

Michelin-starred chef Atul Kochhar chats to Lindsey Harrad about finding his feet in the UK, the nation's long-standing love of curry and why he's supporting the Curry for Change campaign, along with a string of fellow chefs.



A British love affair

Arriving in the UK for the first time 21 years ago, driven by wanderlust and a passion for food, the ambitious young chef Atul Kochhar turned to two expatriate chefs to help him find his feet in a foreign land.

'In 1994 British food had not taken off,' says Atul. 'There were a few Michelin stars here, but nothing much for the world to look up to. But I knew that Albert and Michel Roux had done a great deal for modern cooking and although they were French they had lived their lives here and promoted British food, so I came to them for guidance. Albert Roux had a great sense of Indian food, and he was able to give me his perspective as a foreigner living in the UK.'

Atul admits it was pure chance he'd ended up accepting a job in the UK, but after working for the Oberoi Hotel Group in his native India for five years, he was looking for

his next challenge, and had started applying for jobs in Australia, South Africa and Britain. 'A job in the UK came through first, but I arrived here with a mindset that I'd stay for only three or four years at most!' he laughs.

Star of India

Despite his ambivalence about making a life here initially, Atul is now firmly entrenched in the UK food establishment, with a string of restaurants in London, Kent and Marlow, and international locations in Dubai, on P&O cruise ships, and with restaurant openings planned for Madrid and Mumbai this year. He has held a Michelin star at Benares, his flagship restaurant and first solo venture in Mayfair, London, since 2007, and was the first Indian chef to receive a Michelin star during his tenure as head chef at Tamarind in 2001 – a moment he describes

as the 'highest point of my personal and professional life'.

But he admits this could only have happened in the UK. 'It would never have been possible in India, so it was a huge achievement for us. Back then, for Indian food to be considered by Michelin was significant and a great move for them and us. It was a wonderful moment because I never thought of myself as competing with other Indian restaurants; my aim has always been to compete with good restaurants. I want to compete on the quality of my ingredients and the standards I provide; it's these things that make a restaurant great.'

With hindsight, Atul says that the UK was the best place he could have chosen to come, and he believes the existing heritage of Indian food and the British passion for curry laid the foundation for his success.



Dhruv Baker, Anjum Anand and Vivek Singh support Curry for Change

'The British already loved their curries and kebabs, maybe in rustic or not pure forms, but they knew what they were eating and what they wanted.

'This open-mindedness has really helped advance the food scene here. I think it goes back to when the first ship set sail in search of nutmeg and black pepper: British people have always wanted to explore and find something new; they have a true adventuring spirit and that's what I love about living here,' he says. 'The traditional dishes haven't been forgotten, but there are still new influences from everywhere, from Scandinavia to Malaysia and Japan, and chefs such as Tom Kerridge, Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsay have done a lot to really diversify the flavours we enjoy in this country in a big way.'

Old traditions, new ideas

Atul himself has contributed much to this movement, adding his own fresh, contemporary fusion of Indian cuisine with seasonal British produce into the UK food scene, both through his restaurants and TV appearances on shows such as *Great British Menu* and *Saturday Kitchen*. Ironically, he says his understanding of the wide variety of Indian food was enhanced after moving away from his native country, which also enabled him to break free of the entrenched and often limiting Indian cooking traditions.

'I found that here I could make exactly what I wanted; there was no one to point a finger and say I shouldn't do it that way. The chef I worked for at the Oberoi Hotel, he was a purist and I respect him for that and learned a great deal from him, but he always said modern Indian food couldn't happen; it's always been done a certain way and that's how it should always be done.

'Of course, I and many others have proved him wrong because anything can be

modernised. New techniques can turn the same ingredients into a very different thing, and I was able to do this more freely in a neutral country. People here accepted my style of cooking wholeheartedly and I'm always mindful of what British people like to eat, while at the same time remembering the spices and flavours of my own cultural upbringing.'

Cooks' campaign

And it's also the British love affair with curry that's behind a campaign Atul has been supporting for the last 10 years, helping families in Asia and Africa struggling with hunger and poverty.

'I've supported UK charity Find Your Feet for quite some time now. I first met them when they were working in the city of Benares in northern India. They invited me to join them for a day to see some of the work they were doing and I absolutely loved it. I've always thought that if you really want to help people you have to teach them a skill they can use to support themselves; I hate the idea of just handing over money, it's only ever a short-term solution.'

The organisation runs the Curry for Change campaign, now in its fourth year, and is supported by other celebrity ambassadors including TV chef and restaurateur Cyrus Todiwala, TV chef and cookery writer Anjum Anand, and founding chef of The Cinnamon Club Vivek Singh.

