

## CONTEMPORARY BRITISH GASTRONOMY - AN EXAMPLE OF GLOBALIZATION

### GASTRONOMIA BRITANICĂ CONTEMPORANĂ – EXEMPLU AL GLOBALIZĂRII

ELENA NISTOR\*, ELENA LOREDANA POHRIB\*, MALA-MARIA STAVRESCU-BEDIVAN\* EUGEN-CLAUDIU DUMITRESCU\*

*\*University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Bucharest*

**Abstract:** *The present paper aims to introduce an attempt of interdisciplinary approach to some significant issues of contemporary gastronomic culture in Britain. The Indian culinary art represents a combination between different types of cooking. The base for most Indian dishes is condiments, with the most powerful impact upon British cuisine, a typical example being ‘chicken tikka masala’, a sort of Indian-influenced food existing only in England. Through some concrete examples, the paper is trying to demonstrate that the contemporary period has surpassed radical division and separatist attitudes, evolving to moderate and moderating philosophy and practice of globalization.*

**Rezumat:** *Lucrarea de față își propune o încercare de abordare interdisciplinară a câtorva aspecte semnificative ale culturii gastronomice contemporane din Arhipelagul Britanic. Artă culinară indiană reprezintă o combinație între diversele moduri de gătit ale numeroaselor etnii aparținând teritoriului Indiei. Baza majorității preparatelor indiene o constituie aromele condimentelor, acestea fiind cele care au avut impactul cel mai puternic asupra bucătăriei britanice, exemplul tipic fiind chicken tikka masala, un fel de mâncare cu influențe indiene care există numai în Anglia. Prin câteva exemple concrete, lucrarea va încerca să demonstreze că perioada contemporană a depășit etapa sciziunii și atitudinile separatiste radicale, evoluând spre filosofia și practica moderată și moderatoare a globalizării.*

**Key words:** *Anglo-Indian cuisine, garam masala, curry, sushi, globalization*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *bucătărie anglo-indiană, garam masala, curry, sushi, globalizare*

#### INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the concept of identity has become complicated and problematic, as standards turn into a matter of personal choice out of multiple options. The traditional notion of identity is now perceived as artificial. Real identity abolishes taboos, refusing obedience to constraints in order to respond to the Third Millennium realities. Trying to exceed isolation, gastronomy has paradoxically become a way to celebrate emancipation, release from patterns and redefinition of individuality.

A representative example for the dissolution of distinctions is England, a multicultural space *par excellence* where the Anglo-Saxon culinary traditions are revaluated, based on the minorities' creativity, particularly Oriental. Under the influence of the existing culinary styles, British cuisine is passing through a rediscovery phase.

#### MATERIALS AND METHOD

Considering the contemporary cultural changes resulting from the complex reality which is challenging traditions, standards, and norms, the paper is primarily based on data collected from literature (among which Edward Said's masterpiece 'Orientalism' and the excellent study by the anthropologist Kate Fox on the English people's unuttered rules of behaviour), completed with information from the Internet.

Our research approach is mainly descriptive, aiming to demonstrate that, in addition to language, cuisine may be regarded as the intellectual means by which post-colonial communication and reflection takes place.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Basically, man is a social animal, with an inherent drive to contact and communication. Food sharing is part of the human capacity to interact with others since food has always been an element of cohesion and solidarity, reinforcing interactions at both physical and metaphysical level. To partake in a meal is become a member of a ceremony which dissolves distinctions and limitations, as the French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva noticed:

“The meeting often begins with a food fest: bread, salt, and wine. A meal, a nutritive communion. The one confesses he is a famished baby, the other welcomes the greedy child; for an instant, they merge within the hospitality ritual. [...] The nourishing and initially somewhat animal banquet rises to the vaporous levels of dreams and ideas: the hospitality merry-makers also become united for a while through the spirit. A miracle of flesh and thought, the banquet of hospitality is the foreigners’ utopia – the cosmopolitanism of a moment, the brotherhood of guests who soothe and forget their differences, the banquet is outside of time. It imagines itself eternal...” (KRISTEVA 11-12).

