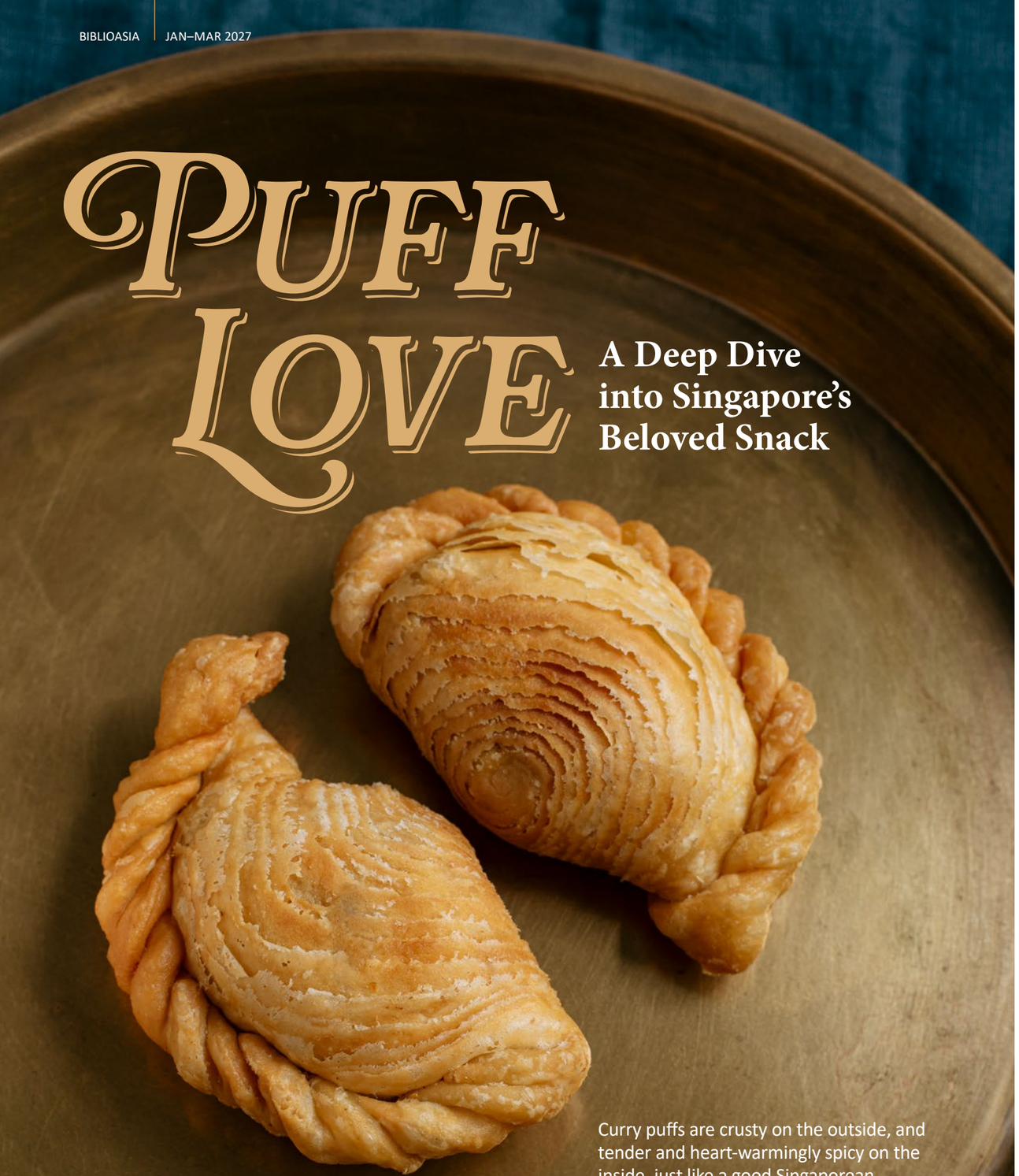
PUFF LOVE

A Deep Dive into Singapore's Beloved Snack



Curry puffs are crusty on the outside, and tender and heart-warmingly spicy on the inside, just like a good Singaporean.
By Christopher Tan

