Confronting Chicken Tikka Masala

By: Smiti Nathan

"I'll have the same." I could not even utter the words. In my head I was thinking, "*Did I really just order 'chicken tikka masala'?"* and all the while the man who took my order pulled out a plate and methodically scooped in some basmati rice, saag paneer and finally the chicken tikka masala into three separate dishes. Right before he handed me the tray, he tossed on a naan to complete the meal. I stared at the overflowing tray of food with bewilderment and as I handed over my credit card, I thought "*Could I eat all of that and did I really want to*?"

Photo: Chicken tikka masala, saag paneer, basmati rice, naan

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The origins of Chicken Tikka Masala are heavily debated; however, the population creation story goes something like this:

> Once there was a disgruntled British patron, who though his chicken tikka was far too dry. He sent the dish back to chef, who quickly concocted a masala gravy out of 1 can of condensed Campbell's Tomato soup, some cream and some spices and poured it over the chicken. The End.[1]

Except that was not the end.

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Sitting outside of "Curry in Hurry", the Murray Hill, or as my friend informed me, "Curry Hill", restaurant, I examined my tray. There were three separate dishes and an awkwardly large piece of naan balancing in one corner of my tray. Surely if the British could consume 18 tons of this per week, I could get through one, granted quite large, portion.

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[1] Collingham, L. *Curry: A tale of cooks and conquerors.* pg 2-3

Before diving in, I took ate a piece of naan to brace myself. I then pierced a piece of chicken and as I lifted it I could see brightly colored pink patches of tandoori chicken peeking through the masala. The sauce barely clung to the piece of meat as I swiftly transferred that first intended bite to my bowl of rice. The sauce immediately entrenched the surrounding rice grains with its vivid red colors and specks of orange oil bubbles. I then scooped up a mix of the newly tainted rice with the sole piece of chicken in the bowl, put it in my mouth and took a bite.

The result was surprising.

Photo: Curry in Hurry restaurant in Murray/ "Curry" Hill

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Chicken tikka masala eventually grew to be quite a popular dish in the United Kingdom. By 2001, it was proclaimed the national dish of the UK.

> *"Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences."* –Robin Cook, UK Foreign Secretary 1997-2001[2]

While the notion of perfectly illustrating certain British cultural behaviors can surely be debated, the fact that Britons consumed 18 tons per week of the newly proclaimed national dish is fair evidence of its popularity.[3]

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"So how is it?" asked my lunch companion and long-time chicken tikka masala aficionado, James. "Honestly, it doesn't really taste like anything." I replied. "Well, how many times have you had it before?" It then hit me—this was the second time I could consciously remember eating the dish.

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[2] The Guardian: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/apr/19/race.britishidentity
[3] [3] Collingham, L. *Curry: A tale of cooks and conquerors.* pg.3

The first time I got a glimpse of the British affinity to the dish was in Berlin. It was the summer of 2008 and I was meeting a British friend of my cousin's to discuss the two UK schools I was interested in attending. To this day, I do not really remember most of the conversation, but I do remember the sweetly reminiscent manner in which this expat spoke about eating chicken tikka masala in the early hours of the morning after a night of drinking. He proudly told me that chicken tikka masala was the national dish of the Britain. I could not help but think "*Really? A curry is your national dish? What the heck is chicken tikka masala anyway?*"

I cannot pinpoint where my repulsion of chicken tikka masala began. There is not a recallable memory that involves me eating the dish and finding the taste completely horrific. I think the revulsion grew over time and with increasing frequencies of remarks like:

> *"You're Indian?"*
> *"Well I'm American, but my parents were born in India."*
> *"I love Indian food. _____ is my favorite Indian dish.*

Often chicken tikka masala would occupy that blank. I should mention that I am quite happy that people possess a fondness for Indian food and I think it is quite endearing that people want to share that sentiment. I can totally understand the passion that various dishes and cuisines can stir in a person; however, I think over time I would continually think in my head "*Oh, chicken tikka masala, well that's not really Indian."* I did not dare say this out loud because I did not want to come across as the smug "insider", but this suppression eventually led to an outright hatred of the dish. At least that is my best guess.

