Green Curry: Politics and Place Making on Brick Lane

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Brick Lane and the surrounding area has historically attracted successive groups of migrants, one of the most prominent currently being those from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh. Following decades of economic depression and racial tension, regeneration efforts have ensured that the area is now inextricably associated with the curry restaurants that line the street. Food is the medium for Brick Lane’s transformation, yet the use of food as a centrepiece for development is also ripe with ambivalence. Media reports on the Brick Lane curry houses regularly focus on the poor quality of the food, or the aggressive nature of the restaurant touts. Since the mid-1990s, local Bengali restaurateurs have held an annual Curry Festival to promote local businesses, and to help counter negative publicity.

This paper is based on limited initial fieldwork on Brick Lane in 2006 and 2007. It traces the efforts of local restaurateurs to respond to events and to manage the Brick Lane ‘brand’ proactively through the Curry Festival. It also explores the ways in which the occasion of the festival, and its related curry competition, reveals how food operates in Brick Lane as a medium through which rival political affiliations are displayed and reinforced.

Regeneration Through Celebration
Brick Lane and the surrounding area just east of the City of London is a location almost saturated with association, evocation, and imagination (Jacobs 1996). Accommodating successive layers of refugees and other migrants since at least the 17th century, the area has provided a base for French Huguenot weavers, then European Jews, and since the 1970s, Bengalis from Sylhet in Bangladesh (Kershon 2005). Each group of migrants has brought with it its own skills and trades, the textile houses of the Huguenots and Jews gradually giving way to the Bengalis’ ‘Indian’ restaurants. The street remains a practical and symbolic focus for a now established Bengali population, as well as attracting more recent arrivals from North and East Africa among others, and a growing young white creative class (Mavrommatis 2006). Today Bengali restaurants – reportedly the largest concentration outside of Bangladesh - line the southern part of the street, while trendy shops, music venues and studios cluster at the northern end.

This paper looks at an episode relating to two connected events, versions of which have been in existence in Brick Lane for some or all of the last decade. They are known as the International Curry Festival, and the Brick Lane Festival, though exactly what is included under each heading varies from year to year, and exactly where the line between the two is drawn is difficult to determine. In bald terms, the Curry Festival is promoted as an annual fortnight-long event, involving a majority of the curry restaurants in and around Brick Lane and Osborn Street. It is run by the Bangla Town Restaurant Association (BTRA), established in 1999 by Cityside, a local regeneration agency, but now managed by the restaurateurs themselves.¹ In advance of the festival proper, the organisers hold a press launch, with an official opening and a curry competition. A special festival menu is available in all participating restaurants. The festival’s aim is to support restaurants in the area, both during the event, and throughout the year.

The Brick Lane Festival began in 1996 as a half-day event in early September for local residents, with a children’s procession in Brick Lane itself, followed by a ‘picnic and funfair’ in nearby Allen Gardens.² In the following three years it was taken up and financed by Cityside,  

¹ BTRA represents many, but by no means all, Brick Lane restaurants and their owners, as we will see later.  
and developed as part of the ‘Raising the Profile’ initiative for the area. In 2000 the running of the event passed to the Ethnic Minority Enterprise Project (EMEP), a local business support organisation developed by Cityside, under the ‘Branding and Development of Brick Lane/Banglatown’ part of the regeneration programme. It was explicitly seen from the early days as an opportunity to promote local businesses, and the area more widely, as a desirable destination for visitors. In 2006, the Brick Lane Festival continued to fall under EMEP’s auspices, although Cityside and its money had long gone. The festival was financed in 2006 from a combination of sources, including a grant from a European Social Fund entrepreneurship project, financial and in-kind support from the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and a limited amount of commercial sponsorship from Western Union, among others.

