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Unpacking our food





Cape Malay food

Cape Malay cuisine is not just about food; it's a rich narrative that unfolds with every bite, echoing the diverse history and culture of the people who call Cape Town home.

It's a cuisine steeped in stories of sweetness, like the plump sultanas that dot a fragrant platter of Cape Malay yellow rice, and tanginess, like the unique, mouth-puckering flavour of tamarind that takes centre stage in a hot plate of Cape Malay fish curry, where every bite dances with layers of flavour.

Food, flavour, life—Cape Malay cuisine invites you to savour the history of a community whose roots are deeply planted in one part of South Africa: the vibrant heart of Cape Town, the Mother City.

Rooted in the traditions of the Cape Malay people, Cape Malay cuisine has been shaped by the influences of Malay and Javanese cooking. This blend of cultural flavors brought to South Africa spicy curries, tangy sambals, pickled fish, and a variety of hearty fish stews that have become beloved staples.

Adaptations of iconic dishes like bobotie and sosatie have also become integral to many South African households.



Cape Malay food

Sosatie, a traditional Cape Malay dish, features marinated meat—typically lamb or mutton—skewered and grilled to perfection, offering a taste of the vibrant culinary heritage of the Cape Malay community.

In the 1600s, people from the East found themselves on the shores of the Cape, at the southern tip of Africa. The Dutch brought with them slaves from far-flung places—Japan on one side of the world, Brazil on the other—but most came from Indonesia, Malaysia, and India. These men and women endured a life of hardship, their bodies enslaved but their spirits unbroken.

Out of this history of struggle and resilience, the Cape Malay community was born, woven together by a shared heritage of beliefs, culture, faith, and food that nourished the soul.

The Cape Malay community is rooted in Islam, and their cuisine reflects deep ties to Islamic cooking traditions. From the complex blend of spices to the communal act of eating with your hands, Cape Malay food is as much about connection and heritage as it is about flavour—a way to savour the fruits of hard work and a reminder of the strength and spirit of those who came before.



Traditional South African Braai

The history of the traditional South African braai (barbecue) is deeply intertwined with the country's diverse cultural and historical contexts. Its origins can be traced back to indigenous practices, colonial influences, and the evolution of South African society over centuries.

Early Origins: Indigenous Practices and African Culinary Traditions

The roots of the braai can be traced to the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa, particularly the Khoisan, who were among the earliest inhabitants of the region. These groups practiced cooking over an open flame, a technique that was later adapted by other communities.

The Khoisan were known for roasting meat, especially game, on fires, and this form of cooking is believed to have laid the groundwork for what would later become the braai.

Archaeological evidence suggests that early Africans used rudimentary methods to cook food over fire, developing a style of open-flame cooking that became central to their social gatherings.



Traditional South African Braai

The Colonial Influence and European Arrival

The arrival of Dutch settlers (the Boers) in the 17th century and the subsequent colonial presence introduced new culinary practices to the region. The Dutch, along with other European settlers like the British, brought their own methods of roasting meat, which influenced the evolution of the South African braai.

The Boers, particularly, developed the "potjiekos" (a stew cooked over an open fire) and a tradition of cooking meat over a fire. This style of cooking, which involved slow-roasting meat, evolved into the braai method known today.

The British influence in the 19th century further contributed to the development of the braai. British colonists introduced sausages (boerewors), which became a key component of the South African braai, along with the use of marinades and side dishes like chutneys and potato salads.

Over time, these culinary traditions blended with the local African, Dutch, and other settler cuisines, creating the distinctive South African braai culture.



Traditional South African Braai

Apartheid Era and the Role of the Braai

During the apartheid era (1948-1994), the braai took on additional cultural and social significance. Under the system of racial segregation, non-white South Africans, particularly Black South Africans, were systematically excluded from public spaces like parks and beaches. This exclusion led to the creation of informal braai gatherings in private spaces such as backyards and townships. For many, the braai became more than just a method of cooking; it became a form of resistance and a space for cultural preservation and solidarity. The communal nature of the braai allowed marginalised communities to come together, share food, and maintain cultural ties in the face of apartheid's restrictions.

The Post-Apartheid Era and National Braai Day

With the end of apartheid in 1994 and the election of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first black president in 1995, the country underwent a profound transformation. As part of the nation's efforts to celebrate its newfound unity and multiculturalism, National Heritage Day was established on September 24, 1995. On this day, the 24th of September was officially designated as "National Braai Day." The idea was to foster national pride and unity through the communal act of braaing, a practice that symbolized the coming together of South Africans from all walks of life. Over the years, National Braai Day has grown in popularity, becoming a celebration of South Africa's diverse heritage and a symbol of multiculturalism.



Traditional South African Braai

Snoek has long been a vital part of the food culture and history of the Western Cape. Found off the coast from Fish Hoek to Port Nolloth, it has been a source of sustenance and livelihood for generations of coastal communities.

Historically, under Dutch colonial rule, the Dutch East India Company controlled fishing rights in the Cape, granting slaves and farm workers permission to fish, as long as it didn't interfere with their agricultural tasks. For these workers, snoek became a crucial protein source, with the fish playing a significant role in the daily diet of many impoverished households.

The Dutch colonists, who arrived in 1652, named the fish “zeesnoek,” meaning "sea snoek," due to its resemblance to the freshwater pike they knew from the Netherlands. In the 1800s, snoek entered the commercial fishing sector, with traditional methods like beach seining and hand lines still used by small-scale fishermen today. Over time, snoek became not only a food staple but also a cultural symbol, especially within communities of Indonesian descent, where it was considered a delicacy.

Today, snoek remains a key protein source for many working-class households in the Western Cape, forming an essential part of the informal fishing market, especially in Cape Town, where its price tends to rise around the Easter holidays.