

The backstory of Calcutta Mutton Biryani



To begin, let's clear up a common misconception. Biryani is not pulao, and pulao is not biryani.

While both pulao and biryani are rice-based dishes made with an assortment of spices that are mixed with vegetables and/or meat—calling one the other is factually wrong and tantamount to culinary blasphemy.

Pulao—and all its subsequent namesakes; pilau, palaw, polao, pilaf, plov, pilafi—is said to be derived from the Sanskrit word “pulāka” meaning a clump of boiled rice. Others attribute it to the Indo-Aryan term “pula”, which means rice and meat.

While some historians claim that the dish is a Persian invention, others believe it originated in India (after rice was brought to the Indus River valley) and then made its way back through Central Asia. Found abundantly in cuisines across the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia, pulao dishes are also prevalent in European, Middle Eastern, South Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean fare.

The name ‘Biryani’ might stem from the word Birinj, which means rice in Farsi. Others say Biryani is derived from the Persian word ‘Birian’ meaning ‘fried before cooking’.

There is also great speculation about the dish's genesis as well as how it came to be in India. Some say it originated in Persia and came to India through Emperor Timur in the 14th century. Others believe it was brought to India by Persianate Mughals in the 15th century. Yet another camp claims that biryani was born on Indian soil; in order to efficiently cook and feed hordes of battling Mughal soldiers.

Whatever its origins, biryani was popularised by the Moghuls who entrenched it in various parts of their dominion. Locals adapted it to their own native flavours and sentiments, resulting in over 50 distinct variants in the subcontinent today.

Sindhi biryani is tart with yoghurt, the Kashmiri version contains lots of saffron and dry fruits, and those who don't eat meat can enjoy a vegetarian biryani.

Yet, of all the variants of biryani, two stand apart; Awadhi/Lucknowi Biryani (of which Calcutta biryani is a variant) and Hyderabadi Biryani.

In the mid-18th Century, the Mughal empire went into decline. In Awadh, a new culture began to dominate; that of the Nawabs – a clan of hereditary rulers who hailed from Persia. The Awadhi Nawabs tempered the prevalent rich Mughlai cuisine to their milder palates; by toning down the use of spices, using fragrant infusions, and introducing slow-cooking techniques.

The end result was the delicate and subtle Lucknowi biryani that endures to this day. Referred to as ‘pakki biryani’ or cooked-method biryani, the meat and the rice components are cooked separately and then layered in a vessel that is cooked over a low flame.

As the epicentre of Mughal-dominated north and central India; the historical Awadh region (the area around present day Lucknow) became a stronghold for Mughal food culture. Here, Mughal cooking techniques such as marinating meats in yoghurt, using perfumes to flavour food, and grilling meats were greatly popularised.

As the Mughals began losing control of their southern Indian territories, traditional Mughlai food customs were augmented by the food habits of the native Deccan rulers – the Hyderabi Nizams. Possessing a fondness for heat, they established their own variant of biryani by upping the spices and adding chillies. This resulted in the signature pungent and robust Hyderabadi Biryani of today. Known as ‘kacchi biryani’ or raw-method Biryani, the meat is first marinated in yogurt and herbs. The raw meat is then cooked with rice over low heat.

So how did the ultra-subtle, potato-wielding, Calcutta Mutton Biryani come to be?

In 1856, Awadh was annexed by the British, who exiled the last King of Awadh, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to Calcutta (now Kolkata). The ex-royal couldn't live without his beloved Lucknowi biryani. Given his reduced fortunes, he was forced to make the dish on a budget, by cutting back on spices and replacing some of the meat with potatoes. As the saying goes, the rest is history.