

# Splice: Gendered narratives of spices as healing

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the uses of spice as a method of healing in selected dishes within a Durban Indian foodscape. Beyond its culinary potential (taste, flavour, seasoning), the article motivates spice as having particular utilities and meanings that have bearing upon social, cultural and gender issues pertinent to food preparation as well as consumption which ultimately influences health and well-being. Methodologically it engages conceptual insights from the critical literature on food, including its gendered parameters, and frames a description of a few pertinent dishes drawn from five interviews in a larger project on food focused on its materiality and visceral dimensions.

**Keywords:** spice; healing; health; gender; women

## Introduction

This article presents a snapshot of a larger project (see <https://criticalfoodstudies.org.za/>)Footnote<sup>1</sup> aligned to thinking critically about food in relation to *how* food makes cultural sense as a corporeal (and gendered) experience, namely viscerally, through taste, appetites, desires, embodiment and identities. We highlight not simply the functionality of food, but rather the potency of some ingredients in their combinations that give rise to recipes handed down to new generations over time. Either directly or circuitously the latter aspects have direct bearing on the contextual meanings of gustatory “taste”, symbolic or imaginative representations of “good food”, “cooking” and cuisine in subject-formation, as well as with the materiality of food and rituals associated with food in a particular ethnoscape. While the space for all of these issues is too broad to do full justice to (and while they resonate and shape the insights in this article) they nevertheless trigger, some delimitations to what we present here which we make clear in this section. This research contributes to emerging knowledge focused on “healing foods” and how South African women (particularly those of Indian descent) are using more cultural “healing foods” to help boost their family’s immune system to fight off illnesses.

In this argument we are dedicated to what is anthropologically and sociologically referred to as the materiality of food. As Steele and Zinn (2019, p. 1) indicate, the materiality of food directs us to actual food and its symbolic meanings and its broader circulation within a political economy (Mintz 1985; Watson & Caldwell 2004). While “taste”, symbolic or imaginative representations of “good food”, “cooking” and cuisine in subject-formation have a rich body of knowledge that tell us stories about our relation to food and what counts as ‘good food’, this article maps our relationship to healing foods from the perspective of a particular ethnoscape, namely within the Indian diaspora of Durban, and shaped by a few descriptive aspects of recipes.

We do not propagate normative insights to suggest that these are representative food choices of the people we represent, but rather *a* choice during particular social (and cultural) moments that speak to grounded experience of social context and particular moments of illness, ill health

and disease. In several ways, our framing of this article resonates well with a subfield of anthropology aligned to food and its relation to medicine, of which an extensive scholarly field exists (see for example, Buell & Anderson 2000; Chen 2009; 2019; 2020; Chen & Volding 2000; Farquhar 1994). Chen, for example, expresses a particular saliency about the cross-cultural dimensions of food and its fertile heritage, knowledge drawn through a variety of texts that shape current practices:

In many parts of the world, foods and medicines are deeply intertwined whether as personal approaches to eating, social formations of food sharing, or as text based prescriptions for wellbeing. Their convergence as medicinal foods, healing recipes, herbal remedies, or nutritional knowledge may be passed on through shared memories, intergenerational stories, or codified through medicinal texts (2020, p. 821).

As Chen (2020, p. 820) indicates “writing about food and medicine in the current context of the SARS Co 2/COVID19 global pandemic – and its continued unfolding in the present – draws attention to how foods and medicine, especially their intersections, give shape to longstanding worlds of knowledge, dietary therapy, and cultural practices.” More apt, is Chen’s (2020, p. 821) statement which resonates both in terms of its contextual and conceptual relevance with some of our assembled ideas here, namely

whether through embodiments of dietary knowledge and practice, historical recipes, or generational eating, the critical work of food and medicine especially their assemblages with memory lay the foundation for bringing potential futures into view especially in current moments of transformation and pivot.

Aligned to this idea, we construct brief storied narratives shaped by the people who have generously shared ideas, recipes and techniques.

