

In Search of the Perfect Curry: A Gender Perspective on Durban Curry in Two Contemporary Cookbooks

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Abstract

The article focuses on the meanings of the curry in two contemporary cookbooks, *Durban Curry* (2014) and *Durban Curry: Up2Date* (2019). These texts are read partly in conjunction with *Indian Delights* (originally published in 1961), a pioneering volume focusing on Indian food, which serves as an intertext to the books analysed in this article. The article offers a textual and symptomatic gendered reading that describes some representational and discursive aspects of curry-making as shown in the foodways and foodscapes presented in the two cookbooks. The article motivates that the meaning of curry is not in its singularity, but is instead in the plurality of its shifts, changes, appropriations and mobility over time.

Keywords: cookbooks; curry; Indian food; diaspora; foodways; foodscapes; culinary nostalgia; gender; hybridity; identity

Introduction

This article offers a gendered reading of the Durban curry, a regional dish usually (but not exclusively) associated with the Indian subcontinent, and with people of Indian origin in the diaspora. In particular, we offer a gendered reading of the recipes and narratives that shape the food practices (e.g. cooking as shaped by recipes) and their representation in Platter and Friedman’s two recent cookbooks: *Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour* (2014) and *Durban Curry: Up2Date* (2019). To do this, we draw on literature informed by a developing field in the humanities that is focused on the critical study of food. Of particular relevance to our analysis is the literature suggesting that cookbooks make recipes mobile and transferable beyond the originating cooking community in space and in time. Further, we anchor our analysis in the understanding that cookbooks are representative of an act of codification—the classification of foods as emblematic of foodways and foodscapes (Morris 2013). The concept “foodways” encapsulates various aspects of food and food practices, “including what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, and who is at the table” (Lawrance and De la Peña 2012, 2). In the words of Harris, Lyon, and McLaughlin (2005, viii–ix), foodways as a concept summons to mind “[o]ur attitudes, practices, and rituals around food” and offers a “window onto our most basic beliefs about the world and ourselves.” St. George (2000) also describes foodways as a form of vernacular expression with autoethnographic dimensions. Borrowing from Pratt’s (1991, 6) idea of the “contact zone” where, as her thesis suggests, concepts “meet, clash and grapple with each other,” St. George suggests that food, too, presents an ensemble of associations, linkages and relations. The notion of a “zone” represents regions, spheres and circuits of connection and junctures that have bearing on this argument. For example, Indian food historian, Pushpesh Pant (2011; 2020; see also Choudhury 2016) talks about food representing a gastronomic heritage that can be ascribed to what he describes as “zones of taste” emphasising the material, visceral and aromatic dimensions aligned to flavour, which he claims are artificial boundaries. In other words, “zones of taste” position influences from one region (such as where spices emanate, e.g. cinnamon, cardamom, star anise, clove, black pepper, and nutmeg in the Southern Indian state of Kerala, while saffron is known to be dominant in the North Indian state of Kashmir) that take on different combinations and styles in another region when shaped by recipes, thereby creating new and diverse flavours and tastes. More important, the “zones of taste” transcend national and international boundaries. Thus, foodways represent a network of systems that are physical, transnational, social, affective, cultural, gendered, communicative, spiritual, and aesthetic. At the same time, foodscapes describe gastronomic heritages that shift and change over time and across spaces.

In considering how foodways define the two *Durban Curry* texts, we propose that in its full manifestation curry comes with ideological freight as an idea, concept and a practice that has travelled (Bal 2002) through voyages (Said 2001) that transcend boundaries, contexts and histories. This understanding echoes what Chakrabarty (2008, 17) has

referred to “as a problem of translation,” because no human society is a *tabula rasa*, including, by extension, food, and in this instance, curry. Translation in a linguistic sense is not merely about communicating meaning between a source language and an equivalent target language. Instead, it is about a process of movement, development, and flux. In other words, *curry* is an effect of travel, migration and a result of our knotted histories that foreground its ambivalence and intricate relations of exchange and transformation. How is this dynamic movement of the curry reflected in the two editions of *Durban Curry*, along with the gendered nature of foodwork, culinary nostalgia, and diasporic hybridity? While curry (like all food) may have much to tell us about the renegotiation of identity, in this article we do not promote the allegiance of curry to “Indian identity.” Instead, we contend that curry is by no means emblematic of an ethnocentric identity (see also our conclusions). Neither is this article focused on the material and representational history of curry concerning what is perceived to be Indian cuisine in its broad political economy, which highlights that politics, interests and conflicts affect economic (and by extension social) outcomes. While food discloses multilayered meanings about its material dimensions (e.g. ingredients, flavours, techniques, seasonings and visual presentation), cooking is a creative, social and cultural project (Abarca 2006; Christie 2004; Williams-Forsen 2006) and is unequivocally gendered (we return to this point throughout the article).

Our approach in this argument is both descriptive and discursive, drawing on insights from an interdisciplinary toolbox in a reading of two cookbooks dedicated to curry. Cookbooks are inherently primary documents that tell stories that reveal much about the authors’ interpretation of their communities and the “visions they have of society and culture” (Theophano 2003, 3). Due to their location in time and place, cookbooks dispense values and meanings and have much to suggest about their gendered implications. In this article, we offer a story about food that is by no means definitive. We undertake this task by zeroing in on one iconic dish, the curry, and by studying how chefs, cooks, peoples and communities repeatedly construct its meanings in textual interpretations in cookbook representations. Specifically, the focus is on two contemporary cookbooks that have provided further visibility to the rich, colourful and multicultural tapestry of regional cuisine in South Africa generally, and Durban in particular.