The campaign encourages curry lovers to host an Asian-inspired dinner party to raise funds for the charity, and a number of the chefs have shared their favourite recipes (see pages 28-31), with plenty of ideas for entertaining. 'I believe in helping people to become independent, confident and self-sufficient,' says Atul. 'Which is exactly what the charity does.'



Curry for Change

Find Your Feet is asking cooks to support the Curry for Change campaign which runs until October. It's easy and fun to take part – simply host an Indian-inspired dinner party using a free event pack. The kit includes exclusive recipes, cooking tips and a packet of Natco spices. Afterwards guests are invited to donate what they'd usually spend on a takeaway to the campaign instead, and every penny raised will be matched by Natco.

Atul along with his fellow chefs have suggested some of their own dishes on the following pages to inspire you, from street-food starters to a gorgeous chocolate torte.

Find out more and sign up to receive your free kit at www.curryforchange.org.uk.

Anjum Anand's avocado pani puri

'Pani puri is a fabulous street-food snack.

A hollow, crispy shell is half-filled with, traditionally, chickpeas or sprouted pulses and chopped potato, a tangy, minty and slightly sweet liquid is poured in, then the whole thing is popped straight into the mouth where it bursts into a firework of flavours and textures. You can vary the fillings, or keep it traditional. I have used an avocado 'salsa' for a creamy but crunchy twist.'

Makes 20 | Prep 40 mins

For the spiced tamarind and mint liquid:

1 tbsp store-bought pani puri masala powder, or to taste

4 tbsp store-bought tamarind sauce (I like Maggi brand), or to taste

8 mint leaves, finely shredded

For the filling:

1 ripe avocado, finely chopped

finely grated zest of ½ lime, plus 2 tsp lime juice



PHOTOGRAPH © EMMA LEE



AVOCADO PANI PURI

PHOTOGRAPH © LISA LINDER

1 small tomato, finely chopped
1 spring onion, finely chopped
½ small red onion, finely chopped
½-1 small red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped
small handful of chopped coriander leaves
salt

20 pani puri shells

1 First make the tamarind and mint liquid. Pour 250ml water into a bowl and stir in the pani puri masala powder, tamarind sauce or chutney and the mint. Adjust the balance of flavourings to taste, adding more tamarind chutney for sweet sourness, or masala powder for spiciness.

2 Mix together the avocado and the lime zest and juice, tossing gently but thoroughly to coat the avocado and stop it from discolouring. Add all the other ingredients for the filling. Taste and adjust the salt.

3 When you are ready to eat, crack a hole with your finger into the thinner surface of a pani puri shell (one side will always be thinner and more delicate). Add about a teaspoon of the filling to the cavity and place on a serving platter. Repeat to use up all the shells and filling.

4 When you are ready to eat, pour the tamarind liquid into a small jug and place next to your puris. Before eating one, pour 3-4 teaspoons of the liquid into the hole and place in your mouth (it will leak everywhere otherwise). Enjoy!

COOK'S TIP You can find pani puri shells in Indian grocery shops, or at specialist Asian stores online.

■ **PER SERVING** 45 cals, fat 2.5g, sat fat 0.5g, carbs 6g, sugars 3.5g, protein 0.5g, salt 0.4g, fibre 0.5g

Atul Kochhar's aubergine and bean curry

'Asians love aubergine and it is cooked across Asia in different forms and methods. It is such a versatile vegetable that takes on spices really well, and works with cream and coconut too. This recipe is unique to Cambodia.'



AUBERGINE AND
BEAN CURRYBHUJELO PORO
BAKED SPICY OMELETTE

PHOTOGRAPH: HELEN CATHCART

Serves 4 | Prep 10 mins | Cook 25 mins

- 2 tbsp vegetable or rapeseed oil
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 shallots, thinly sliced
- 2 dried red chillies
- 3 tbsp kroeung paste
- 1 tbsp palm sugar
- 4-5 aubergines, cut into small pieces
- 200g blanched French beans
- 6 kaffir lime leaves
- 500ml coconut milk
- 300ml vegetable stock
- 1 bunch of fresh basil leaves
- salt and ground pepper
- 2 limes, cut into wedges
- 1 small red onion, sliced into rings

1 Heat the oil in a wok or pan and sauté the garlic, shallots and chillies for 2-3 minutes or until lightly coloured. Stir in the kroeung paste and palm sugar and cook again for 2-3 minutes or until the mixture darkens.