We frame our argument in relation to the domestication of food by turning to a conceptual level to the materiality of food “stuff”, what Steele and Zinn (2019, p. 1) describe as “central to people’s daily experiences, as it is to social reproduction, and their sense and expression of identity”. To be more specific, food “stuff” represents what we would describe as commodity histories of which, for example, food ingredients (see DeWitt 2020; Mintz 1985; Willard 2001) are examples that represent foodways that signal food practices, “including what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, and who is at the table” (Lawrance & De la Peña 2012, p. 2). For our purposes we turn to spice (as an ingredient and template) in cooking processes and its healing prospects that draw on indigenous, inherited (particularly memory) and gendered knowledge, combined with its vital connection to biology, nature, nurture and central to food preparation and consumption, delicious flavours.

Shaped by conceptual insights drawn from a multi- and transdisciplinary field of concepts and ideas, but predominantly the perspective of a gendered anthropology of food (Coleman 2011; Crowther 2018; Geertz, 1973; Klein & Watson 2019; Kleinman 1981) as well as its sociology (Carolan 2022; McIntosh 1996; Murcott 2019; Poulain 2017), we structure our argument in the following ways. We begin firstly by motivating the title of this paper. Secondly we turn to the gendered culture of food (in its association to the meaning of spice more broadly) aligned in part to the materiality and particular embodied effects they accrue when combined with other ingredients to fulfil particular healing functions. Thirdly we provide a brief note on methodology and fourthly, we bring the latter to bear on the central component of this discussion, five dishes drawn from people interviewedFootnote<sup>2</sup> as well as a description of

some recipes where spice (and its combinations) produce flavours that have material effects on the body. We thereafter turn to some tentative conclusions.

### **Spice is more than ‘food stuff’**

We focus on spice as a humble yet important ingredient that takes on new meanings when combined with other ingredients, flavours, aromas, tools and techniques in the development of recipes. Spices are dried seeds, fruits, roots, bark or flowers of a plant or herb used in small quantities for flavour, colour or as a preservative. Moreover, for people of the world, spices stimulate appetite and create visual appeals to food. Globalisation has made spices easily available, and is increasing their popularity (Czarra 2009). In addition to making food taste good, culinary spices have been used as food preservatives and for their health-enhancing properties for centuries (Sachan et al. 2018). Spices are functional foods; but also demonstrate beneficial effects on certain targeted functions in the body beyond basic nutritional requirements (Colbin 1986; Etkin 2006; Srinivasan 2014; Van Wyk 2019).

As mentioned earlier, spices have their origin in both plants and herbs and are used in most cultures and are highly valued for their nourishing and transformative properties (see for example, Hsu & Harris 2010; Schultes, Hofman & Rätsch 2001, as well as their pharmacological evidence and insights (Etkin 2006Footnote<sup>3</sup>; Kuete 2017). Aligned to their transformative properties, spices have been known for healing effects (Aggarwal 2011; Dobbins 2012; Orey 2021), as well as in the ancient practice of Ayurveda (Menon 2019), where the latter references “knowledge of life” where the “body (is) not just an assembly of cells, tissues and organs” but rather viewed as “a silent flow of intelligence created and controlled by bubbling impulses” (Jaisinghani 2022, p. 18). More specifically, in the alignment of food with energy motivated by Jaisinghani (p. 22): “energy is the life force of food from its inception as a fertile seed, which receives energy from the soil and the environment, to the final stage of sowing and reaping.”

In other words, spices are not simply herbs and ingredients known for their culinary possibilities as potent parcels of flavours and seasonings that augment aromatics to improve the taste of dishes (De La Torre Torres et al. 2015; Lakshmi 2016). Rather, they are in fact also shaped by ideas, senses, practices, archaeology (Bellwood 2019), trade routes (Corn 1999; Keay 2007), taste and demand (Freedman 2008), culture (Hildebrand 2017), ethnic-specific histories (Banerji 2007), global histories (Nabhan 2014; Schivelbusch 1992), histories of colonisation (Sheriff 1987), and deep symbolism (Turner 2005). All of these attributes further contour and inform larger narratives that have gendered implications such as those who usually mobilise it, and those who transform it into digestible foods, context-bound, event-oriented food, who are usually women who often also act as nurturers and caregivers. If spice is about the aromatic skeins of the history of food and the anthropocene, then it is also about its alliterative prospect, namely ‘splice’, its entanglement and conjoinment within human relationships, life (and living) as opposed to death and dying, and its attendant meanings: gender, cuisine, medicine, sex, magic, distaste, palate, body and spirit, for example.