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Portable pastries packing a potent punch, curry puffs have been quintessential staples in Singapore for a long time. As far back as 1917, Victoria Confectionery (the original "Red House" bakery on Victoria Street) advertised baked curry puffs on offer "every Saturday; on other days made to order only".[1]

They were namechecked surprisingly frequently in local newspapers' coverage of society events. In July 1927, for example, the *Malaya Tribune* reported on a dance held at the Fort Canning Garrison Staff Sergeants' Mess, where "a plenitude of coffee, sandwiches and other refreshments (curry puffs greatly in demand) were served by a band of willing helpers".[2]

In the 1970s and 1980s, Mackenzie Road was dubbed "Kali Pup Lane" (after a humorously mangled mispronunciation of "curry puff") as three eateries opposite the Rex Cinema, namely Old Chang Kee, Selera Restaurant and Rex Restaurant, all sold curry puffs which were enormously popular with cinemagoers and diners.[3]

Further east, the area around the Geylang Serai Wet Market and Joo Chiat was another curry puff hub. Nooraisha Hashim, the fifth-generation owner of Haig Road Putu Piring and who grew up in that neighbourhood, recalled: "Every Friday my late grandfather would go to Masjid Khalid and then buy a full box of 10 puffs from the bakery [next door]. The triangle one with potato was my favourite."[4]

A survey of local hawker foods published in 1940 lists no less than six distinct curry puff types sold by Cantonese, Hainanese, Bengali, Tamil, Malay and "Hokkien Straits-born" (probably Chinese Peranakan) hawkers. Hainanese ones were baked but all the others were fried. Malay "kari pop" and Cantonese puffs had beef and potato filling, while Hainanese "curry pop" and Hokkien "ipok ipok" used pork and potatoes. Bengali beef and potato puffs were "folded into fancy shape" and fried in mutton fat, whereas Tamil curry puffs paired potatoes with prawns and were fried in coconut oil.[5] Echoes of these street snacks can be seen in the several kinds of curry puffs we still enjoy today.

(Facing page) Christopher Tan's fried lamb-fat curry puffs, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan.*

Epok-epok Encounters

Perhaps the most perennially popular species, *epok-epok* puffs are familiar to most Singaporeans as school tuckshop and hawker centre staples, and were once commonly prepared by students in home economics classes. Made with a dough of flour, water, a fat such as ghee, oil or margarine – sometimes mixed in while hot to yield a more tender texture – and sometimes egg, these half-moon fried puffs have curved edges crimped by hand, or sealed with a fork or plastic press. Their name comes from the Riau Malay word *epok*, meaning a small pouch traditionally used to hold betel-chewing accoutrements, which the pastry may have resembled.[6]

Adibah Ahmad, of local Malay *kueh* and snack specialist Deli Maslina, recalled that her family first started selling *epok-epok* at Mukmin Restaurant in Bedok North in 1981. "We only made one flavour, *kentang* – curried potato," her grandmother's recipe. After they opened a second larger outlet, their repertoire grew to include sardine, vegetable, egg, chicken and beef puffs. "As years went by, with many challenges in navigating the business, we even thought of [not] making our own *epok-epok* and selling frozen ones instead," Adibah shared. "However, the demand remains consistent, hence we are still producing *epok-epok* today." She observed that sardine puffs are currently the most popular flavour. "It's evergreen… something that everyone in the family can enjoy."[7]

In Malaysia, circular cousins of *epok-epok* called *tembosa* sandwich the filling between two plain (or spiralled – see next page) dough discs crimped all around their circumference. According to Malaysian culinary doyenne Kalsom Taib, "Sekiranya ditanyakan kepada lelaki dari Johor, bakal isteri yang dicari mestilah tahu mengelim karipap." ["If you ask a man from Johor, the future wife one seeks must know how to crimp curry puffs."][8]

The Indian-Muslim Karipap

Triangular or oblong, the *karipap* made by Indian Muslims uses a laminated (repeatedly layered and folded with fat) pastry dough which is sturdier and less airy than Western puff pastry. A particular rolling technique splays and displays its layers to give the baked puffs uniquely crunchy edges: Hazreen Mahmood Hussain explained this to me in her home kitchen, demonstrating how to press out a chunky dough cube into a thin square.[9]

