

Making Curry Transnational

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Even before I understood the social and political implications of colonialism associated with Thanksgiving, I dreaded it for many reasons as a child. First, I never connected with the idea of pilgrims and Indians celebrating a feast together. Second, I always felt alienated when people spoke about the foods associated with the holiday. For most American families, Thanksgiving dinner consisted of bountiful amounts of food--mashed potatoes, green beans, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, and the obligatory roasted turkey. My family and I did not follow such culinary traditions.

As an immigrant who came to the United States with her parents, I am commonly referred by demographers and sociologists as part of the 1.5 generation.¹ The 1.5 generation adapted to mainstream American culture and learned about the symbols of American identity fairly quickly. Growing up, I craved those Thanksgiving dishes. I wanted to embrace new American traditions more than anyone. I thought that the best way to be American was to eat “American” food. My parents, however, steered us clear away from that. We ate what was served to us, mainly Chinese and Vietnamese food. Occasionally, we were allowed to have Ruffles potato chips and breakfast cereals. Eating at McDonald’s was a special treat that we rarely could afford. Instead, we were introduced to charbroiled hamburgers through the local burger joint that offered the “buy one, get one free” specials on Tuesdays. We ate hamburgers and hot dogs at Rick’s and our Thanksgiving turkey was prepared chopped up and made into a spicy, hearty curry stew served with rice noodles or French baguettes.

My mother worked for an electronics assembly manufacturer that gave employees turkeys and hams every Thanksgiving and Christmas. The best way my mother knew to cook a large bird for her family was in curry stew, marinated to perfection. She would cut up the turkey into pieces, season it with garlic, onions, salt, and pepper, lightly fry it in oil, and place in a large pot to cook with sweet potatoes, carrots, peas, tomato paste, coconut milk, other spices, and a healthy portion of curry powder. She learned how to make this delicious dish from her mother while growing up in Vietnam. My maternal grandmother was a grocer who sold live poultry and other pantry goods. She learned how to make the curry from a good neighbor and customer, an Indian immigrant who settled in Vietnam in the 1940s. My mother told me that South Vietnamese

¹ For more about this group, see Chan, Sucheng, ed. *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.

society consisted of a diverse population when she was growing up in the 1950s.² Indian, Burmese, Cambodian, Thai, Chinese, and other ethnic Asian migrants who lived there provided the labor force and participated in vastly rich economic and cultural exchanges in Vietnamese society. Sadly, many of those expatriates returned to their countries of origin after the war became inhospitable to foreigners. The war severed connections between my grandmother and her customers, prompting many to flee from Vietnam in the late 1970s and early 1980s. My family eventually fled as well, carrying the family recipe with us to the United States. On special occasions, the recipe resurfaces.

I did not know this story until much later in my life. My desire to assimilate overshadowed my mother's attempt to hold on to memories of her mother. This did not occur to me until one year when my mother allowed my brother and me to cook Thanksgiving dinner. After years of begging, she finally gave in and surrendered a turkey for us to roast, whole. My brother and I did our very best to follow recipe books to make Thanksgiving dinner to resemble the picture perfect Norman Rockwell painting.³ We took our responsibilities very seriously and prepared the most bountiful traditional Thanksgiving dinner complete with pies, candied yams, mashed potatoes and gravy, the desirable oven-roasted turkey with stuffing. We presented our family with the ultimate "American meal" but their appetites were not fully satiated. Unlike our usual curry dinners, there were leftovers for weeks. Our family was not used to the tastes of America. We were so disappointed with ourselves that the turkey came out dry and the flavors had to be masked by cranberry and soy sauce.



² Taylor, Philip. *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

³ I am referring to Norman Rockwell's third installment of the Four Freedoms series. *Freedom from Want* appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 6, 1943.

Since then, we all agreed that my mom's curry turkey would remain the traditional meal for our family for Thanksgiving. Over time, I learned to appreciate my mother's cooking and began to pay attention as she made other dishes my grandmother taught her. Now that my grandmother has passed, every time she cooks traditional Vietnamese dishes, they become even more meaningful. I have not been brave enough to make a turkey curry stew but have ventured to make smaller portions with other meats and vegetables for my own family. However, I plan on carrying this tradition of making curry turkey when my children are older. Despite my children's begging, I have yet to repeat an attempt at making a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. For Thanksgiving at my house, we just have a regular meal that I am very thankful for on that holiday.

The following recipe was given by my mother, Nhung Truong, and written down by my brother, Son Lieu. My brother recorded this as a guideline but most of the cooking is done by approximation.

Recipe for Chicken Curry Stew (can be modified with other poultry meat)

Ingredients for marinating:

- 1 whole chicken cut in pieces
- 5 bay leaves
- 1 Tbsp cloves
- 5 Tbsp curry powder
- 5 star anise
- 2 cloves garlic (minced)
- 2 shallots (minced)
- 1 tbsp grated ginger
- Salt and pepper to taste

Combine all and marinate 2-4 hours or for most full flavor overnight

Pan fry in olive oil at medium heat the following ingredients until golden on all faces.

- Taro or sweet potato chunks (1 inch)
- Potato chunks (1 inch)
- Carrots (2 inches)

Pan fry chicken pieces until lightly browned on all sides as well.

Cook in large pot with the following:

- 1 Quart of chicken broth

1 can of coconut milk

2 Tbsp of tomato paste

½ can of evaporated milk

2 Tbsp turmeric

add more curry powder until it is a golden orange

add 5 bay leaves and simmer for 1 hour during ½ hour, add root vegetables.

Salt and pepper to taste

Top with fresh herbs and bean sprouts, serve with rice vermicelli or French baguettes.



Curry chicken in rice vermicelli