This article reports on emerging research into “healing foods” especially in the time of COVID-19 (but not exclusively) and how South Africans (particularly those of Indian descent who emanate from Durban) and women in particular who deploy cultural “healing foods” (with spices as central ingredients) to help boost their families’ immune system to fight off illnesses and disease. The article provides a description of the recipe (not the detailed method) via brief ethnographic insights into what could be described as healing foods (mainly contingent on

spice ingredients) to tell brief stories about the healing properties of food (and gender) beyond their culinary uses. The study adopted qualitative research methods (see section titled methodology) to gauge a deeper sense of peoples' perceptions, beliefs and experiences with relevant spices and recipes.

### **The gendered culture of foodscapes**

Historically, food preparation and household cooking have been assigned to women, and cooking has been linked to female gender roles and identity which is widely documented (Counihan 1999; DeVault 1991; Kerr & Charles 1988; Inness 2001; Nickols & Kay 2015).

According to Holm et al. (2015) meals are a cornerstone of social life and a central part of caregiving and the building of relations in households. Food preparation and cooking are routine tasks in ordinary daily household work, and the preparation of hot meals has been highlighted as an especially significant example of such work. Historically, this work has been assigned to women and several studies highlight cooking and female gender roles and identity (Holm et al. 2015; Charles & Kerr 1988; Murcott 1982). Holm et al. (2015) suggest that cooking is a task that is closely linked to what historically has been seen as female identity. Food cooked in private households is marked by the logic of the gift, which involves an ethic of care – an orientation “where one is relating and responding to another’s needs” (Fürst 1997, p. 444) and where production is geared towards the structuring of social and emotional relations (Marte 2007). The main evening meal is especially important in this respect as it is often the only meal of the day that brings household members together. It has been shown how women’s preparation of cooked dinners for their families is seen as a normal and important female duty, which confirms gender roles and expectations in households (Holm et al. 2015; Murcott 1982). This could imply that cooking through the use of spices (as an example) for healing one’s family is a specific task that women tend to keep to themselves and pass this cultural tradition on to the next generation.

Cultural belief systems that are set in traditions are practices that are inherent in the daily life activities of many groups of people and regulate the order of life and the life of that group, noting that this does not imply a generalisation, but rather the differentiation of experiences within groups. Traditions passed down from ancestors as cultural heritage, including food preparation, ethnomedicine and beliefs that are passed down from one generation to the next, emanate mostly through women (Jansen 1993; Meyers 2001; Srinivas 2006). Traditions contain various matters relating to aspects of life and community life of their owners, such as value systems, traditional knowledge, history, law, customs, religious medicine, astrology, various art products, and local wisdom. Local wisdom is a local cultural value that has been applied wisely to regulate the social order and social life of the community. Local wisdom that can be used to improve welfare includes hard work, mutual cooperation, gender management, creativity and cultural preservation, and environmental care (Hasnidar et al. 2021; Sibarani 2018). The traditions that live and develop in a specific region are influenced by local culture and have their own local wisdom, especially when one looks at food preparation that aids in healing (Hasnidar et al. 2021). According to Sharif et al. (2013) the transfer of family food knowledge from one generation to the other is part of a traditional informal education scenario. The process generally occurs spontaneously and involves mothers and daughters. This practice has become tradition across cultures. Food knowledge transmission is one of the central mechanisms leading to either continuity or change in human culture. The transfer of cognitive and social orientations and cultural knowledge from generation to generation may maintain a culture over longer time spans in addition to genetic transmission. Mothers were the most

involved and influential as food knowledge transfer mediators. Consequently, their involvement in food knowledge transfer is very significant in continuing ethnic food traditions and identity (Sharif et al. 2013; Schönplflug & Yan 2013).