Our analysis builds on some seminal perspectives on food practices and their representations, notably in their relationship to the particularities of time, place, and culture. In search of the perfect curry, we seek to bring a gendered perspective to bear on what we see as pioneering South African cookbooks.¹ In our view, the two

¹ We appropriate a part of the title of this article from English celebrity chef, restaurateur and television presenter, Rick Stein, whose monumental book, *Rick Stein’s India: In Search of the Perfect Curry* (2013), emanated from his BBC television series. In his text, Stein’s quest is to “search for a perfect curry ... to understand Indian food in all its complexities” (2013, 8) in the Indian heartland. However, he never really finds the perfect curry and instead discovers that “curry, therefore is a word that, to me, very broadly describes all of the cooking of the subcontinent” (7). What he finds is a veritable mixture

cookbooks represent a significant departure from Zuleikha Mayat's *Indian Delights* ([1961] 1998), a comprehensive, pioneering and quintessentially South African text that sold over 400 000 copies (Vahed and Waetjen 2010). A doyenne of South African Indian food, Mayat features rice dishes and curries, vegetables, fish, roti, naan and bread, convalescent and healing foods, desserts and much more. This text has since evolved into a benchmark as an authoritative guide, designed initially for "the South African Indian housewife" (Mayat 1998, 19). However, as Mayat (1998, 19) observes, the text has since attracted a broader audience, appealing both to "Indians and non-Indians." The latter, we believe, has much to do with the evolution of South African society in the transition from apartheid to democracy, and more importantly, with our idea that food is dynamic and travels in time and with people.

Nevertheless, at its core, notwithstanding the depth, detail, impact, and variety of *Indian Delights*, the text is significantly gendered. For example, in addressing her readers, Mayat (1998, 19) states that "the new homemaker must be aware that the health of her family is in her hands. Shortcuts and improvising may be resorted to, but vital principles are not to be compromised." Presumably, the supposed "art of Indian cooking" (Mayat 1998, 19) stereotypically assumes that skill, technique, and method are fundamentally feminine (perhaps indicative of the deeply patriarchal context in which she was writing). *Indian Delights* took shape with Mayat as editor and as a founding member of the Durban Women's Cultural Group, which still exists today, and whose members are acknowledged as co-creators of the book.

While *Indian Delights* remains a prevalent intertext in this argument, our focus falls on two recent cookbooks that have broadened perspectives on what we have labelled regional cuisine focused on the curry: Platter and Friedman's *Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour* (2014) and *Durban Curry: Up2Date* (2019). Mayat's text was assembled by a women's cultural group to provide home-making guidance to women, young brides and homemakers over five decades ago (see also for example, Kerr and Charles 1988). We contend that the two *Durban Curry* texts take us beyond the history of apartheid and its alignment to the ethnoscaapes of *Indian Delights*. It is not our intention to underrate the contributions of *Indian Delights*. However, we suggest that the two Durban curry texts, as contemporary creations, are designed to mobilise lovers of curry in all their diversity in new ways that show curry to be an effect of our entangled histories. Importantly, the texts provide some counter-gendered perspectives in their representation of cooking, and of the men and women who have come to define it across race, ethnicity, age and national origin. Our analysis does not suggest a hierarchy between *Durban Curry* and *Indian Delights*. Instead, we believe that all cookbooks are texts that ultimately rely on the act of reading, interpretation and the culinary value they

of colours, flavours, aromas, techniques and varieties that reflect a plurality of options. See the introduction (2013, 7–11) for an extended discussion of his culinary expeditions. See also the excellent text by Baljekar (2012) titled *Vegetarian Indian: Food and Cooking*, specifically the introduction (2012, 6–43) focusing on the varied and regional cuisine, festivals and celebrations, tools and equipment, cooking techniques, and ingredients.

bring in translating recipes, their ingredients and techniques into the pleasures of eating in the contexts (including time and place) in which they are located.

On the one hand, *Indian Delights* and *Durban Curry* converge insofar as they originate in Durban. On the other, they diverge in that they represent, in our analysis, distinctive texts written in two different historical periods. The former represents “Indianness” as an identity in an insular, closed, and exclusive fashion, written as it was during apartheid and foregrounded by the title. The latter foregrounds the hybridity of regional-specific identities, recipes, techniques, consumption, and taste patterns in a post-democratic, post-apartheid context that eschews material “contact zones” implied in part by the title. We recognise that all these issues warrant further study, but they do not fall within the scope of this article. *Durban Curry* also underwrites gendered material practices about food preparation (with curry as the index), recipe construction and meanings about identity, culinary nostalgia, cultural mobility, and hybridity in terms of experiences of recipe construction and consumption.

What’s the Matter with Curry Anyway?

Indian food carries tremendous symbolic resonance in and beyond India (Achaya 1998a; 1998b; Jaffrey 1986; Malamoud 1996; Ray 2015). As a field, Indian cuisine has always been shaped in relation to the global landscape (see, for example, Fielding 2014; Jaffrey 1978; Sen 2009; Zubaida 2009). Indian food, in particular, has a profound presence in the South African foodscape, with a plethora of cookbooks already published.² However, one dish—the curry—tends to dominate perceptions of Indian food stereotypically, and this not unique to South Africa. The curry carries a unique, indexical and iconic status, with resonance for cultural and social reasons, as an emblem of Indian identity (coined as a term by British colonialism). With the authenticity of the curry being arbitrary, ambiguous, discursive, and under construction, and with a multiplicity of menus shaping its representation, this, in our view, is a misrepresentation.