Food sharing gives the participants a sense of belonging, as aliments become a contributing factor to the development of self-identification. And Anglo-Indian cuisine is an illustrative instance of commonality.

In 1978, the American thinker EDWARD SAID published one of the most influential books for the Western world, ‘Orientalism’, in which he referred to the British and French occupation of Asian and African countries, articulating a mutually constitutive process of assimilation: if the West had conquered the East politically, the Western world had, in turn, been permeated by the Orient’s history and culture.

Thus, SAID provided an analysis concerning the deconstruction of the old-fashioned perceptions of power and oppression that had been adopted during the time of colonialism, together with the post-colonial reverse movement that has marked a new type of conquest, based on convergence rather than clash between cultures.

The present-day relationship between India and the United Kingdom is a special instance of the above, given the colonial history of both countries. As far as gastronomy is concerned, the acceptance of the Indian culinary legacy that is being widely assimilated by the British cookery tradition in a self-confident manner, resulting in the attractive Anglo-Indian cuisine. Tracing its roots back to the mixed marriages between the local women and the British colonizers, and the community created through the blending between the native and the new traditions and customs, the new cooking style was born out of the common inheritance, that is, the imperial tradition of copious food doubled by the rich indigenous herbs and spices.

In this manner, a radical change in mentality took place, in that the British acquired “the deep-seated, enduring, inborn love of food that is to be found among our European neighbours, and indeed in most other cultures” (FOX 296).

Full of mystery and flavour, old Indian cuisine is a combination between the various cooking styles of the numerous peoples and cultures of this country. Most dishes are based on various spices, each used in certain circumstances and for certain purposes, either fresh or dried, in pieces or as powder, hald or fully fried, roasted, charred, etc., depending on the taste expected. There is an old saying according to which spices enrich food and water; thus, each dish should include a certain amount of spice, or else food will not be savoury.

Spices were probably first discovered when ancient humans learned to cook. Ever since the ancient times, humankind learnt that many fruit and leaves not only made food tastier and more aesthetically appealing, but were also good means of health protection.

Herbs and spices came from India, the cradle of the Old World, being spread through a vast trade network including China, Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt. Often used as currency, eventually they reached Europe; in 802 AD, Charlemagne issued a collection of laws and regulations on the growing of spice and herbs, among which garlic, tarragon, thyme, cress, rosemary, coriander, and sage. The demand in spices increased in Western Europe during the Crusades: a symbol of richness, they were offered as gifts to rulers or as price for ransoms.

After the year 1780, the bankruptcy of the East Indies Company turned London into the most important centre of spice trade with Sri Lanka and India. However, in the 19th century, the demand in spices decreased gradually, being replaced by other products. After World War II, spices regained popularity in Europe, attracting modern cooks' attention, and the second half of the 20th century marked an increased fascination with exotic cuisine and spices.

Among the most frequently used spices and herbs there are: pepper, saffron, ginger, mint, coriander, fenugreek, cumin, nutmeg, etc. They can often be found in the mixture known as 'garam masala'. The term refers to a combination of spices; nevertheless, the combination is not constant: depending on the geographic area and personal taste, each Indian cook creates 'garam masala' according to its own recipe. There is a general difference between the 'garam masala' powder and paste, although both contain coriander, cumin, cloves, nutmeg and pepper; sometimes the mixture includes chilli, mint, and fresh coriander.

Just like each nation has brought its own cultural contribution to the foremost global power of the British Empire, so each spice and herb is brought into the mixture of 'garam masala' in certain proportions.

Much used in Indian cuisine, cumin is one of the oldest European spices. In the Middle Ages, its seeds were thought to chase ghosts and demons away. It is appreciated for its distinct, slightly bitter and hot aroma which is yet warm and pleasant. Mixed with coriander, its bitter taste disappears. At present, cumin is on top of the aromatic herbs employed in international cuisine, thanks to its characteristic flavour given by the main components, carvone and limonene, of its fruit rich in volatile oil (3-7%).