I eventually decided to attend the University College London, which is where I first met James. At that point, my disgust of chicken tikka masala had grown exponentially. As a fan of the dish, James offered to cook it for me in order to try to get me on his chicken tikka team. I remember I did not want to be rude and say I did not like it; however, I came away from it thinking it was not bad, but not particularly amazing either.

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Chicken tikka masala can be found in many Indian restaurants in the UK and in the US; however, the ubiquity and resonance of the dish was personally marked by the various forms the dish took on. For example, Walkers, a potato chip company in the UK, came out with a "Chicken Tikka Masala flavored crisp". Now if a major potato chip producer decided to create a chicken tikka masala flavored chip, in my mind, the dish itself has to be quite popular.

Given the popularity of the dish, many parties set out to proclaim that they were the masterminds behind creating it. In 2009, the MP of Central Glasgow, Mohammed Sarwar,

motioned for Parliament to recognize Ali Ahmed Aslam's restaurant in the Glasgow West End area, Shish Mahal, as the official birthplace of chicken tikka masala.[4]

This move was quickly met with backlash from a group of Delhi food historians. Some claimed that the dish has Punjabi origins, while others asserted the dish dated back to Mughal times.[5] While the exact Indian origin of the dish is still debatable, the aforementioned food historians vehemently argue that the dish originated in India, not the UK.

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I could not manage to finish the massive tray of food in front of me so I packed the rest and put it in my fridge. That night I attended the first meeting of the Anthropology Graduate Student Association and needless to say, I consumed a decent amount of alcohol. By the next morning I was happily not hungover, but I was ravenous.

As I opened the fridge, I saw the styrofoam container that house my leftovers from the day before. I quickly took out the container and plopped the contents on a plate and stuck it in the microwave. After a minute and a half on high, a steaming mix of what had once been separated entities of rice, naan, saag paneer and chicken tikka masala emerged as an amalgamation of food to assuage my burning appetite.

That first bite was glorious. It still did not taste like anything, but it did not have to because it was warm and hearty and I was really hungry. After I finished eating, I finally understood the appeal of dish to my cousin's friend back in Berlin. I cannot say that chicken tikka masala is my new go to food after a night of drinking, but my overall disdain for the dish diffused after that morning.

Photo: My morning after amalgamation

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[4] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/food/article-1201268/The-great-chicken-tikka-riddle-Glasgow-MP-tables-motion-Britains-favourite-curry-stems-Scotland.html

[5] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/5972643/Chicken-tikka-masala-row-grows-as-Indian-chefs-reprimand-Scottish-MPs-over-culinary-origins.html

As the popularity of chicken tikka masala grew, various recipes on the dish emerged, 48 according to Real Curry Restaurant Guide. Some were quite complex and used a variety of spices and ingredients, while others were quite simple. James claims that the best chicken tikka masala he ever had essentially tasted like chicken mixed with jarred ragu sauce, milk and sugar. He said the sugar was the key.

Various recipes emerged; however, the only common ingredient was chicken. [6]

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After having someone else cook chicken tikka masala for me and eating it at a restaurant, I thought I would try to make my own version of the dish. I drew inspiration from a recipe found in a book about the history of curry[7], allrecipes.com[8], and to get a Briton in the mix, Jamie Oliver[9]. Of course, my own background and experiences played a role in the ingredients I put in.

> Ingredients: 4 chicken thighs, ½ packet (25g) of chicken tikka bbq mix, 1 can of diced tomatoes, 1 can of coconut milk, 1 small yellow onion, 4 cloves of garlic, 1tablespoon of garam masala, 1 tablespoon of turmeric, 2 tablespoons of ginger-garlic paste, ½ teaspoon of freshly ground cardamom, 1 teaspoon of freshly ground coriander, 1 teaspoon of freshly ground black pepper, ½ teaspoon of paprika, ½ teaspoon of salt, 1 tablespoon of almond butter, 1 pinch of crushed red pepper, some butter to grease the pans.