Karipap construction is layered deep into Hazreen's heritage. Her grandfather Shaikh Jan Bux migrated from Bangladesh to Singapore and became an itinerant hawker, selling bread from a head-mounted basket. He accrued enough success to eventually open Joo Chiat's Indian Muslim Bakery & Confectionery in 1942, which became famous for its wares baked in large stone-floored ovens – "bread, curry buns, sugee cookies," said Hazreen.[10]

The bakery eventually became known to regulars – such as Nooraisha Hashim's grandfather – as "Onan Road Karipap",[11] after Hazreen's father, Jan Bux's eldest son Mahmood, took over as boss in 1977 and began to highlight the pastries. "It's my mother, who is very creative, who came up with different types of puffs," Hazreen recalled. "Beef *karipap* – which was the signature that really made us different from other places – chicken *karipap*, egg, sardine… I'm proud to say that we served the best [puffs] back then."[12]

Hazreen would bring her mother's custom spice blends to the local mill to be ground into curry powder. Growing up in and around the bakery, she and her siblings regularly lent a hand, and sometimes took the opportunity to play. "We would chase each other around the table… jump here, jump there until we were covered with flour." Now a school canteen operator, Hazreen still sells her homemade family *karipap* during school holidays, churning out a few hundred by hand each weekend. It is literally back-breaking work – "I injured my spine because of too much rolling," she shared. But when customers tell her that her *karipap* reminds them of her father's, it is all worth the effort, she said.[13]

Spiral Symmetries

If a water-based dough is laminated with a fat-based dough, rolled out and then rolled up into a log, slicing this crosswise yields discs which, once flattened, folded around a filling and fried or baked, yields puffs with beautifully flaky concentric ridges. This puff style is made by both Malay and Chinese hawkers here, and is also known as *karipap gulung,* or *karipap pusing* (*gulung* meaning "roll", *pusing* meaning "turn", both referring to the spiralling technique) or *epok-epok pusar* (*pusar* meaning "navel", referring to the spiral's visible centre).

Tay Mui Lan is the third-generation owner of Soon Soon Huat Curry Puff, which began life as 1A Crispy Curry Puffs in Eunos Block 1A in the 1990s. The business later moved to Henderson and is now at Katong. Its founder, her Teochew grandmother Madam Lim Sai Hong, was a keen and expert cook: inspired by the different curry puffs she saw around the Chai Chee kampung where she lived, she created her own spiralled version. Mui Lan fondly recalled, "My Ah Mah,

Epok-epok puffs are frequently sold in school tuckshops and hawker centres, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan*.





she will tell us, can you please fold 28 [crimps]? She would count them," because scrimping on crimping makes the edge unpalatably thick. Also, "the pastry has to be light, not greasy, not thick, and the curry should be moist, not dry".[14]

While she has added new filling options like custard and durian, Mui Lan still sticks rigorously to her grandma's crust, chicken-potato curry and sardine filling recipes after 35 years, albeit with necessary tweaks to account for fluctuations in ingredients and environment. The puffs are made from scratch by hand, fried and sold out every day, with no leftovers for the next. Mui Lan told me about a recent customer who, for her 80th birthday celebrations, ordered "10 chicken and 10 sardine puffs each day on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, because she was meeting different friends for her birthday!" and came by to pick them up each day without fail.[15]

Knowing that she is feeding the community is precious to Mui Lan. "It's very important that you have the heart to make this food taste good. People appreciate that this is the old-time taste." And not only in Singapore – in 2025, visiting chefs from Macau's Wynn Resort tasted her puffs and were so impressed that they requested a collaboration. With Mui Lan's tutoring, Soon Soon Huat-branded puffs are now served at the resort, all still hand-made to her Ah Mah's exacting standards.[16]



(Left and above) Hazreen Mahmood Hussain and her homemade family-recipe *karipap*, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan*.

Puff-Pastry Perspectives

Puffs made with many-layered, high-rising Western-style butter puff pastry were popularised by local bakeries from the mid-20th century onwards, many of which were run by Hainanese chefs who were trained in Continental cuisine.