Returning to ingredients, spices have their origins in the world in terms of their supposed agricultural roots and routes, and they more importantly travel as ingredients beyond their point of origin as they take on new identities and histories that shape the world through their uses (Turner 2005). In fact, spices form part of what is known as the *materia medica* (medical material/ substance) of ancient medical texts of China, India and Tibet because of their curative properties. Spices are also sources of numerous bioactive compounds significantly beneficial for health (Bukvicki et al. 2020; Opara & Chohan 2014). Due to their important properties, spices have also increasingly become essential for culinary and medicinal purposes, often assembled and designed by women in several parts of the world (Singh et al. 2021). The trading of these spices has been an important commercial activity since ancient times and a means of economic development (Tufail 1990). Spices have been used since ancient times because of their antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory and carminative properties (Bukvicki et al. 2020; Opara & Chohan 2014).

For Geertz (1973) who did influential work on the interpretation of culture, these factors are about the experience and distribution of illness, the prevention and treatment of sickness, healing processes as well as the social relations of therapy management and the cultural importance and utilisation of pluralistic medical systems. Kleinman has subsequently made an important distinction between the concepts of illness and disease, suggesting that while disease is regarded as a natural phenomenon (the etic view), illness is conceptualised as a cultural construction (Kleinman 1981). Brown (1991) motivates further that members of all societies encounter disease and injury and develop social practices to cope with their effects, one of which is through the use of certain spices in treating illness and disease. In this instance certain spices play a vital role in the healing process.

According to the *Times of India* (2020), be it a simple cold/flu or a serious ailment or boosting the immune system to help recovery from COVID, the food that one consumes during an illness plays an important role in a person's recovery. Certain foods with blended use of spices not only are reported to provide a person with energy but a healthy dose of nutrients that are said to be helpful in gaining full strength. Put another way, to eat these foods regularly, you are doing away with the nutritional deficiencies that you might acquire during the illness.

Sarkar et al. (2015) and Hotz and Gibson (2007) suggest that traditional wisdom about processing of food, its preservation techniques, and their therapeutic effects have been established for many generations in a variety of contexts, regions and nations. Ingredients within diverse food systems can deliver numerous biological functions through dietary components in the human body. For example, several ingredients within Indian foodscapes are also recognised as functional foods central to the medicine cabinet (Aggarwal 2011) because they contain molecular and biochemical secrets – notably the presence of functional components such as body-healing chemicals, antioxidants, dietary fibers, and probiotics.

### **Some flavours of the spices**

Supposed authentic traditional food does not simply bring one closer to an inherited culture, but it is also typically loaded with a number of healthy ingredients. One such authentic traditional food, which is used for colds and flus as well as to build your immune system, is

*rasam* (see section titled ‘Some Examples of Healing Foods’). *The Indian Express* (2019) suggests that *rasam* is like a warm hugging *desi* (Indian) soup which is super easy to make and can be consumed with rice or savoured after a meal. It is commonly consumed, predominately in South India, as a healing soup. It is traditionally prepared using tamarind juice as a base, with the addition of Indian sesame oil, turmeric, tomato, chilli pepper, pepper, garlic, cumin, curry leaves, mustard, coriander, asafoetida, sea salt and water. *Rasam* is a classic example of traditional functional food with all its ingredients medicinally claimed for treating various ailments. The newspaper notes the tangy flavour of *rasam* helps to clean out your respiratory tract and the curry leaves in it helps as a corrective to flu-like symptoms. Curry leaves, tamarind extract, turmeric powder, red pepper and mustard seeds have a number of health benefits if you are prone to cold and cough. Also mentioned in *The Indian Express* (2019) is its use as an excellent recovery food that boosts a person’s immune system. Patients can load up on *rasam* for easy inflow on vitamins and nutrients. Given *rasam*’s long history as a healing food, it is unsurprising that it has been an essential food prepared in many South African Indian homes during COVID-19 lockdown to boost immunity.