Photo: Most of the ingredients used

I first marinated the chicken using the wonderful pre-made "Chicken Tikka BBQ", which I finally bought after debating between that and the tandoori mix, and about a quarter can of coconut milk. After fully coating the chicken with my marinade, I put it in the refrigerator, where it remained for about an hour.

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[6] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/food/article-1201268/The-great-chicken-tikka-riddle-Glasgow-MP-tables-motion-Britains-favourite-curry-stems-Scotland.html
[7] Collingham 10-11
[8] http://allrecipes.com/Recipe/chicken-tikka-masala/detail.aspx
[9] http://www.jamieoliver.com/recipes/chicken-recipes/chicken-tikka-masala

Before grilling the chicken, I decided to make the masala. I started by coating my pan with butter and when the butter warmed up, I put in the chopped onion and the chopped cloves of garlic. As the onions and garlic cooked I started my symphony of spices: bright orange turmeric, followed by earthy garam masala—then an intermission with some ginger-garlic paste—resuming back to the main program with freshly broken coriander seeds, followed by personal favorite spice, cardamom, which was accompanied with a trio of salt, black pepper and a hint of crushed pepper. The grand finale was some blood red paprika, which I added purely for the aesthetic element.

The diced tomatoes were added, as well as the coconut milk. This was when I looked at my concoction and I realized the lumpy consistency created by the diced tomatoes was unappealing. Quickly, I scooped as much of the masala as I could and put it in my food processer. 10 seconds later a beautiful smooth masala emerged and was immediately returned to the pan. I finally added the almond butter. In Lizzie Collingham's chicken tikka masala recipe, it calls for "crushed almonds, mixed to a paste with warm water." I honestly could not be bothered to do undertake such a task, but the inclusion of almonds intrigued me so I stirred in some almond butter that I already happen to have on hand.

It was then time for the chicken. I was ready to break in my caste iron grill pan with the marinated chicken. Beautiful charred grill marks impressed themselves on each piece of chicken and as each batch of chicken finished cooking, they were continuously added to the masala, which was simmering on the adjacent burner.

After all the chicken had been cooked and incorporated into the masala, it was time to eat.

Photo: The final product

I shared this meal with my roommate, Sally, who kindly cooked the rice for the meal. I bought some brown rice, which I never ate before, and I was pleasantly surprised that I really enjoyed the taste and texture of it. As a person who likes her pasta al dente, the subtle chewiness of brown nice was welcome. As a side dish, we had my favorite mango pickle, the 1-kg container of Shan Mango Pickle, which I happened to find when searching

for some ingredients for the dish. This was the first meal that just Sally and I shared together since moving in. It was definitely a joint effort in orchestrating the endeavor and the end result was fully satisfying.

It was the best chicken tikka masala I ever tasted; bearing in mind that I consciously remember having the dish just 2 times before and I added ingredients that I definitely liked and in the case of cardamom, that I loved.

A small part of me still cringes at the fact I designated this dish to be chicken tikka masala; however, I would have never made my version if I did not go through this journey of confronting a dish that I once loathed. Reflecting back on my initial aversion for the dish, I believe key factor had to do with authenticity. Even though we can consciously challenge the paradigm of authenticity, there still lingers a sense of pride that can potentially overshadow rationality. I know that the pizza we consume in America is not "authentic" to Italy or that fortune cookies have highly debatable Chinese origins; however, the authenticity of these dishes never really impacted my enjoyment of them. The difference came when the culture in question happened to be one I was closely linked to and that is when it got personal. How could a dish that was seemingly so "un-Indian" turn into the poster child for Indian cuisine?

My confrontation with chicken tikka masala did not provide total closure with the issue surrounding authenticity, instead, it stirred my interest in the matter and I hope to investigate the issue more in the future. It did, however, allow me to let go of a sense of pride that I did not know existed in me and instead of taking the seemingly unfound popularity of the dish personally, I simply made it personal.