To take just two iconic examples: Mont d'Or in Ngee Ann Building (where Ngee Ann City stands today) and Polar Café on High Street rose to fame on the strength of their curry puffs and other baked goods. Advertisements from the late 1950s extolled Mont d'Or as an "ice cream, milk and snack parlour" serving "delicious ice-cream and appetising snacks, curry puffs and also Sunday Special Gado Gado".[17]

Next to the former Parliament House, Polar Café was a popular haunt of politicians, parliamentarians, lawyers, court reporters and other City Hall denizens. In a *Straits Times* article from March 1986, then Member of Parliament Tan Soo Khoon recalled Polar puffs being regular teatime fare in the Members' Room at Parliament House, beloved for "fragrance in the stuffing which could not be matched" and for their signature crisp, light pastry.[18]

The most recently flourishing puff species in Singapore also uses puff pastry likely learnt from Continental or Portuguese sources, but is now made with vanaspati, an Indian vegetable shortening. Found across Little India's latest crop of cafe-bakeries, such as Madras Bakery and Star Café, these classic South Indian snacks from states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu are typically filled with





(Above) Tay Mui Lan (right) and her mother Ow Siew Kheng in the kitchen at Soon Soon Huat Curry Puff making her signature spiral puffs, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan.*

(Above right) Soon Soon Huat's curry puffs, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan.*

egg, paneer, chicken and vegetables, spiced a little differently from Southeast Asian curry puffs, all the better to pair with a cup of hot chai.[19]

Passage From India

How did curry puffs arrive in Southeast Asia? Britain's Cornish pasties are often invoked as possible curry puff forebears, but is there any truth to this? Similarities in their shaping may not have any significance. After all, there are only two basic ways to make a filled pastry, geometrically speaking: fold a single dough piece around a filling, or sandwich a filling between two dough pieces. Stuffed dough foods with both geometries are found in virtually every cuisine.

The 1970s domestic science textbook, *Let's Learn to Cook*, by teacher Christina Fones contains clearly differentiated recipes for Cornish pasties; fried curry puffs made with Chinese lard pastry or Western shortcrust; and baked shortcrust, flaky or puff-pastry curry puffs.[20] We can plainly see from this and other vintage texts that classic Cornish pasties are large and sturdy, wrapping thick shortcrust pastry around raw meat and vegetables, which during a relatively lengthy bake release their own gravy.

Curry puffs differ markedly: smaller and daintier, they have precooked fillings bound by (if any) thickened sauces, and are cooked for a short time only, often in hot oil, if not an oven. Crimps aside, any resemblance to pasties is scant.

As is true for many heritage foods, curry puffs have a more complex backstory than you might expect. The terms "curry" and "curry puff" can both be traced to colonial India, when the British expatriate and Anglo-Indian communities there blended Indian and English culinary traditions in their kitchens. The wrapping of leftover or purpose-made curry in pastry was a natural, logical and commonplace result.[21]

Author Jennifer Brennan, raised in Punjab under the British Raj, features a sardine curry puff recipe in her cookbook, *Curries and Bugles: A Memoir and Cookbook of the British Raj*, citing them as being "very convenient for the *khansamer* [house chef] to make because we always had sardines in the store cupboard".[22]

Curry puffs subsequently travelled with the British to Malaya. Written by Seremban-based "mem" Mrs W.E. Kinsey and published in 1929, *The "Mems" Own Cookery Book* is a vivid example of how British expatriates abroad ran their home kitchens. Kinsey's succinct baked puff recipe folds a mixture of minced beef or mutton leftovers, curry powder, onion and butter in shortcrust pastry.[23]

Such recipes were rapidly assimilated into local cuisines up and down the Malay Peninsula. For instance, Penang's Jawi Peranakans adopted the colonial habit of Sunday tiffin, a light meal taken at lunch or at teatime. According to ethnographer Mareike Pampus, a Jawi Peranakan tiffin would regularly feature curry puffs, which Pampus describes as "a deep-fried pastry shell filled with either chicken or potato curry… varieties with tuna, sardines, and beef rendang also exist". Her interlocutor rather more colourfully observes, "basically what would happen if a British chicken pie and an Indian samosa would have a baby".[24]