Another immune boosting treatment modality is *Corona Kashayam*, a decoction prepared from the herbs and spices which became highly popular during the pandemic. According to *Times of India* (2020) *Corona Kashayam* is a herbal decoction made with potent herbs. *Kashayam* is meant to help boost immunity and support the body's health. It has been traditionally used in Ayurvedic medicine as a remedy for fever and for its ability to prevent various infections. It can also be used to relieve body aches, fatigue and headache. The herbal combination is made from natural herbs with medicinal properties including Nilavembu (Green Chiretta), black pepper, white sandalwood, dry ginger, vetiver (Khus), snake gourd, nut grass, Vilamichai ver (root) and parpat. This ancient medicine for curing viral infections finds its way in modern-day research as well. *Haldi ka Doodh* (Hot Turmeric golden milk) is another well-known comforting drink made with milk, turmeric and warm spices. It is sold in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) as golden ginger milk or turmeric latte and is made with turmeric, milk and honey to treat sore throats. Turmeric's anti-inflammatory properties makes it a perfect drink to consume when you are under the weather (specifically aligned to the healing properties of turmeric). A further example is *Khichdi* - a perfect weight loss dish which detoxifies and calms the digestive system, improves immunity and energy, lowers blood sugar levels and keeps diabetes under control. Made from rice, moong lentils and mild spices, *khichdi* or *khichari* is a healthy Indian dish that also keeps one fuller for longer as a rich source of protein and fibre. It goes by other names in other regions: *Daal kichadi* (North India), *Pongal* (South India), *Bengali khichuri* (East India) and *Kathiawadi khichari* (West India).

Based on the above, we explore in the section following ‘methodology’ how South Africans (particularly those of Indian descent) are using some examples of cultural “healing foods” based on the illustrations provided in this article to help boost their immune system to fight off illnesses. As indicated earlier we provide a description of the recipe (without analysing all details in the template of a cookbook) to motivate their healing properties beyond their culinary uses. The article focuses on developing a perspective on five treatment modalities in relation to their recipes: *Marandhu Sellu* (birth Masala curry), *Rasam* (King soup), *Haldi ka Doodh* (Hot Turmeric golden milk - commonly known in Durban as Ginger Manja milk), *Murunkai* braise (Moringa herb curry) and *Kitcheri* (Moong dhall and rice).

## **Methodology: ethnographic enquiry**

The study deployed an ethnographic enquiry into people's engagement with and the meanings assigned to food and recipes in relation to culture and ingredients and their alignment to expression and identity. The inquiry combines brief information about people's thoughts gathered through interviews with information collected by observing their behaviour and social interactions in relation to these food items, recipes and their utility. We adopted a qualitative research method (see note 3) in the form of in-depth interviews with 10 to 15 people from the South African Indian community (for which these recipes have particular salience) to get a deep sense of peoples' perceptions, beliefs and experiences.

Anthropological methods were used to examine the underlying themes and patterns in the documented data. We transcribed recordings, took notes on the content and on the developing analytic thoughts of participants. Analysis is an ongoing process that began as the first data became available and continued to the end of data collection. In this article, we present summative comments made by five of the participants.

## **Some examples of healing foods**

Historically, men and women have had distinct roles in food production and distribution (Holm et al. 2015; Counihan 2012). Almost universally, women are in charge of cooking, feeding and health of the family. Holm et al. (2015, p. 15) suggest that the obligations of cooking and feeding others "have been ambiguous sources of power, and creativity for women", and have given them a channel for creating important social ties for passing their knowledge on to the next generation.

The study reveals that knowledge systems of spices used as healing had been passed on from generation to generation, and this typically through women in the family to the next generation, including and especially the preparation of these dishes of which spices are central ingredients. Five recipes were documented and brief explanations provided for each recipe that had been passed on through the generations, these were *Marandhu Sellu* (birth Masala curry), *Rasam* (King soup), *Haldi ka Doodh* (Hot Turmeric golden milk (commonly known in Durban as Ginger Manja milk), *Murunkai braise* (Moringa herb curry) and *Kitcheri* (Moong dhal and rice). It must be stated that all participants were hesitant to share the exact method for preparing the spices.