Brick Lane Festival coincides with the first day of the Curry Festival; in 2006 it attracted up to 60,000 visitors. Brick Lane and the surrounding side streets were relieved of their incessant traffic, turning a busy narrow thoroughfare into a pedestrian zone. The restaurants lining the street set tables and chairs outside on the pavement, and additional stalls selling snacks or music, jewellery, etc, filled in the gaps, creating the impression of a bustling street market cum open-air food court. Over in Allen Gardens, a short walk away, more food and other stalls surrounded a children’s funfair, and a music stage, where an eclectic mix of local performers entertained the crowds for free during the afternoon and early evening. There were a number of ‘fringe’ events: a fashion show for emerging designers (entry free, by ticket), also organised by EMEP, and free music events in a number of the bars and clubs in and around the Old Truman Brewery site towards the northern end of Brick Lane (see map). Restaurants can expect to be full from lunchtime through to early evening, so the day is an important trading opportunity.

Both festivals have their roots in the various strands of the Cityside programme, the result of a large Single Regeneration Budget award in the mid-1990s. Such an investment was a response to wide-ranging problems in the Brick Lane area in this period. Two decades of racial tension, severe housing problems, and economic depression had left their mark: businesses were struggling, the area was run-down, and street crime was rife (Dench, Gavron et al. 2006). Despite its location, perched right on the edge of the City, this corner of Spitalfields had become effectively a no-go area for non-residents. In consultation with local people, Cityside was looking for ways to attract visitors to Brick Lane, and to persuade them it was a safe and appealing location.

As significant employers of local Bengalis, both directly and indirectly, through supporting businesses such as suppliers, accountants, etc, Brick Lane’s restaurants were an important focus of Cityside’s regeneration efforts. Curry restaurants had particular qualities in this respect: aimed largely at non-Bengali customers, they traded explicitly on the cultural credentials of an otherwise marginalised group. Cityside acted to support business development for restaurant businesses – EMEP for example provided health and safety training and other business support services in an accessible environment. But it also considered the restaurants as the centre of a more public rebranding exercise of Brick Lane and its environs as Banglatown, repositioning a marginal area as a destination in itself: the Curry Capital, the new Chinatown. The festivals were seen as important vehicles through which this identity could be established and communicated.

By 2006, clearly there has been some success. Brick Lane is now a popular tourist ‘destination’, and has participated to an extent in the City’s prosperity, as restaurants are filled with workers from the nearby financial districts. There are certainly more restaurants than ever before on the southern strip of Brick Lane (upwards of 60 cafes, restaurants and sweet shops
on Brick Lane, Osborn Street and surrounding streets). It is claimed that the restaurants provide employment for 1000 people in the local area, almost all of them Bengali. The catering trade is the overwhelming vehicle for the high levels of entrepreneurship among Bengalis in London compared with other migrant groups (Basu 2002). This apparent boom can however be overstated (Carey 2004). Most restaurant businesses do not own the freehold for their properties, which remains in the hands of earlier migrant groups. High rents are often cited as one of the reasons restaurants change hands frequently. Leaving aside the handful of most established, successful businesses, income can be precarious. There are growing problems with staffing, as younger Bangladeshis shun the long hours and poor wages, and changes in immigration policy have made it more difficult to recruit chefs directly from Bangladesh.

The concentration of similar restaurants means there is intense competition for custom. Pressure to discount prices has not helped the street’s reputation for cheap, poor quality food, and aggressive touting, and its consequent wholesale dismissal by restaurant critics.

Brick Lane has not for some time witnessed open confrontation between BNP supporters and Bengali migrants of the kind seen in the 1970s and 80s (Leach 1994 [1980]). But such a concentrated, visible migrant population centre is an inevitable focus for attention at times of tension. Sometimes this can be a response to external events. Restaurant owners mention the noticeable drop in trade following the July 2005 London bombings, which they interpret as a boycott of Asian Muslim businesses. Certainly, global geopolitics and the war on terror have become local issues in Brick Lane, with the election of the outspoken Respect MP George Galloway as the member for the constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow within which Brick Lane lies, taking the seat from Labour’s Oona King in 2005 on an anti-Iraq war ticket. Rivalry between supporters of Labour and Respect is a defining feature of Bengali social relations on Brick Lane, as we will see later.

