

The flavours of India



Curry ist eigentlich kein Gewürz, sondern ein Gericht.
Undritisches Curry ist kein indisches Gericht, sondern eine gute Geschäftsidee.
Was ist dann ein echtes Curry?

INEZ SHARP fragte einen indischen Koch aus Birmingham.

medium 

The British love Indian food. Every day, thousands of portions of chicken tikka masala, vegetable korma and chicken balti are served in restaurants and pubs, ordered as takeaways or picked up as ready meals in shops. The supermarket giant Sainsbury's sells around 1.6 million portions of chicken tikka masala each year.

Just how authentic are the dishes British people order when they have "an Indian" for supper? Asian food experts say these recipes have their roots in India, but have been changed so as to be almost unrecognizable. In fact, an Indian restaurant owner in Glasgow claims to have invented the recipe for chicken tikka masala.

Now, as an antidote to Anglo-Indian cuisine, a number of chefs are offering British diners the real flavours of India. Aktar Islam, whose restaurant, Lasan, in Birmingham has won nine awards in the past two years, including Best Local Restaurant in the UK 2010, is one such chef. *Spotlight* spoke to him about Indian food in Britain.

Spotlight: Mr Islam, can you tell us about your background and how you became interested in Indian cooking?

Aktar Islam: I was born in Birmingham in 1980 and have spent most of my life in the city. Cooking — the restaurant trade — has been part of my family for three generations. My grandfather was a restaurateur, and my father runs his own restaurant. But my love of food started off at home. My mother's a very talented cook. She encouraged this passion of mine, which led to a full-time career.

Spotlight: Is your cooking influenced by some particular cultural background?

Islam: My cooking at home concentrates on recipes from Bengal, a north-east region of the Indian subcontinent, because that's where my parents come from. But they both moved here at a very early age. And you know, being in Britain with people who aren't just from the Bengali community, but also from various parts of the subcontinent, the influences in the kitchen became quite varied. So not only would we have good Bengali food, but also food from the south, west and north of India, depending on my mother's social network.

Spotlight: How would you define Bengali cooking?

Islam: We use a lot of fish and vegetables, and we tend to have sauces that are a lot thinner than what people are used to in Indian restaurants here. Bengali sauces are also much spicier and stronger. A lot of that comes from the use of mustard oil and other types of oil. We use mustard oil and mustard seed and various other strong flavours, such as from curry leaves.

Spotlight: How long have you been working at Lasan? Does the name have a meaning?

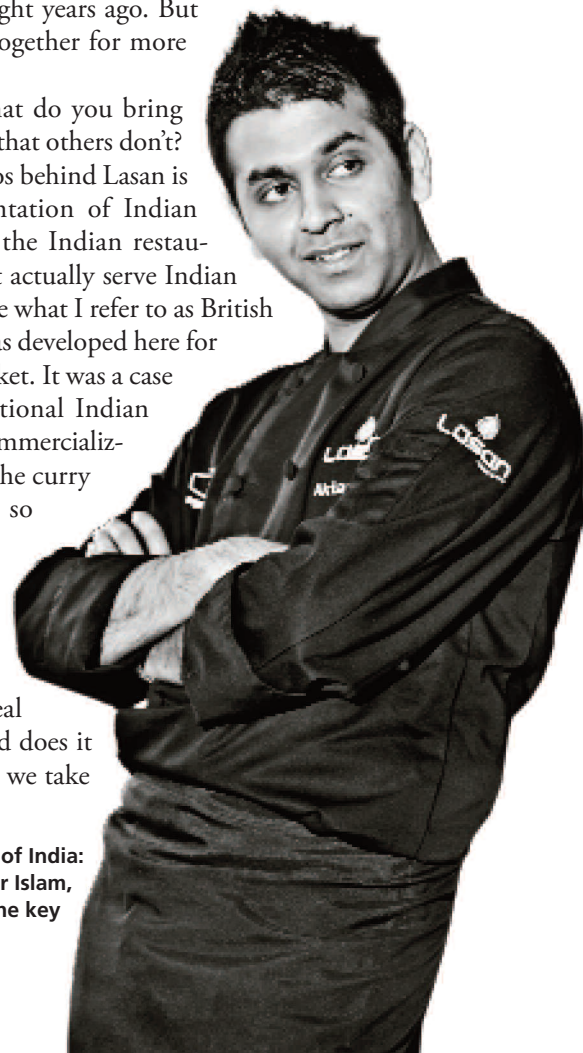
Islam: Yes, *lasan* is the Hindi word for garlic. I set up Lasan with my business partner Jabbar Khan eight years ago. But we've worked together for more than ten years.

Spotlight: What do you bring to the business that others don't?