2 Add the aubergine, French beans and lime leaves, followed by the coconut milk and stock. Simmer gently for 20 minutes or until the aubergine is cooked.

3 Stir in the basil leaves and adjust the seasoning. Serve with jasmine rice, the lime wedges and onion rings.

■ PER SERVING 526 cal, fat 35.5g, sat fat 19.5g, carbs 28g, sugars 25g, protein 11g, salt 1.5g, fibre 17g

Cyrus Todiwala's bhujelo poro baked spicy omelette 🇮🇳

'This omelette is a Parsee speciality originating from Gujarat and should be eaten as soon as it is baked. Whatever you wish to eat with it, be it toast, hot soft bread or croissants, should all be kept ready. For breakfast a really fruity jam is ideal. The Parsee would have their omelette with an extra dollop of butter as well (and this I would recommend, though not on health grounds!).'



PHOTOGRAPH: NITIN KAPOOR

Serves 4 | Prep 15 mins | Cook 12 mins

For the masala:

- 2 thin green chillies
- 6-8 sprigs of coriander
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1cm piece of fresh ginger
- ½ tsp cumin seeds
- ½ tsp salt
- pinch of ground turmeric

For the omelette:

- 4 free-range eggs, separated
- 1 tsp plain flour
- 2 tsp sunflower or rapeseed oil
- knob of butter (optional)

To serve:

sweet chutney and buttered warm pain rustique

- 1** Preheat the oven to 220C/fan 200C/gas 7.
 - 2** Grind the masala ingredients to a smooth paste in a mortar with a pestle. Alternatively, use a clean coffee grinder or small food processor, adding a splash of water, if necessary. Take care you don't add too much, though, and make it runny.
 - 3** Beat the egg whites until very stiff and fluffy. Mix the egg yolks together with the flour and masala paste, loosening with a splash more water, if necessary, then gently fold into the egg whites.
 - 4** Heat the oil in a large, 25cm non-stick ovenproof frying pan or flameproof baking dish. When the oil is hazy but not smoking, add in the egg mixture and spread out. Dot the butter over the top, if using, and, after a minute or two, when just browning on the base, place the pan into the oven.
 - 5** Bake for 5-10 minutes or until the omelette is risen and golden brown on the top, cooked through, light and fluffy. To check whether it is cooked, insert a clean knife into the centre of the omelette and see if it comes out clean.
 - 6** Cut in halves or quarters and enjoy with sweet chutney and pain rustique.
- PER SERVING (OMELETTE ONLY) 148 cal, fat 12g, sat fat 4.5g, carbs 2g, sugars 0.5g, protein 8g, salt 1g, fibre 1.5g

PHOTOGRAPH: STUART WEST



Anjali Pathak's channa masala

Serves 4 | Prep 10 mins
Cook 15 mins

- 2 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 tsp black mustard seeds
- ½ tsp cumin seeds
- pinch of asafoetida/hing (optional)
- 2 spring onions, finely sliced
- 2 fat cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 2 tsp finely chopped root ginger
- 1-2 green chillies, finely sliced (optional)
- 1 tomato, chopped
- 1½ tbsp garam masala powder
- 600g cooked chickpeas, drained and washed if in brine
- 1 tbsp chopped fresh coriander
- salt, to taste

1 Gently heat the oil and add the mustard seeds, cumin seeds and asafoetida (if using). When the seeds starts sizzling, add the spring onion, garlic, ginger and chilli (if using).

2 Sauté for 1 minute before adding the tomato and garam masala. Sprinkle in a little water to protect your spices and prevent them from burning.

3 Stir well and after a few minutes add in the chickpeas and around 200ml water. Cover and allow to cook on a simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

4 Taste and adjust the seasoning with salt. Stir through the coriander and serve with your favourite Indian breads and rice.

■ PER SERVING 283 cal, fat 12g, sat fat 1.5g, carbs 28g, sugars 2g, protein 13g, salt 1.9g, fibre 9g



PHOTOGRAPH: LARA HOLMES



FAT CHILLIES WITH SPICED PANEER

Vivek Singh's fat chillies with spiced paneer



PHOTOGRAPH: NICK GREGAN

'This must be one of our most popular and long-standing favourites from the Grill. There was a time I'd got so familiar with the sound of the printer that I didn't need to look at the docket to know there was an order for (yet) another fat chilli paneer! The 'fat chillies' refers to the Romano peppers we use, which are large, mild and long red peppers that make the perfect vehicle in which to serve the spiced paneer.'

