

The masala stone

Bernard Appassamy | 12 November 2014
19 Comments



Some envy my ever-lasting tan. The child of horrified Caucasian friends asked why I was always dirty. The colour of my skin. Described as chocolate brown, *café au lait* or olive. In various shades across my body. It matters because it testifies my family's roots, and speaks of a proud love that defied its times.

Comarassamy Soupa Chetty, my paternal great grandfather, was the son of Appassamy Soupa Chetty, a Tamil merchant migrant from India's South East, who settled in Mauritius in the first mid-half of the 19th century. Comarassamy converted as an adult to marry Anne Euchariste Clam, a Catholic with a family name allegedly of Dutch ancestry. He then changed his full name to Joseph Appassamy.



Any country with a colonial heritage carries sensitive layers of identities, Mauritius more so because of its size, no indigenous population, and a hybrid nation born from waves of European, African and Asian immigration. The inevitable process of mixed marriages has been excruciating and scarring. Anne and Joseph's budding affection must have been fearless; their commitment endured and led to six children and more than one hundred current descendants across the globe.

In 1968, the independence of Mauritius from the UK divided the country, raised racial tensions and provoked riots. Thousands emigrated. The extended Appassamy family was split with a portion moving to Australia. My parents chose to stay with my two sisters and me. I recall distressing farewells at Plaisance airport and Quay D at Port Louis harbour, and my family standing watching the Qantas plane or the 'Patris' ship depart, gradually shrink, and grow fainter till it vanished.

Families, like mine, that are born from migration are reborn punctually through the scent of their cuisine. I like to think that the Indian curry has transcended its origin, slowly bridged Mauritian ethnic communities, and established its own version as a national treasure. For those who left, the making of a curry remains a patriotic ritual.

What defines a uniquely Mauritian curry? A sound, more than a taste or recipe, comes first to my mind. It's a late afternoon in the early 70s. I'm a teenager doing my schoolwork at my desk in my bedroom. A grinding rhythm from the garden is audible through my window. Leaning over the *ros kari*, Jessie, our family cook, is crushing spices for the evening curry. With her two hands, she holds flat a cylindrical stone, the *baba*, and rolls it with her wrists back and forth, on a large rectangular base, the *mama*. Both are solid grey basalt hand-chiseled by *tonbalis*, stonemasons, from the volcanic boulders of Mauritius.



I see Jessie as a priestess and the *ros kari* as her altar, officiating a marriage of sorts between aromatic spouses. Their names and colours evoke a primeval celebration: gold turmeric, crimson chillies, emerald curry leaves, amber coriander seeds, khaki cumin and more. Some are roasted, others dried or fresh. Proportions vary. A little flicked water, then and again, to bind the paste, is compulsory. It takes skill and years of practice to drive a *ros kari*, to develop a method that pulsates and reiterates, and imparts the essence of the basalt stone into the masala.

Later, Jessie picks the oldest pot with broken handles to cook her curry. She heats up the oil before frying the masala, and a new magic begins. Jessie flings open a door to a pungent, intoxicating world that tickles and stings. The house is silent but the kitchen is exploding.

At my desk, I am distracted. Soon I race to Jessie having torn a piece of bread on the way. She is expecting me and, from a cooking spoon, tips some sauce on my bread.

I savour Jessie's curry. She glows as, with my mouth full and my eyes watering, I nod effusively my appreciation.

For those Mauritians who still choose to prepare a curry from scratch, the *ros kari* has, of course, been supplanted by a panoply of blitzing appliances. The majority, including myself, reach for curry powder mix. The action of adding just enough water to make a paste, and frying the paste remains the same. While some argue that the test is in the taste, a traditional masala remains, more than a benchmark, evidence of a forgone sensual harmony.

Jessie is now long retired. Her signature curry is eggplant with *sevet*, tiny local freshwater shrimps. My late uncle Jacques, who migrated to Sydney with his *baba* in his luggage on Qantas, and his *mama* in a wooden crate that followed on the 'Patris', kept for decades the Sydney-based Appassamy clan queuing at gatherings for his ox tail curry, nibbling the juicy, gelatinous meat from the bones, and sucking the marrow.

The colour of my skin? I prefer masala.



Bernard Appassamy is a Sydney writer and artist who is a bilingual medical care coordinator.

Photo credit: Marie-Claude Pascal.

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EXISTING COMMENTS

Thank you for the article. I am married to a Mauritian and until reading your article wondered why I love cooking a Mauritian Curry when our children come over. My benchmark is my mother-in-laws curry. I try hard but never quite reach her standard. Let me be bold - any chance of your recipe?