As Maroney (2011, 123) confirms, the meaning of curry “is continuously changed and affected by the community which consumes it” (see also Nandy 2004). As “communities” are not homogeneous and continue to change, so is the case with eating practices. Given the fact that, by extension, food (and food practices) is subject to movement and mobility, food, including the curry, endures changes in meanings and values as it travels from one location to another. The specific physical and geopolitical conditions tend to complicate foodways as a network of activities and systems in the production and consumption of food (see, for example, Lawrance and De la Peña 2012; Riley and Paugh 2019; Sutton and Hernandez 2007). Migration, context, history,

² Numerous cookbooks focus on Indian cuisine in South Africa and cover one or several aspects of Indian foodscapes (curry included). For example, Govender, Blunden, and Ally (2018) take a culinary journey throughout South Africa focused on curry. Their accounts span 90 recipes and conversations with cooks and food experts; see also Govender-Ypma (2017), Mayat (2020), Narshi and Williams (2005) and Parbhoo (2008). See also for example Sydow and Noordien (2019) who focus on Malay cuisine, which is part of the foodscape of the Cape Flats.

tradition, region, nation and identity influence these foodways in complex ways. As Maroney (2011, 123) indicates, curry “is a case study that provides evidence for how complicated the processes are in the mobility of foodways.” As many cookbooks suggest, this means that the perennial question of determining the essence of what constitutes an authentic curry, including the Durban curry (to which we return later), is, in fact, a fallacy.

In its etymology, the word “curry” has its linguistic roots in the South Indian Tamil word *kari* (a spiced sauce poured over rice), first used by the Portuguese, who introduced the chilli plant to India in the sixteenth century (Collingham 2006; Davidson 1999). Curry, coined by the British (see Leong-Salobir 2011), has increasingly become a blanket term, and as Twilley, Graber, and Gastropod (2019) confirm, “[c]urry is, supposedly, Indian,” but it turns out instead to be a “variety of spicy, [and] saucy dishes,” giving it the identity of being “a dish that’s from nowhere and yet eaten nearly everywhere.” Ironically there is no such thing as a “curry” in India. Equally in India and particularly in the South African context, Indian cuisine is more than just the curry (indeed also more than for example simply tandoori, korma, vindaloo, chicken tikka masala and rogan josh, which characterise the commodification of Indian cuisine in a global economy). However, cookbook recipes seem to represent a colonial encounter with India through the curry, but also represent a departure from the Indian subcontinent brought about by local (in this case, South African) inflections, postcolonial relations between South Africans and their ancestral heritage as well as innovations³ (see also footnote 2). Even curry powder is a western invention and recipe-specific spice mixes are common across the Indian subcontinent to shape specific dishes (see, for example, Czarra 2009; Nabhan 2014; see also footnote 2). Importantly, the “bunny chow,”⁴ a distinctly South African dish, is highly dependent on one form of curry as a central ingredient (beyond usually bread), and bears testimony to the enduring legacy of colonialism, apartheid and gender disparities. For example, apartheid education introduced “Domestic Science” as a school subject. It touted it as progress for women, in which packaging, convenience, efficiency, and speed were seen as breaking with an

³ Interestingly, “curry” was also not a word used in popular parlance. As Sen (2015, 223) explains, “[t]he word was not historically used by Indians, who called dishes by their specific names: korma, kalia, salan, rogan josh, and so on (in 1973 in her book *An Invitation to Indian Cooking* the celebrated Indian cookery writer Madhur Jaffrey wrote that the word ‘curry’ was ‘as degrading to India’s great cuisine as the term ‘chop suey’ was to China’s’). The word appears to have been first used in 1502 in a Portuguese travel account, and may come from the Tamil *karil*, signifying a watery sauce poured on rice.”

⁴ The bunny chow features repeatedly as a menu item (with innovative variations in the curry component) in both volumes of *Durban Curry*. See Platter and Friedman (2014, 26–27), and Platter and Friedman (2019, 20–21) for a brief exposition of the term. At its core, bunny chow is best described as “street-food invented in the 1940s by enterprising café-owners to dodge the apartheid laws. ... [It is] a hollowed-out loaf of soft white bread, filled with curry, topped with a lid made with the scooped out bread ... [T]he name ‘bunny’ comes from ‘bania’, a term for the Hindu mercantile class who ran establishments” (Platter and Friedman 2019, 21). See also *Many Lives: 150 Years of Being Indian in South Africa* by Vahed, Desai, and Waetjen (2010, 266–67) for a brief history of this food item.

inefficient past (Shapiro 2009, 7; see also Goldstein 2012; Stage and Vicenti 1997). Arguably, this led to women's interest in cooking food with the practicality of kitchen economics (see Abarca 2006; Sharpless 2010) and increasing resistance and changing perspectives on this practice demonstrated by women (Nickols and Kay 2015; Sztokman 2018).

For those who make and consume them, curries have myriad flavours and textures and provide evocative images of the country and region in which they emanate, including the culture, ingredients, and most importantly, the people behind the dishes. The curry has taken on a plethora of meanings and tastes in terms of its South Asian roots (in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka for example), but it also belongs to South East Asia, Africa and the broader diaspora that transcends a purely Indian foodscape (see, for example, Basu 1999; Chhabra et al. 2013; Jaffrey 2003; Monroe 2005; Naidu 2017; Nandy 2004; Narayan 1995; Zlotnik 1996). As noted by Alvarez (2006, 221), just as culture is not stable or a thing that can be "recovered," food is ephemeral and transient. It is always being produced, always in the making, and thus cannot be considered at any point "authentic." Thus, in this article, we focus on the tradition of curry-making known for showcasing a variety of spices that move beyond the ethnocentric category of "Indian" as it may be perceived in the two volumes of *Durban Curry*. Our view is that in curry-making, "cooking," "ingredients" and "recipe" constructions are shaped by time, space, geography, people, methods, histories and appropriations. The use of spice is central in preparation, used either whole, or often ground into curry pastes, powders, and masalas (a mixture of spices). Alternatively, such spices are often fried in bubbling oil to splash over a dish as a final, aromatic flourish. This cooking technique, called tempering, is used either at the beginning or at the end of cooking to enhance flavours and aromas. Given the rich fabric of preparation techniques that contribute to the meaning of curry, as expressed in cookbooks and the people behind the recipes, it is difficult to identify a single definition of what curry and curry-making is.