Also essential in such mixtures as 'garam masala', tandoori and curry, Persian cumin is used to give flavour to rice-based food and chutney. Its fresh and aromatic taste somewhat resembles cumin, as the main component of its fruit is volatile oil, together with fatty oils, mucilages, and gums.

Ginger is another popular spice in Asian cuisine. It is known since the times of the Chinese philosopher and sage Confucius (500 BC), when its daily consumption was thought to lead to a long life. Equally popular in England since the British Empire, it has a delicate though stirring flavour which is remarked even among other spices.

Indispensable to curry and chutney preparation, fenugreek was also known by ancient Greek philosophers and their disciples as a stimulant for the brain. Nowadays, it is appreciated for its seeds rich in copper and iron, good for their influence on athletic performance. Appreciated for the bitter-hot and slightly flour-like taste, the fenugreek seeds contain a large amount of proteins, fats, as well as mucilages, saponosides, fitosterols, tanins, coumarins, alkaloids (trigoneline).

Coriander is one of the oldest grown plants, being mentioned in the Bible as one of the bitter herbs present at the celebration of the Hebrew Passover. Its aroma is given by the etheric oil varying between 1.5 and 2.0%, and containing 60-80% linalol, pinene, dipentene, and timole. Its fruit is piquant and aromatic.

Cardamom is a herb employed particularly to flavour coffee and tea, as well as cocoa-

based sweets, as it neutralizes the toxicity of certain alkaloids. Its French name of 'seed of love' is given by the fame it gained as a rejuvenator. The most important part of this herb is its seeds whose flavour results from the content in etheric oils (3-4%).

Cloves are said to be used "since times immemorial". Originating from the Maluku Islands, also known as the Spice Islands, they started to be transported and traded in the rest of Asia and Europe even before Christ. Their use in various mixtures brings an intense hot-sweet, highly aromatic and astringent taste which intensifies the sweet or baked dishes, and gives a special flavour to cooked meats.

The British are also famous for their full breakfast. However, the culinary influence of the centuries when India was a British colony is reflected by a breakfast known as kedgeree. This dish is actually based on the Indian khichri (lentil, rice, and spices) to which the British have added eggs, sour cream, and smoked haddock (a marine fish species which is highly popular in British cuisine).

Other two dishes originating in Indian cuisine are: *hoppers* (rice pancakes, also known as *appam*) and *mango chutney* (it is interesting that 'chutney' is an Indian word meaning 'delight').

It is not difficult to notice that Indian herbs and spices have changed the taste of British food for good since the insular nation has started "equating 'good' and 'genuine' interest in cooking with novel, foreign ingredients and new ways of preparing them" (FOX 299).

In fact, according to a recent study, one of the British nation's favourite dish is 'chicken tikka masala' – an Indian dish which, paradoxically, can only be found in England. Acknowledged as a typical national dish all over the United Kingdom (although spiced with the famous Indian curry), 'chicken tikka masala' is still a mystery in the Asian subcontinent.

This unnaturalness made the late British former government minister Robin Cook once remark that 'chicken tikka masala' is the most illustrative example of the manner in which the Empire has internalised foreign features. This unconventional type of food has come to be the ultimate symbol of cultural hybridity, metaphorically transcending any national individuality into synchronic identity.

Anglo-Indian cuisine is highly distinct from the two specific cooking styles: if traditional English cooking is closely related to beef, garlic, and tomatoes, the addition of Indian spices and herbs has resulted in unique preparates, both savoury and rich, which have created spiritual bonds between the two nations.

This current trend is highly promoted by specialised TV shows, very well-known in Britain, such as 'Ready, Steady, Cook', 'Hell's Kitchen', or the Jamie Oliver series ('The Naked Chef', 'Oliver's Twist', etc.). Dynamic and humorous, these programmes are aimed at reforming the British taste in the sense of dispelling the current assumption according to which "there is no such thing as British gastronomy, as this would require a passionate love of food, which we clearly do not have" (FOX 295).