Joan Moutou | 12 November 2014

Merci pour ce partage très émouvant.

Jacqueline | 12 November 2014

Thanks so much, Joan. Maybe Mauritian curries have magical unifying powers? As for a recipe, I am like you - trying again and again. But I'm happy to share two tricks that work for me. First, the curry powder of the Fiji Markets shop in Newtown, Sydney. It's the owners' family recipe (a story in itself) and, in my view, the closest taste to a traditional Mauritian masala. That's Australia for you. Second, I purée an entire bunch of fresh coriander with one onion, one tomato, garlic and ginger that I add to my masala paste before frying the lot. Oh, and only ever use your oldest cooking pot. It's got to have soul. Best of luck.

Bernard Appassamy | 12 November 2014

et je voudrais ajouter : texte rempli de saveurs, de parfums et de couleurs bien de chez nous...

Jacqueline | 12 November 2014

A wonderful description. I can almost smell and taste the rich aromatic spices. I have always been fascinated by the interwoven cultures of Mauritius. Thank you for sharing your story, Bernard,

Anne | 12 November 2014

Thank you for this article..It brought tears to my eyes.I left Mauritius in 1969 and like you,the Ros Kari held an impressive spot in our yard. One of my favorite time was to used a bit of "Dipain Maison " and clean dry the Mama after a Satini coco had just been made..

George Siniska | 12 November 2014

great piece, bernard. reminds me of the old mauritius. i have a ros kari that stands idle behind my garage. the electric grinder has put the ros kari out of business. happy that we have people like you who keep reminding us of what mauritius was before.

subash gobine | 12 November 2014

the unbearable witness of stones....baba, mama. what a beautiful telling. merci.

Dead Ned's Head | 13 November 2014

Mmmmmm! I am salivating! Thank you Bernard for this beautiful evocative piece.

Marie-Rose A | 14 November 2014

Thank you Bernard, as usual a beautiful piece of writing. You sure know how to bring back memories. We, too, have a ros kari & a baba in the garden, a reminder of the "letan lontan". A little addition to my curries is a leaf of Kaffir Lime, it is worth a try. Thank you again.

Veronique Davy | 14 November 2014

Such a vivid description, one could actually smell the delicious aroma and feel very hungry. Such beautiful childhood memories, so difficult to recreate.

J Phiniefs | 14 November 2014

"The house is silent but the kitchen is exploding" - such a powerful fragment of deep memory - thank you for the pleasure of this evocative piece.

cecile yazbek | 15 November 2014

Yum. As emigrated Mauritians, curry remains our all time favorite dish. Got to stock up on masala when in Mru... I love your writings. They conjure up memories of my childhood. Thanks for sharing!

Anick | 19 November 2014

I loved this piece, and like Marie-Rose, I'm salivating. My mother used to try to make a curry now and then, but it was but a pale echo... And the mention of the Patris: part of my own story. Thank you!

Gillian Bouras | 20 November 2014

A beautiful inspiring story from the heart. Thank you for allowing us a peek into your family history. I too prefer masala.

Vivian | 23 November 2014

What a wonderful article! It so beautifully captures the immigrant experience with such a rich focus on the importance of the foods of our childhood and culture. I loved the description of Jessie's preparations. Thank you, Bernard!

Barbara Bartlett | 25 November 2014

I have been looking for 2 recipes for a long time now. 1. Masala paste. 2. Roti (manilla) not faratah! I would be infinitely grateful if you could get them for me. Thank you very much. Kindest regards, Josiane.

Josiane Saminaden | 11 February 2015

Need to purchase the masala stone - where can I get it to buy. Thx.

farida khan | 06 May 2017

Salut neighbour! What a nostalgic trip back in time... from Brisbane where I now live, got there in 1991 via MK and BA via SQ! After reading you, I can still remember/early evening flavoured here emanating from our respective houses on Venkatasamy Street... our own Jessie was called Roseline and she is sadly no longer with us, she was quite a vigorous Rodriguan spinster and I believe her ros kari skills were up there as well... Interestingly, we visited some Mauritian friends of my parents' near Camberwell, Sydney and I reckon Robert M, the retired Nurse, turns out to be the best and closest replicator of our Jessie-Roseline's combined grinding skills... It's been over 20 years and I memory still remains... Cheers and Best Regards, JV

Jean-Vincent Dubois | 29 January 2018

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