The Gendered Nature of Foodwork and Cookbooks

Desiree Lewis (2015, 422) reminds us that "apart from the insight provided into certain groups' own knowledge of food, national cuisine and nutrition, understanding local bodies of knowledge about food would provide crucial avenues into understanding food flows as sites of resistance and socially marginalised groups' agencies." In this section of the article we focus on local knowledge as represented in how the two *Durban Curry* texts frame a set of perspectives on foodways that are shaped by recipes, methods, and in part, memories and taste. Our thinking aligns with Lewis's (2015, 424) contention that "interdisciplinary feminist approaches to food amplify understandings of power, resistance and freedoms in particular contexts." In other words, cooking carries more than the material, visceral and embodied nature of transforming recipes into the practice of eating. Cooking also communicates emotional and social connection (Pollan 2013), and speaks to gendered, ethnoracial, and class hierarchies (see, for example, Brenton 2017; Elliott and Bowen 2018; Fielding-Singh 2017; Wright, Maher, and Tanner 2015).

Cooking and food preparation are contingent on gendered performances of attention and care while masking persistent gendered inequalities (Beagan et al. 2008; Bowen, Elliott, and Brenton 2014; Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick 2013). This type of performative labour falls disproportionately to women (Craig 2006). Central to food is its construction of relations between men and women, as well as building and projecting the role of women, as represented in cookbooks such as *Indian Delights* (see Vahed and Waetjen 2010).⁵

Citing the work of Appadurai (1988, 3), which suggests that cookbooks belong to “the humble literature,” Morris (2013) contends that they nonetheless contribute in significant ways to broader national issues, including the formation of national cuisine and identity (see also Anderson 2009; Murcott 1996; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Parveen 2017). However, cookbooks such as *Durban Curry* might also represent the popularisation of a perceived Indian foodscape (see Nanjangud and Reddy 2020). Our contention in this article is that cookbooks are simultaneously nostalgic (Mannur 2010), mobile (Heldke 2003), diasporic (Dufoix 2008; Mintz 1996; 2008; Palat 2015), and highly gendered (Counihan 1999; Inness 2001a; Lewis 2015; Meyers 2001; Theophano 2003). For example, for the food that people eat to become the cuisine that represents the nation and its gendered meanings, recipes have to be written down (Appadurai 1988; Ferguson 2004). At the same time, recipes travel beyond the written word, more so through oral recipe-sharing practices (see, for example, Bell 2009; Finn 2004; Jansen 1993; Santlofer 2011). Several recipes featured in the two *Durban Curry* volumes were reportedly captured through orality and memory, and were often transmitted by mothers to their children (see, for example, Platter and Friedman 2014, 20–21, 36–37, 42–53, 46–47, 50–51, 60–61, 74–75, 79–81, 112–14, 118–19, 122–23; Platter and Friedman 2019, 30–31, 37, 40–41, 44–45, 51, 76–77).

Linked to this aspect of cultural association between recipes, voice, memory and people, Appadurai (1988, 8) notes that cookbooks “tell cultural tales,” in that they “reflect shifts in the boundaries of edibility, the proprieties of the culinary process, the logic of meals ... and the structure of domestic ideologies.” Thus, cookbooks are valuable historical sources that illuminate our cultural history (Appadurai 1988; Humble 2005). Arguably, *Indian Delights* could represent a statement about what young brides, women and homemakers in South Africa of the 1960s could prepare as an ideal meal for Indian husbands and men. *Durban Curry*, in contrast, projects an image of a diverse range of culinary tastes across race, gender and ethnicities in a 21st-century Durban. As such, both texts tell us “who we are and who we want to be” (Humble 2005, 278) and reveal the societies that produced them. By so doing, they regulate private practices as well as cultural and social customs (Singley 2013, 1–2) in similar ways to the kind of “imagined communities” that Anderson (1991) articulated. As some writers have observed, cookbooks, therefore, present distinctive *food cultures* that are marked by their place of

⁵ Concerning *Indian Delights*, Vahed and Waetjen (2010) provide an extended discussion of the gendered and salient historical social circles and networks and their specific construction of culinary practices and identities (see also Wardrop 2012).

origin and an assumption of the continuity of the culture and history of the people concerned (see Zubaida and Tapper 2001, as cited in Burstedt 2002). As indicated earlier, and as seen in *Indian Delights* and *Durban Curry*, recipes tend to be loaded with meaning contingent on their time and place; they steer towards a kind of imagined community while disclosing other essential scripts. As cookbooks, they also present social histories that represent the evolution of foodways and eating practices.

Cookbooks also reveal significant cultural and social elements, such as the division of domestic work (Inness 2006; Neuhaus 2003). For example, Neuhaus (2003, 1) argues that “[c]ookbooks contain more than directions for food preparation. Authors often infuse their pages with instructions on the best way to live one’s life—how to shop, lose weight, feed children, combat depression, protect the environment, expand one’s horizons, and make a house a home.” This highlights how readers might view cookbooks as lifestyle instruction manuals designed also to perform gender. Linked to this, scholars have read performances of sexuality, gender, and nationalism in cookbooks (Cappellini and Parsons 2014; Cruz 2013), alongside the phenomenon of gastroporn—the voyeuristic consumption of food through the use of lavish images (Brownlie, Hewer, and Horne 2005; Dennis 2008; Smart 1994). While photography in *Indian Delights* is relatively sparse, generous photography of people and recipes (in their diversity) fill the *Durban Curry* texts, marking them as contemporary cookbooks in their strong appeal to visuality.