That good food is no longer a privilege, but a right for the British has also been proven, over the recent years, by the insular nation's opening to Asian delicacies, among which *sushi*. This kind of food has become very popular both in the European countries and on the American continent.

With over 1300 years of history, *sushi* is based on the tradition of preserving fish fermented in rice for several months. After the fermentation process is finished, rice is thrown, and only the fish is consumed. In ancient times, *sushi* was considered a cheap meal for ordinary people, but nowadays it is served in the fanciest restaurants from all over the world.

The exotic *sushi* is known as a healthy delicacy, served in a very special way. Its preparation is a true art, and those who intend to obtain a qualification in this gastronomic

field, must train and specialise in famous cookery institutes, in order to become appreciated and successful.

Contrary to the popular belief, the term sushi does not refer to raw fish, but to vinegared rice, which can be (or not) associated with fish or fresh raw-seafood dishes. The freshness and quality of fish are essential when choosing the staple for sushi. Oceanic fish (tuna, mackerel, salmon or eel) is preferred because freshwater species can be a source of parasites for humans, especially in raw condition.

The following can be used as alternatives for fish: octopus, squid, cuttlefish, shrimps, oysters (however, they are not typically put into the sushi dish because the taste is thought not to go well with rice) and crab.

The sliced raw fish alone is known as sashimi and is served accordingly or together with vinegared rice (shari). A dried and pressed layer of seaweed or alga named nori is that which holds the sushi ingredients 'connected'. The most frequently used toppings for the fish-rice mix are: Japanese soy sauce (shōyu), a spiced paste (wasabi) and pickled ginger root (gari).

Not always the first contact with sushi is very pleasant, and thus the consumers' taste must be, in the gastronomic jargon, 'educated'. It is recommended first to consume portions with a less intense taste and only then others whose taste is more dominant. The drinks frequently served with sushi are: green tea (agari), sake and different types of wine.

There are different kinds of sushi: rolls wrapped in nori (makizushi), an oblong mound of sushi rice that is pressed between the palms of the hands, often served in pairs (nigirizushi), a large cone-shaped piece of nori on the outside and the ingredients spilling out the wide end (temakizushi). Beside rice, tofu can be used in sushi.

This great variety has occurred in time because of the wide range of ingredients that can be used, chef's imagination, and customers' preferences.

Also, the nutritive value of the sushi components should not be neglected: seafood and fish are a source of Omega-3 unsaturated fat and proteins; gari, avocado, cucumber and asparagus are rich in vitamins; the nori algae contain calcium, iron and iodine which make them highly energising, whereas rice provides carbohydrates.

In the United Kingdom, sushi has become almost an institution. With their long seafaring tradition, the British are great fish consumers, and the contemporary cultural transfers between the Orient and the Western world has led to a more diversified, cultured and refined taste for fish dishes.

Thus, nowadays there are over 200 de restaurants with Oriental specific in the capital of England and its surroundings. The first Yo! Sushi restaurant in London was open in the early 1970s. On top of the best rated, the following restaurants can be mentioned: Tsunami, Nobu, Sakura, and Itsu.

## CONCLUSIONS

Cooking styles are not only a process subordinated to life itself, a simple necessity, but have become an art, a performance of colour, taste, and flavour.

As Kate Fox remarked, 'English cooking has in recent years improved out of all recognition', and the English people's relationship with food has turned into an every-day spiritual ritual.

Indian food has now become an integral part of English culture: if, in the past, "mediocre food was the norm", today "is not fish and chips or steak-and-kidney pie but a proper English curry" (Fox 300).

The above examples are good proofs of compatibility between clearly defined identities that have assimilated features of national identity into a universal notion of individual

identity, surpassing radical division and separatist attitudes, and evolving to the moderate and moderating philosophy and practice of globalization.

#### **LITERATURE**

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