

Food Origins: Where Our Favorite Dishes Get Their Roots

By: Zehra Tobpas

If you know me at all, you know I love to try new foods. I leave every trip to the grocery store with tons of new and interesting things. Trader Joe's has a great selection of ethnic foods and has given me the opportunity to explore foods I maybe otherwise would not have. The grocery chain labels some of its ethnic food items with variations of the word 'Joe'. From one of my personal staples, Trader Giotto's tomato paste, to Trader Jose's premium lager, the grocery store, among others, does not lack in its representation of numerous cuisines.

That said, however, watered-down versions of ethnic cuisines aren't exactly representative of authentic dishes from varying parts of the world. So I decided to dig deeper into the origins of some of our most beloved dishes. I asked my friends what their favorite ethnic dishes were. The overwhelming response was the ever-so-popular sushi. But I also got many other exciting responses that I was eager to investigate a little further.



First up, we have Thai green curry.

Green curry and red curry are among the most popular curries. The young green chile utilized in green curry distinguishes it from other curries because they are significantly hotter than other chiles.

Typically, this dish is prepared using a combination of fresh, green vegetables and meat. Almost all use the same base of spices and ingredients. Shrimp paste, garlic, shallots, lemongrass, peppercorns, kaffir limes, and cumin seeds are among the basics. The chiles added distinguish one curry from the next. The consistency of the curry comes from coconut milk. The green paste is fried in coconut cream before it is added to the vegetables and meat.

The dish is almost always enjoyed with steamed rice and a side dish. Some popular side dishes are Gaeng Jued Woon Sen, a Thai glass noodle chicken soup, and Thai chili paste with raw or steamed vegetables. In addition, the dish is served with traditional Thai rice noodles known as Khanom Chin.

So where does the Thai green curry get its roots? The chile was first introduced by Portuguese missionaries who brought them over from South America in the 1600s. These potent spices were toned down and enhanced by fresh herbs such as lemongrass and galangal. Eventually, fewer and fewer spices were used in Thai curries, while the use of fresh herbs increased.

Curry also spread to Southeast Asian countries by Indian monks journeying along the famous Silk Route. Curries from Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia have a different flavor than Indian curries due to the incorporation of local ingredients such as lime and lemongrass.

Next up, we have dolma.

A relic and culinary tradition with roots in the Ottoman empire, these deliciously stuffed grape leaves filled with spiced rice, meat, and nuts are my all-time favorite. Of course, my Turkish origin makes me bias as I have fond summer memories nibbling on these with my family.

The origins of dolma are quite a point of contention. While we can all agree they descend from Middle Eastern traditions, the specific country of origin is where the lines are a bit blurry. It's generally believed that the ancient Greeks and Persians developed dolma. Following the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the dolma became a delicacy for Ottomans, initially only reserved for the Sultan and his party at the Topkapi palace (a must-go if you ever find yourself in Istanbul). But eventually, dolma found its way into the lower echelons of Ottoman society. Dolmas can be found in Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Albania, Armenia, Iraq, and Iran.

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There are a variety of dolmas. Some are vegetables, such as bell peppers hollowed out filled with the stuffing. In other cases, the stuffing is wrapped in grape or vine leaves. Once filled, dolmas are slow-cooked, and can be served hot or cold. I'm a fan of adding yogurt on the side.

Finally, let's talk about an Italian classic – Cacio e Pepe

While this is probably one of the more well-known international foods, this ancient dish of Roman origin has more depth than you'd anticipate. Cacio e Pepe is a pasta dish, typically spaghetti, with Pecorino Romano cheese, salt, and lots of freshly ground black pepper. Because the ingredients are easy to transport and don't spoil easily, it was once the favorite dish of Roman shepherds. The spicy pepper protected the shepherds from the effects of cold weather during the night, while the pasta provided them with the carbohydrates they needed to perform their back-breaking labor.

While the dish has seemingly simple ingredients, technique plays a big part in perfecting this dish as the sauce has to be just right. One of the not-so-secret secrets any more (thanks Gigi Hadid), is reserving a small cup of starchy pasta water to dilute the Pecorino Romano before it is stirred together with the pasta and pepper. I almost always have the ingredients, and since it's quick to prepare, it's a staple of mine for those late-night study sessions.

Of course, the list doesn't end there. But, I highly encourage everyone to go outside of their comfort zone and try something new. I've found some of my favorite foods this way. Next time you're exposed to new cuisines, be sure to give them a try. You'll be surprised to discover what you like.