Evident in a cookbook such as *Indian Delights* is that its purpose as a manual for cooking, and a blueprint for eating and living, has shaped—and been shaped by—the prevalent gendered discourse of its time. For example, as Mayat (1998, 19) argues, “[w]ith the mother-in-law or aunt no longer around, a good reliable cookery book has become essential, despite the trend of working wives, Indian husbands still insist on meals as mother prepared them.” The idea of “as mother prepared them” may, in feminist terms, be interpreted as sexist. However, the phrase could simultaneously suggest ideas about care, emotion, love, and joy that describe the preparation and execution of food in the broader context of relational bonds and memory. But gendered labour is not always empowering, fruitful, or an act of choice. It is usually labour that is expected and demanded of women, with cooking forming part of received gender norms. For example, mothers did not typically pass on recipes in written form. Instead, women learned by watching and sharing, in a mutual exchange of ideas, in units such as the family (Srinivas 2006). It is usually the case that women and mothers inspire food in a stereotypical sense. For example, in *Durban Curry* (2014), recipes trigger maternal memories: the male contributor Sandren Govender credits his grandmother, while Fink Haysom, Moh Moosa and Britannia Hotel’s Linkey Moodley credit their mothers. Similarly, in the subsequent volume, *Durban Curry: Up2Date* (2019), Kenyan chef Godfrey Kinyanjui also credits his mother for basic cooking skills. Thus, in terms of gendered labour, *Durban Curry* frames both men and women as creators of recipes and as experts in curry preparation.

Cooking and food (beyond cookbooks) suggest a lifestyle, or “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984) implied by the types of ingredients to be used, and the methods to apply. However, they are also about *who* performs this work and *how*. Men are seldom the primary family food preparers (DeVault 1991; Inness 2001a; 2001b), and when they perform cooking, it usually entails outdoor grilling and braaing (Inness 2001; Reddy 2016) and meals arranged for special occasions (Adler 1981; Szabo 2014), and yet ironically contemporary cultures usually foreground and give the greatest visibility in cooking to men as Michelin star chefs. Neuhaus (2003, 75), for example, asserts that cookery instructions for men “portrayed [their] interest in cooking as a hobby, as an occasional event.” Scholars have therefore noted that home cooking has deep symbolic ties with femininity (Hollows 2003; Inness 2001a; 2001b; 2006; Swenson 2009; Szabo 2014) as evident in *Indian Delights* of 1961, making it an activity through which women construct themselves as “recognisably womanly” (DeVault 1991, 97). For example, in *Indian Delights*, a view of cooking as women’s labour can sometimes dissolve in favour of cooking as fun and enjoyable. As indicated, Mayat’s (1998) insights could be relevant in two ways: on the surface level in terms of the best way to construct Indian food, and on the symbolic level of who should be doing the cooking, how, and for whom. What surfaces are tips that promise delicious recipes, yet they also foreground the gendered value of cooking as an activity to satisfy, please and comfort men. In contrast, *Durban Curry* shows a marked gendered departure from *Indian Delights* concerning a few identifiable themes (description of some recipes, techniques, gender and relational bonds) to which we turn below.

Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour

All curry lovers are mobilised in this text irrespective of their gender. At a descriptive level, *Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour* (2014) is subtitled “People, Places and Secret Recipes,” and promotes Durban curry as “a very distinctive brand of curry developed in the kitchens and cooking pots of this seaside resort” and which “developed its own identity in these foreign fields” (Platter and Friedman 2014, 10). Part of the title, “so much of” is a linguistic variant commonly used by South Africans of Indian origin to emphasise the quality/quantity of something and plays on language, accent and ethnicity. However, while Durban curry reflects an identification with a specific dish, the exact composition of the curry is not yet standardised. Its distinctiveness is that “it does not feature cream, milk, yoghurt or nuts,” and unlike North Indian cuisine “very little butter or ghee (clarified butter) is used” (Platter and Friedman 2014, 10). Platter and Friedman (2014, 10) attribute this distinctiveness to the flavour and colour of the curry, which is spicy and red. Citing Rasaleeka (from Govinda’s Hare Krishna Restaurant in Chatsworth, Durban), the authors indicate that techniques of cooking also suggest a distinctive Durban curry. The authors cite Rasaleeka as stating that “[i]n a Durban curry, the aromatics go into hot oil first. The seeds must splatter” (Platter and Friedman 2014, 11) and for Dharamjit Singh “the firing order is pivotal ... first browning [the] onion [and] then removing it, before adding meat or vegetable ingredients, and only lastly the aromatics.” The search for the authenticity and

singularity of the curry suggests another set of meanings in the text: Durban curry is to be defined in its plurality (across race, gender, age, nationality and identity) because there are numerous variations, experiences and indeed more exceptions than rules to its making.

Renowned anthropologist, chef and food critic Anna Trapido (2014), in her review of this book, provides a pertinent summary of its distinctiveness. She writes:

In *Durban Curry—So Much of Flavour* differences are enjoyed. The food is presented as a dynamic, inspiring blend of old and new ingredients and cooking methods. Every recipe makes it clear that migrants are different from those who stay at home. There is a direct, assertive, flexible vigour in Durban curry that is not found in motherland Indian cuisine. It is not better or worse but is different.

The stories told through recipe constructions create an understanding of the Durban curry as an object of a lived migrant experience of food-as-culture in a regional world (Durban) that, while it remains global, is also profoundly local.

Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour is structured in five sections titled “Individual Curries” straddling beans (samp and a variety of vegetables), meat (notably lamb, chicken, duck, beef and offal), and seafood, “Pickles and Chutneys” (mainly with vegetables and fruits), “Sides” (containing recipes for rice, dumplings, rotis, cornbread, pap and salads), “Spices and Masalas” (providing tried-and-tested home-made spices), and “Drinks with Curry” (devoted to beer pairing, or brandy and coke). South African wine guru, John Platter, as co-contributor to the volume, offers champagne and wine suggestions. A total of 63 recipes comprise the volume, developing foodmaps associated with established curry restaurants such as the Sunrise Chip ‘n’ Ranch, popularly known to Durbanites as Johnny’s. The restaurant is known for its giant-size rotis filled with virtually anything and “famous mid-night munchies antidotes, renowned for their sobering-up properties” following a night-out of drinking (Platter and Friedman 2014, 17). In this book, readers also encounter “Sunrise Beans Curry” and “Sunrise Okra Curry.” Other recipes are selected from Victory Lounge (“Braised Mutton Curry” and “Kebab Curry”), established after World War 2 and an institution in Durban for home-style curry. Another iconic feature is the Seabelle restaurant on the KwaZulu-Natal North Coast known for its seafood dishes. In this text, the “Seabelle’s Mixed Veg and Fruit Pickle” is presented. The recipes also feature Govinda’s Hare Krishna Vegetarian Restaurant (“Govinda’s Beans Curry” and “Govinda’s Paneer Chutney”), as well as “Britannia Hotel’s Mutton Bunny Curry” (from a hotel established in Colonial Natal in 1879, and subsequently sold to two Indian businessmen in the late 1970s).

There are also individual and family recipes, including Zuleika Mayat’s “Delights Fish Curry with Hot Durban Sauce,” in which she notes that “this one recipe emerged from the fusion of communities and ingredients” (Platter and Friedman 2014, 79), as well as “Delights Serva Curry” (“Serva” meaning gravy, which according to Mayat “sustains families over lean days without making them feel like paupers” [Platter and Friedman

2014, 34]). Another professional chef featured in *Durban Curry* is Asha Maharaj, who contributes “Asha’s Banana Kebabs in Curried Gravy.” Solly Manjra, who continues the food tradition of his late father, the legendary Durban master-cook, Manjra Mota—known for his biryanis and restaurant in Sea Cow Lake, Durban—provides a recipe for “Cauli Rice” (with the central ingredient being cauliflower).

The text also presents recipes from a prominent female celebrity, Devi Sankaree Govender, formerly of MNET’s show *Carte Blanche* (now presenting her own show titled “Devi” on ENCA). The recipes comprise “Devi’s Samp and Beans Curry,” “Devi’s Curried Chicken Livers” and “Devi’s Zulu Chicken Curry and Melters,” a hearty organic chicken that takes longer to cook and is served with soft potatoes. The latter is the subtitle of the 2019 book, *Durban Curry: Up2Date*, with Up2Date referencing a brand of potatoes discussed below. Other celebrity recipes include those by East Coast Radio’s Darren Maule, titled “Darren’s East Coast Raita” (a side dish made with yoghurt and chillies) and Zaba Simbine’s “Zaba’s East Coast Fruit Sambal” (a side dish with fruit, vegetables and chillies). Chef Deena Naidoo (the first South African *Masterchef* winner) offers “Deena’s Sheep’s Trotters and Sugar Beans Curry.” The text describes the recipe as unique to the country and “in danger of losing its identity in the commercial space ... [L]et us celebrate our own rich, historic and distinctive local food culture” (Platter and Friedman 2014, 58). Professional chef Futhi Ngomane, founder of Zen Africa, the first black-owned and -run chef’s school in South Africa, shares “Futhi’s Chicken and Amadumbe Curry” (amadumbe is a tropical root vegetable known as taro). The curry is accompanied by her side dish “Futhi’s Home-Made Corn Bread.”

Also included among the recipes is Durban-born lawyer and diplomat Nicholas Haysom’s “Fink’s Fragrant Curry” (a chicken curry). With its addition of yoghurt, typical of Lahore, Pakistan, where his mother spent part of her early childhood, Haysom’s curry departs from local (read, Durban-specific) traditions. Jacqui Rey, central to the catering company Food Matters, provides a subtle recipe for “Jacqui’s Lamb Knuckle Curry.” Sarah Collins, a South African adventurer-entrepreneur-activist, provides a recipe that works both with rice and a bunny chow in “Sarah’s Vegetable Curry.” The recipes in this book represent a rich gendered diversity of foodways that mark the dynamic, transcultural and transnational nature of the Durban curry.

Durban Curry: Up2Date

Durban Curry: Up2Date (2019) sustains the central thread of curry-making and its meanings contained in its predecessor, *Durban Curry* (2014). In this edition, Platter and Friedman (2019, 11) indicate that the strapline is “not simply about how contemporary this book is. Rather, the book also references the most desirable variety of a potato for a Durban curry. Also called ‘a melter,’ this potato cooks more satisfactorily in a curry than other varieties, cracking deliciously into the gravy. It is an old-fashioned variety, not bred to withstand disease, so it is sometimes difficult to find.” The text’s “main focus is contemporary: on a new generation of chefs, cooks and curries; new approaches

and influences; new imperatives” (Platter and Friedman 2019, 126). In fact, according to the authors, “Durban curry is not set in stone. The point about this community dish which has become a national treasure is, precisely and imprecisely, that it is always moved and mutated with the times. It continues, as it did right from the beginning, to respond to new circumstances and needs” (Platter and Friedman 2019, 11). For them, the Durban curry, as it turns out, is “about colour—the redder, the better is generally accepted as one of its defining characteristics” (126).

Durban Curry: Up2Date is structured in 13 sections, consisting of 73 recipes. These include “Beans,” “Bunny Chow,” “Chicken and Quail,” “Eggs,” “Masalas,” “Meat,” “Paneer,” “Pickles, Sauces and Sambals,” “Plant-Based,” “Rice and Rotis,” “Seafood,” “Starters,” and “What to Drink.” Like *Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour*, *Durban Curry: Up2Date* is shaped by individual, family, celebrity and restaurant-derived recipes that share brief, yet colourful histories of the recipes. In addition to the diverse names that feature in the former book, the latter volume adds recipes by Dr Carin Robinson (co-owner of the Glenwood Bakery). These include “Carin’s Curried Beans on Toast at the Glenwood Bakery” and her husband’s “Adam’s Roast Quail with Spiced Brown Lentils and Yoghurt” and “Adam’s Masala Eggs” (more an Indian frittata than a French omelette). Nairobi-born sous-chef, Godfrey Cege Kinyanjui, of the Simbithi Country Club’s Fig Tree restaurant, uniquely adds “Godfrey’s Kuku Bizari Ya Pwani” (Swahili for “chicken curry from the coast”). Also, Andre Schubert’s “Durban Poison Paneer Makhani,” which uses hemp oil in a light beer, is featured.