## **Marandhu sellu *Chicken Curry***

According to Dr Govender, a 61-year-old Social Anthropologist from Durban, *marandhu sellu* is a South Indian spice blend that had been brought by indentured labourers in 1860 and the recipe for this spice has been passed on through the generations mostly by women. It is typically cooked using chicken (as chicken is packed with protein; with chicken soup often used as flu remedy too). The dish can also be cooked as a vegetarian dish by using fresh vegetables. Many in Durban also refer to *Marandhu Sellu* as *Maranshil* or *Maransil*, which literally translates to 'becoming mortal' hence the English translation is colloquially known as Birth Masala to most Durbanites. *Marandhu Sellu* spice is used mainly for new mothers post-delivery of their child. This blend of spices is brown and has an authentic aroma. It is traditionally cooked by the elders for the new mother after birth to aid her in producing breast milk. The mix aids in healing from the stress of giving birth and detoxifies the body. This spice is also used if a person has flu or cold like symptoms. Dr Govender went on to say that the

ingredients used in the birth masala are a blend of spices made from carom seeds (which are known for their antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties), coriander seeds (which are rich in folic acid, iron, zinc, vitamin c, and copper), cumin seeds (have antioxidants that help with cell damage), ginger powder (is an anti-inflammatory and helps with digestion as well as in managing common flu symptoms) and turmeric powder (is anti-inflammatory and helps with swelling and overall health).



Photo source: Navlee Media

According to Dr Govender, not many people in Durban know how to combine this special blend, meaning the precise amounts of each spice. It is usually kept as a closely guarded secret in small circles within the Indian community and the blend may differ from family to family. Dr Govender further states that for women in his family it is a form of empowerment to prepare this dish especially when someone is sick in the family. It allows them to use the knowledge that had been passed down through the generations to heal the sick.

### ***Rasam***

Mrs Nair, 60-year-old housewife and part-time cook for wedding functions from Durban, is of the view that, apart from *marandhu sellu* curry, *Rasam* is also used as a remedy to treat flu and cold symptoms. *Rasam* (also called *Russo/ Rasso*, but commonly referred to as King soup) is a thin and spicy South Indian soup made with a combination of spices and water. She says that the making of the *Rasam* differs from family to family but the basic spices remain standard. It



is a question of technique and style. Her family recipe was passed down to her grandmother and then her mother. Mrs Nair says that her grandmother suggested that it helps in clearing the head when someone has the cold or flu. *Rasam* is prepared using jeera (cumin seeds), fresh dhanian (coriander), puli (tamarind) and these ingredients work in tandem to remove mucous in the membranes. The other ingredients, such as onions, black pepper corns, garlic and mustard seeds, are astringent, meaning they operate in drying out and breaking down the mucous build up. The dry chilies, tomatoes and turmeric powder have anti-inflammatory properties, and operate to boost the immune system. Mrs Nair mentioned that during the COVID-19 lockdown her family and friends had all been making *Rasam* to help boost their immune system and body's defences against infection. She said that this recipe has a regional and Durban-specific identity (including those Durbanites who have migrated to other parts of the country or the world) as a go to recipe when one is infected with the flu or catch a cold. Mrs Nair mentioned that it felt empowering making this recipe that she had learnt from her grandmother, in order to help protect her family from COVID-19 by ensuring they have a strong immune system to help fight off sickness. It made her feel proud to make a difference by protecting her family's health with inherited cultural knowledge.



Photo source: Navlee Media

### **Haldi ka Doodh**

Another participant, Mrs Khan, a 55-year-old housewife from Durban, sharing her knowledge of healing recipes, is of the view that *Haldi ka Doodh* (Hot Turmeric golden milk – commonly

known in Durban as Ginger Manja milk) is also very good in treating colds, the flu, soothing the throat, for a cough and also helps with insomnia. She had learnt the benefits of *haldi ka doodh* from both her maternal and paternal grandmothers and her mother. According to Tarladala (2022) *haldi doodh* is often called golden milk because of its magnificent health benefits, including its use as antiseptic and antibacterial as well as anti-carcinogenic. Mrs Khan shared with us that to make this family recipe entails mixing together particular ingredients: boiling milk with turmeric (anti-inflammatory properties), ginger (anti-inflammatory and helps with digestion), clove (boosts the immune system and protects against infections, it is also a great source of manganese, vitamin K, vitamin C, calcium, and magnesium), black pepper (provides anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial effects) and honey (an anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and antibacterial agent) (Tarlada 2022). According to Mrs Khan this drink needs to be taken while it is hot for the best effect. She further noted that there are a variety of ways to make the recipe. She stated that it gave her a sense of empowerment and purpose to help her family recover and heal when they are sick, relying on the traditional medicine that was used by her mother and her grandmother and which they had taught her.