Eastern Promise

Speaking of samosas, these are thought to descend from pastries originally detailed in Arabic cookery texts penned between the 10th and 15th centuries, which also contain the first recorded recipes for laminated doughs.[25] These snacks and techniques subsequently spread along trade and exploration routes from the Middle East to Europe, Central Asia and South Asia. Southeast Asia received these recipes and traditions from South Asia via Muslim traders, and also on a separate track from the Iberian (Al-Andalus) region via Portuguese and Spanish colonisers – who notably also brought from the New World the chillies and potatoes that are inseparable from the curry puffs we know today.[26]

Within India, the medieval recipes flowered into several samosa species beyond the flat triangles or chunky cones now familiar to most people outside India. Hyderabad has square or rectangular *lukhmi* samosas (from the Arabic word *luqma*, meaning "morsel" or "bite"), while Bhopal has triangular *warqi* samosas with crisply defined thin pastry layers (from the Arabic *warq*, meaning "leaf", "sheet" or "paper"). Delhi has *Japani* ("Japanese") samosas, assuredly not from Japan but named for how their edges spread open into a fan shape as they are fried.[27] As befits its colonial heritage, Goa has Portuguese-inflected incarnations of the samosa, *chamuças*, which may be filled with pork, beef or other meats.[28]

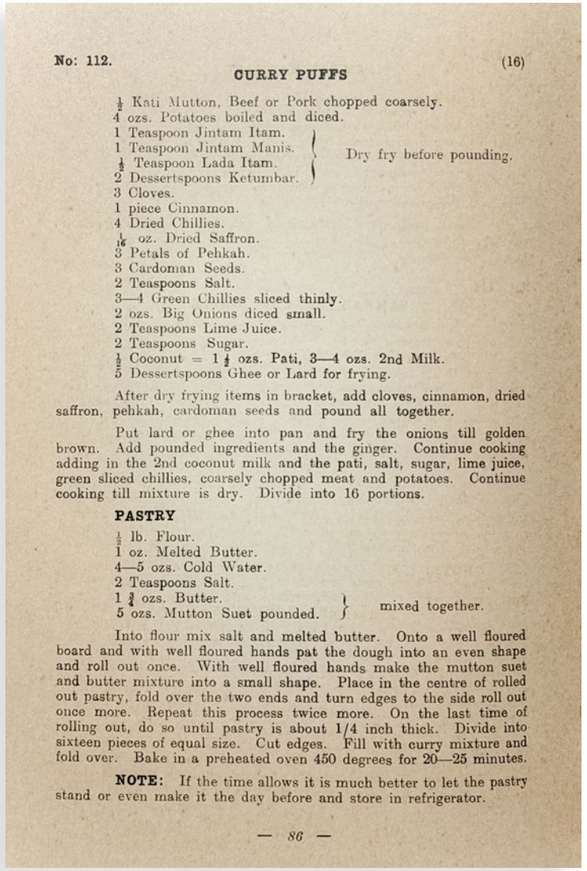
Iberian influences are especially apparent in the globe-spanning family of spiral-laminated puffs. Meat-filled *pastéis* (pastries) from Chaves in northern Portugal boast extravagantly fine, ruffled edges.[29] Murcia in southeastern Spain has *pasteles de carne* (meat pies) whose tops boast dizzyingly, densely concentric spirals.[30] Similarly spiralled discs are hand-pressed to make the ultra-flaky bases of *pastel de nata*, Portugal's iconic egg custard tarts.[31]

All of the above are very old recipes which could very well lie in the direct lineage of Asian spiral puffs. *Karipap gulung* has many visually identical cousins across Southeast Asia. Its Filipino relative is the *empanada de kaliskis* (*kaliskis* meaning "fish scales" in Tagalog, a poetic allusion to the pastry's ridges) from Bulacan province, whose meat or vegetable fillings are typically sweeter and milder than our curry puffs.