Islam: The ethos behind Lasan is a true representation of Indian food. Most of the Indian restaurants here don't actually serve Indian food. They serve what I refer to as British curry, which was developed here for the British market. It was a case of taking traditional Indian cooking and commercializing it to make the curry that we are all so used to now.

What has been served as Indian food is, in fact, far removed from real Indian food and does it an injustice. So we take

**A "real" taste of India:
for chef Aktar Islam,
authenticity is the key**



Shorshe Mach Bengali-style fish in mustard sauce

SERVES 2

INGREDIENTS

4 pieces of **sea bass**, cut in 4 cm fillets
 2 medium-size onions, finely chopped
 dried **peel** of a small orange
 2 teaspoons (tsp) **turmeric**
 2 tablespoons mustard oil
 1 tsp chilli powder
 3/4 tsp coriander powder
 1/2 tsp **nigella seeds**
 1 1/2 tsp mustard seeds
 1/2 tsp salt
 3 green chillies, **split** and **deseeded**
 lemon juice
 350 ml water

METHOD

Add some salt to the fish as well as a **pinch** of turmeric. Heat the mustard oil in a pan and lightly fry the fish until almost cooked. Set aside. Then mix the remaining turmeric, coriander and chilli powder with water to make a paste. Add nigella seeds to the oil, cook for about a minute, then add the turmeric paste and **stir**. Add the salt, onion and orange peel. Add more water to the sauce and cook at low heat for five minutes. Pour in the remaining water and cook at low heat for ten minutes. Mix the mustard seeds and one green chilli together with a pinch of salt to make a paste. Return the fish pieces to the pan. Stir mustard paste into the sauce without **overworking** the fish. Add a little more salt and the remaining green chillies. Cook at low heat for another two minutes. Add a very small amount of lemon juice. Remove the fish from the pan. Continue to cook the sauce until reduced. Spoon the sauce over the fish and serve.



In the kitchen: Islam's attention to spices makes the difference

authentic Indian cooking — practices, **ingredients** and so on — and make it lighter and healthier in our restaurant.

Spotlight: Then you offer dishes from all over India — not just Bengali areas?

Islam: We explore the culinary variety of the Indian sub-continent. Cooking practices vary from region to region and from religion to religion. Historically, different cultures have influenced cooking in India. For example, we may have dishes that draw on, say, the Mogul style of cooking — at its peak in the 17th and 18th centuries —

alongside recipes from the Konkan coast, which have strong Portuguese influences from the 19th century. To give you an idea of the variety at Lasan, you could begin with a lamb dish from Hyderabad, followed by a Bengali fish curry [see recipe above] or a vegetarian mushroom-and-potato dish from the Punjab.

Spotlight: Does the menu at Lasan change?

Islam: Yes, we change the menu about once a **quarter**. There are some dishes that we almost always have, such as south Indian fish curries and a pan-roast chicken Jalfrezi.

Spotlight: Is there one ingredient that you would never want to be without?

Islam: The Indian **lime**, or lemon, is a great ingredient. It adds a lovely **flavour** and is also a healthy element. By using it as **seasoning**, you don't have to add so much salt to a dish, which, of course, makes it better for you. ●

antidote [ˈæntɪdəʊt]	Gegenmittel; hier: Gegenbewegung
balti [ˈbɔːltɪ]	kleiner Metalltopf; Gericht mit wenig Soße
chef [ʃef]	Koch, Köchin
deseeded [ˌdiːˈsiːdɪd]	die Samen entfernt
diner [ˈdɪnə]	Restaurantgast
dish [dɪʃ]	Gericht
flavour [ˈfleɪvə]	Geschmack, Aroma
garlic [ˈgɑːlɪk]	Knoblauch
ingredient [ɪnˈɡriːdiənt]	Zutat
injustice [ɪnˈdʒʌstɪs]	Unrecht
korma [ˈkɔːmə]	eine Curry-Soße
lime [laɪm]	Limette

masala [məˈsɑːlə]	Gewürzmischung
nigella seeds [nɪˈdʒelə ˌsiːdz]	Zwiebelsamen, Schwarzkümmel
overwork [ˌəʊvəˈwɜːk]	hier: in Mitleidenschaft ziehen
peel [piːl]	Schale
pinch [pɪntʃ]	Prise (→ p. 57)
quarter [ˈkwɔːtə]	Vierteljahr (→ p. 57)
recipe [ˈresəpi]	Kochrezept
restaurateur [ˌrestəˈɔːtɜː]	Restaurantbesitzer(in)
sea bass [ˈsiː bæz]	Europäischer Wolfsbarsch
seasoning [ˈsiːzənɪŋ]	Würze
spicy [ˈspeɪsi]	scharf, stark gewürzt
split [splɪt]	aufgeschnitten
stir [stɜː]	umrühren
turmeric [ˈtɜːməɪk]	Kurkuma, Gelbwurz