On other occasions, the street has been known to generate its own controversy, and as usual, the restaurants are in the thick of things. Shortly before the 2006 festivals, Brick Lane once more hit headlines, as a vociferous minority of local residents and businesspeople protested against the planned filming of a version of Monica Ali’s novel Brick Lane in the street. Objectors claimed the book conveyed an inaccurate and unflattering image of Sylheti women as ignorant and uncivilised. In particular, there was outrage at a rumoured scene where migrant women working in curry houses allow lice to fall from their hair into the food. The production company eventually decided against filming in the area, but not before images of strident Bangladeshis threatening to burn books had adorned the pages of the local and national press.

Although the conditions that initially prompted the regeneration programme have certainly improved then, economic and political issues continue to exercise restaurateurs and others in the area. The remainder of this paper will concentrate on the 2006 Curry Festival as a way of exploring how food features as a medium for the expression and confrontation of some of these

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4 There does not appear yet to be much evidence of more recent migrants from other regions finding employment within Bengali-owned catering businesses, as had been the pattern with previous migrant-owned industry in the area.
6 David Cohen, ‘The Battle of Brick Lane’, Evening Standard, 25 July 2006. This headline (reflecting the way in which the affair was widely described in the press) recalls the violent clashes between Bangladesh and National Front supporters in the late 1970s.
questions. I will examine in particular the ‘press launch’ and curry competition, held a few days before the Brick Lane Festival, and the formal beginning of the curry fortnight.

**Competitive Curry**

For the organisers, and restaurants, the press launch and curry competition is a central element of the Curry Festival. A long line of tables covered in white cloths is set out on the pavement, running north along Brick Lane from the corner with Hanbury Street (see map), with space to walk behind, and an awning over the top. A small stage, with amplifier, has been erected on the corner itself, facing into the junction, and a banner is strung across the road, announcing the Festival and its sponsors. Imam Uddin, owner of the Bengal Village restaurant and secretary of the BTRA, the person responsible for the event, is busy directing operations. Azmul Hussein, another restaurant owner, looks on from the doorway of Preem, across the street.

Inside nearby Curry Bazaar, which is owned by the Association’s chair, Badrul Islam, the director of EMEP and organiser of the Brick Lane Festival, with his boss and local accountant, Mahmoud Rauf, and a couple of non-Bengali PR consultants hired to manage the media side of this year’s festivals, sit in an anxious huddle, sipping sweet tea. They are discussing the fact that the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, who reportedly usually opens the festival, has this year not responded to their invitation. This is despite the fact that he is scheduled to attend the opening of an exhibition on environmental issues, Footsteps of a Generation, in the Old Truman Brewery today, which backs onto Brick Lane and Hanbury Street. Mahmoud says that since he will be just ‘behind that wall’, he could simply head over there and ask him to come across.

Meanwhile, outside, chefs wearing white, with paper hats with the names of their restaurants written on have begun to arrive from various restaurants with dishes covered in cling film, and arrange them on the tables. At one end of the table is a large cauldron of vegetable curry. This is the festival’s signature dish, literally a Green Curry. The BTRA, with the help of the PR firm hired by the organisers of the Brick Lane Festival, decided they needed to address some specific recent criticisms by the food writers – those relating to overuse of artificial colourings and flavourings, and the large quantities of oil used for cooking. This specially devised recipe is low-fat, and uses no artificial colours or flavours. It also claims to minimise the ‘food miles’ required to prepare it by featuring spices sourced from local grocers, and a cucumber-like vegetable, *turia*, grown at the Spitalfields City Farm a few hundred yards away. Cards with the green curry recipe are printed on recycled card. This environmental aspect, the PR people suggest, would link the curry festival very neatly with the Footsteps of a Generation exhibition, though their concurrence is coincidence.