Photo source: Navlee Media

### **Murunkai braise**

Mrs Moodley, 75 years, a retired teacher and cultural activist from Durban, indicates that *Murunkai* braise (Moringa herb curry) is also very beneficial for one's health. Braise indicates a moist cooking method that uses a little liquid (usually water) that simmers at a very low

temperature either on a stove top or the oven. In this instance, this dish is prepared on the stove top. According to Wiginton (2021) Moringa has many important vitamins and minerals. The leaves have seven times more vitamin C than oranges and fifteen times more potassium than bananas, as well as calcium, protein, iron, and amino acids, which help the body heal and build muscle. It is also packed with antioxidants, substances that can protect cells from damage and boosts the immune system. There is some evidence that some of these antioxidants may also lower blood pressure and reduce fat in the blood and body. Mrs Moodley mentions that her grandmother shared her knowledge about the health benefits of the *munrunkai* braise, and that it is known to aid the body to be strong and to maintain health. She was taught by her grandmother to prepare this dish, and the ingredients are the *murunkai* leaves (health benefits listed above), garlic (benefits listed above), dry chillies and onions (both health benefits listed above). Mrs Moodley mentioned that this dish is authentic, as it is made in South India. She further states that her mother and grandmother shared a wealth of knowledge with regards to the uses of spices to heal the family and it gives her a sense of pride as a mother and woman to prepare this dish to help restore the health and aid the recovery of a sick person in the family.



Photo source: Navlee Media

## Kitcheri

Mrs Ragoonath, 78 years, a former domestic worker and cook from Durban, said that while growing up as a young girl her grandparents and parents had told her of the benefits of eating *kitcheri* (moong dhal and rice). In Hindi *kitcheri* (also known by a variety of adapted spellings: *kichadi*, *kicheree*, *kichdi*, *khicheri*, *kitcharee*) translates into a mess, indicating that ingredients are mixed up. This dish is a fusion of grains and legumes (usually rice and dhal) that are boiled until soft and then braised in clarified butter (ghee), oil or butter in mild spices. It has a soft, creamy and mash-like texture. Mrs Raganooth recalled her grandparents and parents telling her that during the times of indenture, families were given limited rations of moong dhal and rice by their colonial masters. As a counter and corrective to renewing, restoring and preserving their energy during hard labour in the fields from sunrise to sunset, *kitcheri* was a solution. Mrs Ragoonath said that she feels proud making this dish for her family, knowing the benefits that it has. According to Wiginton (2021) *kitcheri* is known to aid the body to eliminate accumulated toxins and it improves digestion, restores regular bowel movements, and support a healthy body weight or weight loss and improves energy and vitality. *Kitcheri* is also packed with protein and fibre. Mrs Ragoonath shared her family recipe. She mentioned that her recipe is similar to the version cooked in India but is Durban-adapted, and the ingredients: rice (supports energy and restores glycogen, also easy to digest), moong dhal (nutrient-rich food, high in protein), mustard seeds (explained above), dry chilly (explained above) and onions (explained above).



Photo source: Navlee Media

Insights from the preceding description of dishes demonstrate that food knowledge transfer could help future generations to cultivate interest to acquire and practice traditional food knowledge and its health benefits. Cooking alongside a mother and family members is one of the greatest practices to transfer and gain food knowledge and the use of spices to aid healing, indicating that knowledge transfer in respect of food is highly gendered. Central to the insights emanating from the dishes above, is a common theme highlighted by participants who mentioned that the hands-on process in the cooking activities strengthens family bonds and sharing of the belief systems aids in healing.