Over in Thailand, "karee pup" are also spiralled but usually a little smaller than their Singaporean relatives, and their filling only mildly spiced: Thai food scholars attribute them at least partially to the Portuguese.[32] In Indonesia, puffs made with both plain and spiral pastry and stuffed with many different filling varieties are often called "pastel", meaning "pastry" in both Spanish and Portuguese.[33]

Puff-pastry curry puffs from Balmoral Bakery, 2026. *Photo by Christopher Tan.*





No: 112. (16)

CURRY PUFFS

½ Kati Mutton, Beef or Pork chopped coarsely.
4 ozs. Potatoes boiled and diced.
1 Teaspoon Jintam Itam. } Dry fry before pounding.
1 Teaspoon Jintam Manis. }
½ Teaspoon Lada Itam. }
2 Dessertspoons Ketumbar. }
3 Cloves.
1 piece Cinnamon.
4 Dried Chillies.
1/16 oz. Dried Saffron.
3 Petals of Pehkah.
3 Cardoman Seeds.
2 Teaspoons Salt.
3—4 Green Chillies sliced thinly.
2 ozs. Big Onions diced small.
2 Teaspoons Lime Juice.
2 Teaspoons Sugar.
½ Coconut = 1 ¼ ozs. Pati, 3—4 ozs. 2nd Milk.
5 Dessertspoons Ghee or Lard for frying.

After dry frying items in bracket, add cloves, cinnamon, dried saffron, pehkah, cardoman seeds and pound all together.

Put lard or ghee into pan and fry the onions till golden brown. Add pounded ingredients and the ginger. Continue cooking adding in the 2nd coconut milk and the pati, salt, sugar, lime juice, green sliced chillies, coarsely chopped meat and potatoes. Continue cooking till mixture is dry. Divide into 16 portions.

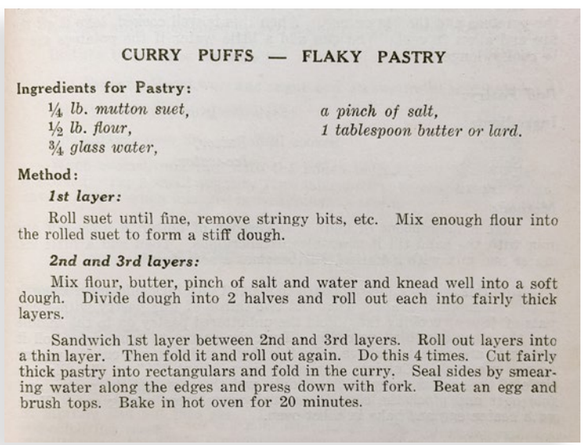
PASTRY

½ lb. Flour.
1 oz. Melted Butter.
4—5 ozs. Cold Water.
2 Teaspoons Salt.
1 ¾ ozs. Butter. } mixed together.
5 ozs. Mutton Suet pounded. }

Into flour mix salt and melted butter. Onto a well floured board and with well floured hands pat the dough into an even shape and roll out once. With well floured hands make the mutton suet and butter mixture into a small shape. Place in the centre of rolled out pastry, fold over the two ends and turn edges to the side roll out once more. Repeat this process twice more. On the last time of rolling out, do so until pastry is about 1/4 inch thick. Divide into sixteen pieces of equal size. Cut edges. Fill with curry mixture and fold over. Bake in a preheated oven 450 degrees for 20—25 minutes.

NOTE: If the time allows it is much better to let the pastry stand or even make it the day before and store in refrigerator.

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CURRY PUFFS — FLAKY PASTRY

Ingredients for Pastry:

¼ lb. mutton suet, *a pinch of salt,*
½ lb. flour, *1 tablespoon butter or lard.*
¾ glass water,

Method:

1st layer:

Roll suet until fine, remove stringy bits, etc. Mix enough flour into the rolled suet to form a stiff dough.

2nd and 3rd layers:

Mix flour, butter, pinch of salt and water and knead well into a soft dough. Divide dough into 2 halves and roll out each into fairly thick layers.

Sandwich 1st layer between 2nd and 3rd layers. Roll out layers into a thin layer. Then fold it and roll out again. Do this 4 times. Cut fairly thick pastry into rectangulars and fold in the curry. Seal sides by smearing water along the edges and press down with fork. Beat an egg and brush tops. Bake in hot oven for 20 minutes.