Like its predecessor, running through this volume is the idea that the Durban curry breaks gender stereotypes. The recipes, as the authors argue, “cross gender lines: macho men who would not be seen dead baking a cupcake proudly tout their curry skills. Creating and surviving their heat is somehow regarded as rather manly” (Platter and Friedman 2014, 10). The two volumes offer representations of culinary masculinities that challenge men’s structural dominance. The idea of “macho men” does not necessarily masculinise curry-making, but in fact suggests that men are comfortable with cooking. By so doing, they frame men’s cooking as a form of routine culinary production and a feature of routine care work (see Nolan 2017), albeit in recipes that are regarded as more acceptable for them to create (see, for example, recipes led by men in Platter and Friedman 2014, 16–17, 20–21, 36–39, 42–43, 58–59, 60–61, 66–69, 88–89, 95; see also Platter and Friedman 2019, 34–35, 36, 40–41, 44–45, 47, 50, 54–55, 64–65, 72, 76–77, 84–85, 91, 95, 99, 100–1, 102–3, 108–9, 11–15).

Both these texts employ personal stories to construct a relational bond with readers, thus creating a kind of tourist nostalgia about the curry. In his overview of the sociology of food and eating, McIntosh (1996, 245) observes that “food, eating, and experiences of the body all have emotional implications,” which also suggests that the emotional is deeply connected to taste. As Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008, 462) argue, “[a]ttention to the senses is key to understanding visceral experiences of food: sensory organs—capturing textures, aromas, flavours—provide mechanisms for visceral arousal

through affective relations with the material world ... in creating and triggering cultural memory.” Thus, the recipes and narratives that comprise the two volumes are seductive and craft culinary worlds of aspiration towards identity, taste, smell and pleasure. In particular, they envision scenes of cross-cultural encounter and fantasies of touristic and gastronomic delight that invite the reader to imagine not only cooking and eating but also to participate in experiences and interactions that validate cosmopolitan appetites for difference. We turn briefly to a few further themes (gender, diaspora, memory and nostalgia, tradition, place/space, autobiographical experiences and hybridity) that can be read into the texts.

The Representation of *Durban Curry*

As indicated above, we interpret these cookbooks through both descriptive and discursive stances. Like *Indian Delights, Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour* (2014) and *Durban Curry: Up2Date* (2019) could fall squarely into a typology of what Heldke (2001) describes as ethnic cookbooks. This cultural commodification often resonates with other identity markers of “socially marginalised groups” and their intersecting identities (see Lewis 2015, 422). Food scholarship has focused on the important stories that cookbooks and related food-writing tell about marginalised identity-work and diasporic place-making (see, for example, Bardenstein 2002; Chen 2014; Mannur 2010; Phillips 2009). Ironically, while these texts engage with marginalised identities, they tap into a diasporic food experience that by all accounts transcends the diaspora. For example, while both volumes are individually published discrete texts, they can be read as texts that together reference the meaning of the curry in terms that homogenise culinary experience in the KwaZulu-Natal Indian diaspora. Intertextually, both draw on the idea of the “curry” as an ethnic index of identity. Yet the two cookbooks, beyond their historical, social and anecdotal references, attempt to inscribe food practice, particularly curry-making, within a broader trajectory that surpasses ethnicity and tradition towards a multicultural and non-racial representation. Thus, the diversity of the peoples and their recipe archives preserves the aesthetic, culinary and ontological connections among the contributors. As Kayla Ann motivates in her recipe, “Kayla Ann’s Natal Langos, Spicy Sauce and Fried Curry Leaves,” “we are trying to define Durban cuisine” (Platter and Friedman 2019, 116), which confirms that recipes in both volumes are about the shared experiences of expressing the idea of a Durban cuisine aligned to curry and its diverse flavours.

The recipes in the two texts draw attention to how men, women and peoples of diverse backgrounds become markers of their culinary encounters with curry and also creations of themselves in relation to food, identity and place. These texts tend to underemphasise the image of the cookbook as a manual or blueprint for food preparation. Instead, the recipes represent a history, one located in an evolving present rather than the past, structured by ingredients and techniques that show allegiance to the curry that symbolically ties together geographically, socially, culturally and racially divided groups. The recipes in these volumes suggest that food (specifically curry) is an identity

marker far-removed from its supposed Indian and ethnocentric origin. The texts demonstrate that the dish possesses cultural currency and symbolises an evolving sense of taste and place (Warde 1997), of self and social relations mobilised by culinary habits, practice and identification.

In several ways, the two cookbooks provide foodmaps, which, according to Marte (2007, 263), help to decode “the aesthetic impressions and sensory moments that food helps generate.” They not only show “actual places, but also spaces (social/racial relations, community networks, local food paths, etc) and place-memory (sense of place and home, relations to homeland, linguistic landscapes, etc).” This helps to trace “food relations to neighbourhoods, social networks, and family histories” (Marte 2007, 263). In the *Durban Curry* books, the authors use Durban as a metaphor for region, place, location, and a kind of melting pot. For example, while Durban is the focus, the recipes have their origins in diverse parts of the province and indeed transcend geographical borders. In other words, personal histories, households, neighbourhoods, and restaurants, as evidenced in the two cookbooks, enable “place-memory, tracking how localities are experienced and transformed through food relations” (Marte 2007, 283). Evident in the texts are shared “memories” of iconic foodways as a theme of creative construction aligned to the curry as an object, subject and experience.

