

## Food for Thought

Recipes and food features

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### Curry: The Spice of India

*Curry* is an umbrella term for both a type of spice and a style of dish. Both are associated with India. But is this a truly authentic part of Indian cuisine? Learn more about curry and how to make your own spice mix in this activity.

#### Preparations & Tips

- This is a copy of the complete activity for the facilitator to use.
- Bring in some curry spice (available in most grocery stores) to pass around for participants to see and smell.



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### Curry: The Spice of India

#### Introduction

What is curry? It gets confusing, because there's curry, the plant; curry, the spice; and curry, the food dish! Even more bewildering, it turns out that there are also two plants called curry, only one of which is edible. Furthermore, *curry* isn't a word that's used to describe food dishes in India. It's a British invention. Let's learn more!

#### Curry, the Plant

As mentioned above, there are two plants called curry: the curry plant and the curry leaf tree. They are not the same plant, and they come from two different parts of the world.

The curry plant, *Helichrysum italicum*, is a member of the daisy family. It grows on dry, rocky, sandy ground around the Mediterranean, and it's called the curry plant because of the strong smell of its leaves. However, it has nothing to do with cooking. It is not edible and should be used only for wreaths or potpourri.



The other curry plant, the curry leaf tree, *Murraya koenigii*, belongs to the citrus fruit family and is native to India. The leaves are called either sweet neem leaves or curry leaves. They have a citrusy, bitter, and sweet smell to them, and they are used in the same way as bay leaves. They can often be found at Indian and Asian food markets.

To bring out the flavor of the leaves, it's recommended that they first be cooked in oil before other ingredients are added. Unlike bay leaves, curry tree leaves are edible, and are usually left in the dish when served.

## Discussion Starters

- What does curry smell like to you? Do you like the smell?
- Have you cooked with curry? What are some of the dishes you have made with it?
- Have you eaten at an Indian restaurant? Did you enjoy it? Did you get a dish with curry?

## Curry, the Spice

Curry isn't a single spice. Rather, it's a combination of many spices, and there are as many curry spice combinations as there are cooks. Any given curry mix may contain as few as five spices or as many as 10 different spices.

Spices typically found in curry include coriander, cumin, turmeric, black pepper, and dried mustard. Often added are cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, cayenne, ginger, fennel, fenugreek, and garlic. Creating one's own curry powder can be a bit like mixing a formula for a science experience.

Similar spice blends have been used for more than 4,000 years, but the word *curry* is only used by Westerners. The word is thought to come from *kari*, a word meaning "sauce" from the Tamil language of South India. The British misunderstood the word to mean the dish or the spices and began using the word to describe anything that evoked the flavor of the dishes they came to love in India.

Curry is so popular in Britain that it is considered a national dish. In fact, National Curry Week is celebrated there in October.

## Discussion Starters

- Before this activity, did you realize that curry is a blend of spices?
- Would you like to know how to make your own curry spice? Here is a [link to the recipe](#).

## Curry, the Food Dish

*Curry* is a catch-all term for any dish made with rice and a spicy sauce. It may include meat, such as lamb, rabbit, chicken, or beef. The first English curry recipe was published in 1747 by Hannah Glasse, "To Make a Currey the India Way."

But the origins of curry go back at least 4,000 years. Traces of cooked ginger and turmeric were found in starch grains—rice—embedded in human teeth unearthed in the Indus Valley in India. This ancient civilization was one of the world's first urban cultures, and apparently, curry was popular even then! It may be the oldest continuously prepared dish in history.

Curry has evolved over the years. When chiles were found in Mexico and South America, they were introduced in Asia and incorporated into curry recipes. Today, commonly known curries in East Asia include red, green, yellow, massaman, and panang curries, along with many others.



In India, curry dishes are traditionally cooked in a tandoor, or clay oven. Typical dishes associated with India include chicken tikka masala, lamb vindaloo, and korma. Tikka masala is aromatic, slightly smoky and sweet, with a hint of coconut from the milk used to create the sauce. Vindaloo was originally a Portuguese dish, and the name comes from the Portuguese words *vinho*, meaning “wine,” and *alhos*, meaning “garlic.” Today, it usually includes potatoes and is a spicy dish. Korma is actually a method of cooking rather than a dish itself. With korma, the food is simmered for a long time in a sauce often made with yogurt.

### **Summary**

Curry has been around for a very long time. There may have been a mistranslation between the peoples of India and those of Great Britain, but the flavors have spread throughout the world, and curry is one of the most popular cuisines across the globe today.

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