Laminated and spiral pastry techniques may have reached China from Central Asia via the Silk Road. Such influence is visible, for instance, in northern China's many varieties of *shaobing* (烧饼, a genre of traditional Chinese flatbreads and pastries).[34] Whether *shaobing* have a contiguous connection to the laminated lard pastries of southern China is unclear, or at least not well documented. Nonetheless, there are many visual and technical commonalities between spiral puffs and, for example, Shanghai's "eyebrow pastries", named for their curvy evocation of the God of Longevity's eyebrows. Featuring shells of water and fat-based wheat-flour doughs interleaved with a "three-fold, one-turn" lamination, these encase a melange of shredded pork, shiitake mushrooms, and either winter bamboo shoots or carrots.[35]

A Panoply of Puffs

Between the 1970s and 1990s, local newspaper *Berita Harian* published articles featuring a fascinating range of *karipap* varieties, including "karipap India", a version of Indian Muslim puffs, and "karipap jagung istimewa", shaped like a sweetcorn ear with yellow pastry "kernels" and green pastry "husks".[36]

Appearing in 1998, "karipap tanduk" were puff-pastry cones that looked very much like Western cream horns, but filled with meat and potato curry instead of whipped cream. A follow-up article even showed how to arrange 30 "karipap tanduk" around a doll figurine to look like a flounced ballgown, a savoury twist on doll cakes typically made with skirts of jelly or cake.[37]

These recipes all used butter or pastry margarine for the puff dough. However, two 1970s "karipap lapis" recipes instead laminated the dough with mutton or beef fat.[38] Hazreen Mahmood Hussain recalled her uncle telling her how bakers would "boil mutton fat, then… harden it and layer it [in the pastry]. He said that that was the *best* karipap, a lot better than now". This use of animal-fat pastry formulas rings true to Hazreen's belief that her grandfather and his peers learnt their baking techniques from the British.[39]

Colonial-era Anglo cookbooks certainly did likewise. *The "Mems" Own Cookery Book* makes shortcrust with butter and fat drippings from roast meat.[40] In Susie Hing's recipe from *In a Malayan Kitchen* (1956), puff dough is laminated with a mixture of butter and "5 ozs mutton suet, pounded".[41] *The Malayan Cookbook*, published in Ipoh before 1964, also specifies raw mutton suet for curry puff pastry, instructing readers to roll it "until fine, remove stringy bits, etc.".[42] The same book's chicken pie pastry uses a whopping 2.5 pounds (1.1 kg) of suet to 3 pounds of flour, shaping a spiralled pie lid very much like Murcian *pastel de carne*.[43]

After digesting texts from all of the above, I created my own version of lamb fat pastry, folding and shaping it into fried and baked curry puffs, which you can see in episode 13, "How Did Curry Puffs Come to Singapore?", of *From Book to Cook* (Season 3) on the National Library Board's YouTube channel.[44] Lamb fat gives the pastry a unique and distinctively savoury aroma and crisp flakiness, which lasts for a few days after frying and baking. (Refer to the online version of this article for a simplified recipe of the spiral curry puffs featured in the video.) I also talked about curry puffs in a *BiblioAsia Podcast* episode, "The Crisped, the Baked, the Spiralled: Curry Puffs and Their History", available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and melisten.[45]

We hope this article will inspire you to make your own version, read up on more recipes, or simply indulge in a curry puff for your next afternoon tea. ◆

(Above left) In Susie Hing's curry puff recipe, puff dough is laminated with a mixture of butter and mutton suet. *Image reproduced from Susie Hing, In a Malayan Kitchen (Singapore: Mun Seong Press, 1956), 86. (From National Library of Singapore, call no. RCLOS 641.59595 HIN-[RFL]).*

(Left) The curry puff recipe in *The Malayan Cookbook*, published before 1964, uses raw mutton suet for the pastry. *Courtesy of Christopher Tan.*

Scan the QR code to see more photos in the online article as well as a special recipe for spiral curry puffs.

NOTES

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