Memory and the cultural meanings of foods are therefore subjects of relevance to the texts featured here. This is because recipes trigger culinary memories, often with an element of nostalgia for a place or for home (Raman 2011; Ray 2004; Valentine 1999). In essence, nostalgia is a resonant subtext in the two cookbooks. Boym (2001, 351) claims that “one is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realise in the future.” The nostalgic operates to recall *curry* as a material and symbolic experience, connoting emotions, the autobiographical, and familial networks (often represented through women, and sometimes men) in a way that suggests that it is not purely psychological but also cultural—an element of identity showing a desire for time and place (see Wilson 1999 for an extended discussion). While nostalgia does tap into memory, in *Durban Curry*, it is not romanticised or sentimental, but is instead characterised as a form of celebration in joyful and pleasurable ways that suggest a form of identification in an imagined community, mediated by shared recipes and the people responsible for them.

The mediation of shared recipes reminds us of Holtzman’s (2006) anthropological study on the relationship between food and memory as a catalogue of key domains: ethnic identity, nostalgia, nationalism, gender, and temporal change. Holtzman maintains that both individual and collective memories and identities are commonly constructed through food, as is the case in the two cookbooks. Owing to its physical and emotional attributes, food (curry in this context) is often deployed as a mnemonic that recalls the past (Sutton 2001) as an extension of memory. Curry, as we see in these texts, plays a role in evoking memories of place, childhood, and of food events, their preparation, textures, aromas; it shows a capacity to “encode” memory but also to “decode”

memories (Mintz 1997, 96). Furthermore, analyses of the role of food in memory have often concentrated on how experiences and feelings in relation to food unfold over time, rather than on how people remember the past (Holtzman 2006; Mintz 1985). This suggests that memory could be conceived as a tool for roughly remembering what “really” happened in relation to culinary events, rather than something which is profoundly manipulated purely by feelings about the present.

In the *Durban Curry* books, it is evident that the brief narratives that precede the recipes often open up several characteristics that speak to the concerns about place, memory, taste and the intrinsic reality that curry is, in fact, an effect of hybridity. As such, *Durban Curry* is not about an essence, but an effect of hybridity spawned by a diaspora and its diverse peoples. This idea aligns with Mintz’s (2008, 521) notion of food as fundamentally diasporic because of “the enormous importance of place—of locality and its distinctive natural characteristics—in the shaping over time of culturally specific food systems” (see also Ferguson 2012). Building on this idea, our analysis suggests that the idea of authenticity in relation to curry is akin to what Cook (2008) describe as “food mixing” (a concept aligned to hybridity; see also Cook and Harrison 2003). By food mixing, we suggest that a central meaning emanating from *Durban Curry* is precisely the idea that the curry has no essence. Instead, the curry is evolved, having absorbed ingredients, techniques and flavours from diverse spaces and is therefore repeatedly modified by a variety of influences. This is an example of hybridity in the mode that Anthias (2001, 630) describes:

[I]t could be argued that the acid test of hybridity lies in the response of culturally dominant groups, not only in terms of incorporating (or co-opting) cultural products of marginal or subordinate groups, but in being open to transforming and abandoning some of their own central cultural symbols and practices of hegemony.⁶

Cookbooks, in other words, as Appadurai (1988, 3) writes, are “representations not only of structures of production and distribution and of social and cosmological schemes, but of class and hierarchy.” The curry is therefore a product and effect of culinary cultural exchanges (see also Heldke 2003).

Conclusion

To locate the best and ideal curry is nearly impossible but its supposed “perfection” might reside in its rich diversity. Therefore, the search for a perfect curry discloses more questions than answers. It seems that there is an ongoing debate about the fact that “curry may be [...] misused” and misconstrued in culinary language (see Little Global Chefs 2017; Patranobis 2014; Rice 1989). Consequently, the story of the curry as told in these two cookbooks is incomplete. Further analysis is required to explore how curry

⁶ See also Chua and Rajah (2001), Marte (2011), and Long (2004) for examples from other diasporas.

has evolved beyond the region of KwaZulu-Natal in other South African foodways (in Cape Malay and other traditions, for example).

In this article, employing a gendered (and indeed feminist lens), our analysis shows that the two texts, *Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour* (2014) and *Durban Curry: Up2Date* (2019), offer readers a perspective markedly different to that of *Indian Delights* ([1961] 1998). We make this claim not to indicate that one cookbook is better than the other. Indeed, *Indian Delights* attempted to provide a detailed codification of Indian food in apartheid South Africa in a particular period of South African history, and offers valuable insights. However, the text offers representations of cooking as stereotypically gendered (see also Vahed and Waetjen 2010), which we believe merits further investigation beyond what we claimed here.

Durban Curry: So Much of Flavour and *Durban Curry: Up2Date*, we argue, offer counter-narratives that break, but do not resolve gender boundaries. The two texts suggest that the curry, a menu item in the broader Indian foodscape, extends beyond ethnicity, class, race, and gender and is an incomplete yet complex representation of Indian cuisine. What we learn is that “curry” does in fact escape India as a geopolitical entity into other contact zones beyond the subcontinent. In this way, curry carries embedded representations of its colonial history while it is a symbol of a regional identity (as represented in the two cookbooks that are key to this article) in which an archive of recipes interweave multilayered (albeit sketchy) narratives about cultural politics, identities, nationalities, tastes, memories, feelings, and the self. The sensory experiences of taste and preferences for certain sensations are more cultural than biological, racial, or gendered. In essence, the visceral and material dynamism of food-flows indicates that the curry is a type of travelling food and establishes many interconnected bridges. It is fundamentally mobile and escapes the borders of a pan-Indian identity and aligns in several ways to multiple “zones of taste.”

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