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, red chili, and peppercorns lightly.
- Add the chicken, mix in the garlic and ginger paste, and sauté for about 5 minutes on medium heat.
- Add the chili powder, turmeric powder, and salt. Mix well and stir-fry for a few minutes.
- Add ½ cup of water or stock and cook until the chicken is tender and the gravy is thick.
- Add the onions that were fried earlier and mix gently.

Anglo-Indian cuisine spice checklist

- Black pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, and clove, all native to India
- Red chilli, introduced by the Portuguese, is now central to regional heat profiles
- Fresh seafood prepared in both traditional Kerala and colonial-style gravies
- Vinegar-based marinades, especially in vindaloo preparations
- Slow-braising and roasting techniques reflecting European culinary methods adapted to Indian kitchens
- House-made breads inspired by colonial-era dining customs