

This and That from the Food Cultures of the World

Part 12: The Birth of Japanese "Rice Curry" and "Navy Curry"

To say that curry is the most popular dish in Japan is no exaggeration. According to 1999 Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries statistics, the average Japanese person, including those of all ages, eats curry approximately sixty-four times a year. That is, they eat curry more than once a week. How and when was this popular dish introduced to Japan, and when was it transformed into the Japanese favorite, "rice curry"?

The Birth of Japanese "Rice Curry"

The recipe for curry was first introduced to Japan in 1872, in *Seiyo Ryori-tsu* (Conversance on European Dishes), a cookbook by Kanagaki Robun. He authored the book based on the notebook of a household cook detailing Western recipes. Whenever the cook's master, an Englishman staying in Yokohama, ordered a meal, the cook made detailed notes of the recipes in his notebook. *Seiyo Ryori-tsu* describes curry as a meat dish made with curry powder. The curry was served in the middle of a plate and was surrounded by steamed rice. It was not until instant curry was introduced that the dish became popular in Japan. In 1906, Ikkando, a shop in Kanda, Tokyo, began selling a dried mixture of curry powder and meat to which the addition of hot water made a ready meal. Later, in 1914, Okamoto Shoten, a shop in Nihonbashi, marketed another instant curry that was sold nationwide by a popular ladies' magazine. The debut of instant forms of curry, made in Japan, paved the way for the popular curry enjoys today.

Soldiers and Sailors Plagued by Beriberi

It is said that many people in Edo suffered from beriberi during the Edo period. This was caused primarily by a diet consisting mainly of polished white rice. Tokugawa Iemochi, the 14th shogun, was no

exception and died of beriberi at Osaka castle. The disease was later found to be caused by a vitamin deficiency and was commonly known as Edo wazurai, or the Edo disease.



The Imperial Japanese Navy battleship Mikasa
(Photo: Mikasa Preservation Society)

Japanese troops suffered terribly from beriberi during the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Records state that while 1,000 soldiers died in battle, over 4,000 died of beriberi. The navy was also afflicted with beriberi, causing countless numbers of sailors to simply lose the will to fight.

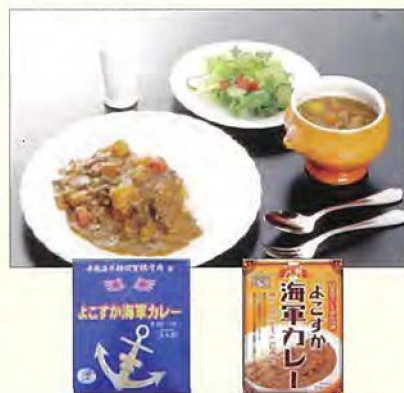
The Roots of "Navy Curry"

In 1880, Kanehiro Takaki, a high-ranking naval physician returned to Japan after studying in Great Britain. It was research by Takaki and his associates that revealed the cause of beriberi to be a vitamin deficiency commonly seen in diets consisting primarily of polished white rice. His instructions regarding the meals served to sailors greatly reduced the mortality rate of beriberi.

The Imperial Japanese Navy at Yokosuka Naval Station began recommending easily prepared curry dishes, containing meat and vegeta-

bles rich in vitamins, to their sailors. In 1908, the cookbook used by the Navy began to include curry recipes. Later, Takaki was promoted and granted the title of Baron under the peerage system. He also became the first M.D. in Japan.

Western navy meals were initially served with bread, which was not popular among the sailors. The bread was then replaced with a steamed combination of rice and barley, and finally to simply steamed white rice. Curry-flavored stew, a common dish in Great Britain's Royal Navy, was added to the menus of galleys throughout Japan's navy, and this Japanese "rice curry," thickened to go well with rice, was the root of the "navy curry" that later became so popular among Japanese civilians as well.



Traditional "navy curry" and instant curry pouches
(photo: Curry-no-Machi Yokosuka Promotion Committee)

Red Pickles—Curry's Best Friend

The red pickles used to garnish Japanese "rice curry" made their appearance in 1886. They were introduced by Seimon Noda, owner of the Shuetsu pickle store in Ueno, Tokyo. These pickles were originally made by pickling seven different vegetables, including eggplant, dai-kon radish, and turnips in soy sauce and sweet rice wine. Red pickles gained instant popularity and became a new Tokyo specialty.

References

- Sekai Chizu karo Shoku no Rekishi o Yomu; Yasuo Tsujihara, Kawade Shobo Shinsha
- House Shokuhin Curry Shi-yokan; <http://www.housefoods.jp>
- Bokken Sensei—Takaki Kanehiro; Pamphlet distributed by the Takao Town Board of Education, Miyazaki Prefecture
- Kikkoman Library of International Food Culture Studies (Vol. 1); Zenjiro Watanabe