Serves 4 | Prep 20 mins | Cook 20 mins

- 2 Romano peppers, halved lengthways and deseeded
- 1 tsp vegetable oil

- ¼ tsp dried red chilli flakes
- ½ tsp salt
- pinch of sugar
- dried fenugreek leaves, crushed between your fingertips

For the filling:

- 3 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 4 green chillies, finely chopped
- 1cm piece of fresh ginger, peeled and finely chopped
- 85g mixed red and green peppers, deseeded and finely chopped
- 1 tsp salt
- ½ tsp ground turmeric
- ½ tsp red chilli powder
- ½ tsp sugar
- 250g paneer cheese, cut into 5mm dice
- 1 tbsp tamarind paste
- 2 tbsp chopped fresh coriander leaves and stalks
- juice of ½ lemon

1 Start by making the filling. Heat the oil in a heavy-based pan to smoking point and add the cumin seeds. When they crackle, add the onion and cook on a medium-low heat for 2–3 minutes. Add the chillies and ginger and cook for a further 2 minutes.

2 Throw in the mixed peppers and stir-fry over a high heat. Add the salt, turmeric, chilli powder and sugar, then gently fold in the paneer and cook on a medium heat for 4–5 minutes.

3 Add the tamarind and adjust the seasoning. Sprinkle with the coriander and finish with the lemon juice. Remove from the heat and set aside.

4 Rub the Romano peppers with oil and salt. Place on a hot barbecue for about 2–3 minutes on each side, until soft. Alternatively, place the peppers on a baking tray and roast in a preheated oven to 200C/fan 180C/gas 6 for 8–10 minutes, until cooked.

5 Remove the peppers from the heat and divide the spiced paneer filling between them. Sprinkle over the fenugreek leaves and serve immediately with a salad or dip of your choice.

COOK'S TIP To get ahead when entertaining, cook the stuffed peppers in advance, leave to cool and set aside in the fridge until your guests are ready to eat. The peppers can then be quickly reheated.

■ PER SERVING 264 cals, fat 19g, sat fat 6.5g, carbs 15g, sugars 13.5g, protein 8.5g, salt 2.5g, fibre 3g



CHOCOLATE AND CINNAMON TORTE

Dhruv Baker's chocolate and cinnamon torte

'This torte works on so many levels: it's not overly sweet and the addition of amaretto makes it a really good dinner party dessert. It's also gluten-free but, more importantly, it tastes fantastic!'



PHOTOGRAPH: SIMON DERYVILLER

Serves 8 | Prep 20 mins | Cook 30 mins

150g dark chocolate, minimum 70% cocoa solids, broken into small pieces
125g unsalted butter
170g light brown sugar
175g ground almonds
5 free-range eggs, separated

200ml amaretto
pinch of ground cinnamon
200ml double cream
icing sugar, for dusting
raspberries (optional), to serve

1 Preheat the oven to 150C/fan 130C/gas 2. Lightly butter a 23cm loose-bottomed round cake tin and line the base with non-stick baking paper.

2 Put the chocolate and butter in a heatproof bowl and place over a pan of just simmering water. Once melted, remove from the heat and allow to cool.

3 Add the sugar and ground almonds to the chocolate mixture and then stir in the egg yolks, 150ml of the amaretto and the cinnamon.

4 Whisk the egg whites until stiff peaks form and then fold into the chocolate mixture with a metal spoon.

5 Pour the mixture into your prepared tin and cook in the oven for 30 minutes. Remove from the oven and allow to cool in the tin for a few minutes before turning out.

6 Whip the cream into soft peaks and stir in the remaining amaretto. To serve, place a slice of torte on a plate with a spoonful or two of the cream. Dust with icing sugar and serve with a few raspberries scattered over, if using.

■ PER SERVING 661 cals, fat 46g, sat fat 21g, carbs 38.5g, sugars 37g, protein 10.5g, salt 0.5g, fibre 2g

Recipes adapted from the following: avocado pani puri from *Anjum's Quick & Easy Indian* by Anjum Anand (Quadrille, £18.99); aubergine and bean curry from *Atul's Curries of the World* by Atul Kochhar (Absolute Press, £20); bhujelo poro baked spicy omelette from *Mr Todiwala's Bombay* by Cyrus Todiwala (Hardie Grant, £25); channa masala from Anjali Pathak; fat chillies with spiced paneer from *Cinnamon Kitchen: The Cookbook* by Vivek Singh (Absolute Press, £25); chocolate and cinnamon torte from *Spice: Layers of Flavour* by Dhruv Baker (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £25). These books also contain non-vegetarian recipes.