The brief insights extrapolated from the dishes discussed above contribute to the field of indigenous knowledge in general, while centring in particular women's knowledge. Pourchez (2017) mentions that focused on the human body, this knowledge reveals the wider relationship of humans with nature, health, illness and misfortune. The knowledge of women represents an example of cultural innovation, unique both in their knowledge of plants and spices as well as in the understanding of their medicinal application. While rooted in the past, this knowledge is contemporary, dynamic and continues to evolve under the constant pressures of globalisation, modern Western culture and biomedicine (Pourchez 2017). During the COVID-19 lockdown, women's knowledge of spices for healing were used to help boost their family's immune system. Thus, this knowledge establishes a significant part of the imperceptible cultural heritage and for that very reason should be acknowledged and preserved.

According to Sabil (2018) understanding a culture through food is an iterative and knowledge-driven process directed towards learning: as a person probes, such as how something is made, what ingredients are at stake, or why it is a dish labelled or called in a certain way, the answers obtained go beyond culinary learning. In these answers, food tells us something about a culture's approach to life and how it had been passed on from generation to generation through women. In the end, we can say that food functions symbolically as a communicative practice by which we create, manage and share meanings with others. Understanding culture, habits, rituals and tradition can be explored through food and the way others perceive it. Building on Long (2004), Sabil (2018) suggested that the level of importance attached to authenticity is indicative not only of the depth of experience that is desired but also of the identity characteristics they are likely to express or try to validate in their interactions with a culinary other.

## **Conclusion**

Eating and medicating practices aligned to healing, as highlighted in this article, have a long history that confirm "healing foods are deeply embedded in cultural practices, environment, and belief systems" (Chen 2009, p. xii). In this article we represented a foodscape aligned to a few dishes in the Indian diaspora of Durban. Aligned to this argument, we indicated that spices have an integral relation to food and its alignment to medical and health benefits also seen in the gastropolitics of cultures. As shown in this paper, spices are not simply aromatic substances that season and also help preserve food to enhance fragrance and flavour. They are in fact much more. Spices have been shown to be indispensable for daily health, indeed living because of the phytonutrients that they contain to bestow health and promote healing and restoration of the body. Besides adding flavour and taste to enhance the sensory appeal of dishes, they help prevent and ease various health problems because of the powerful antioxidants and their anti-inflammatory functions. Spices in their combination, their role in a recipe, cooking method and process, function to intervene in improving bodily functions that have deep cultural and gendered meanings. The latter is significant not only in spice preparation by women, but also

fundamentally aligned to the project of nurture and caregiving demonstrated largely by women in the dishes that are prepared. The dishes aligned to spices and their uses in this article also represent a particular ethnic niche, some local and regional (and gendered) foodways of Durban Indians that have drawn on knowledge from heritage and an ancestral past. The participants interviewed in this paper view the cuisine (through the dishes) they share as cultural commodities that highlight notions of cultural identity that also suggests a form of “authenticity” in respect of the dishes prepared under particular conditions. The idea that healing foods also function as a form of preventive medicine is anthropologically connected to the distilling and tapping of healing properties contained in the molecular and biochemical secrets of spices. Our foray into a particularized foodways ethnoscape of spices and recipes, indicate that we have much more to learn.

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## Notes

1 The Critical Food Studies Programme is a Mellon Funded Project, undertaken in collaboration with the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the University of Pretoria (UP). This programme pursues research studies focusing on food as an analytical lens through which society, culture, the economy, and the polity is scrutinised and theorised in such areas as, for example: how food is culturally experienced, including viscerally, by taste, appetites, and desires; representation, branding and marketing of food in an increasingly food-focused commodity culture; contextual meanings of gustatory “taste”; symbolic or imaginative representations of “good food”, “cooking” and cuisine in subject-formation; food consumption in struggles for agency, social prestige or cultural or social autonomy, and the materiality of food and its visual representation in artwork, performance, and popular culture, and others.

2 Ethical clearance was provided by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee. A semi-structured interview guide questionnaire was developed. Participants were sought by using a snowball method and use of our personal networks (age range 18 and above to 75). Interviews were also video and audio recorded. Participants agreed for their identity and names to be used.

3 See specifically chapter 3 titled ‘Spices: the pharmacology of the exotic’ (see **Etkin, 2006**) which emphasises the strong biocultural lens on food and culture in the role of food in health maintenance.

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