Photographers from local newspapers are by now in evidence, along with a crowd of intrigued passers-by. The competition judge, resplendent in a large maroon suit, is Charles Campion, the restaurant critic from the London Evening Standard. He is notorious for his outspoken condemnation of Brick Lane curry, but has accepted the invitation with some relish. When all the dishes are in place, and the chefs lined up behind the tables, he begins his slow progression along the line, sampling and noting as he goes, followed by an eager crush of journalists and restaurant owners. I’m confident, says Azmul, hanging back from the fray. The owner of three restaurants, he has multiple entries.

The street is particularly narrow here, and is busy with one-way traffic – when a large lorry passes, it practically brushes the tablecloth. Someone places a couple of traffic cones across
Brick Lane north of Hanbury Street, forcing vehicles to negotiate the tight right turn into Hanbury Street. Two Asian Community Support Officers on bicycles appear, and look doubtfully at the improvised roadblock. Azmul shakes their hand, ‘Salam Aliakum’. ‘Is it authorised?’ they ask. ‘Oh yes, Ken’s coming, George is coming’, Azmul assures them. Before long several more CSOs have arrived, and some are even directing traffic.

Suddenly Azmul shoots forward and greets someone warmly. It is George Galloway, the local MP, complete with sunglasses and a huge cigar. Azmul tells me he is a good friend, and that he managed Galloway’s election campaign. He is ushered to the centre of the action, and provided with a ladle, with which he proceeds to distribute Green Curry to the assembled crowd, commenting ‘I’m always keen that a Member of Parliament should have a trade to fall back on. Mr Hussein [Azmul] has promised me a job in his restaurant if I ever lose.’ The band starts to play, and, without the traffic, the atmosphere is distinctly festive.

At last, it is time to hear the results of the competition. Charles Campion takes the microphone:  
Thank you for a very pleasant lunch – I don’t usually have 14 courses! I think the standards are high and improving. There’s only two things I would still quibble with a little bit. One is the use of food dye in food, which I really don’t think you need. And the other is, there are still a couple of dishes which are very heavily oiled. By all means cook it with a lot of oil. Take the oil off before you serve it. No one will know. It will just be delicious.

He announces the winners: first is Poppadums, with a fish dish, second is Café Raj’s chicken speciality, and third is the Green Curry itself, from Imam’s Bengali Village. This is a good result for Imam: an endorsement of the Green Curry, without the embarrassment of winning his own competition. The food is now distributed to those who have attended, journalists, dignitaries and onlookers alike.

Next come the speeches. Mahmoud Rauf, a local accountant, and the chair of EMEP, the organisation responsible for the Brick Lane Festival, stresses the need for unity:  
We want to see that Brick Lane – the curry industry and the whole of Brick Lane - is prosperous, regenerating and going ahead. Our curry chefs are proving that we are the leading people in the UK to produce curry for the enjoyment of the general people of this country. I would like to see that we will go forward and forward and stay united to help this area and this country prosperous [sic] by our curry, by our hard work, and by our unity.

Abdus Salique, a Brick Lane restaurateur and the leading figure in the campaign against the filming of Monica Ali’s novel, makes similar comments, stressing, rather elliptically, that contrary to the belief of some, the restaurants association is not corrupt. Next up is George Galloway, who is less circumspect:  
I want to thank the restaurateurs – Mr Salique and my dear friend Azmul Hussein in particular – for the Herculean efforts they have made to recover the reputation of this area for food and for good community practice. Because the code of what Mr Salique said is ‘beware of imposters’. There are others who pretend that they represent Banglatown. But they don’t. The people who represent Banglatown are the organisers of this event today and the festival on Sunday.

Finally everyone who can be cajoled to do so has said their piece. Abdus Salique turns his attention to singing an accompaniment to the band. The chefs return to their restaurants, the stage and tables are cleared away, and the road is reopened.
Making Curry Count

For the organisers, the curry competition has several related functions: First, it is a collective response to food critics who tend to treat the Brick Lane restaurants as a group, condemning them en masse for putting aggressive discounting before quality, and for overuse of artificial colouring and flavouring. One of the organisers of the competition has a newspaper clipping in the window of his restaurant by Charles Campion, in which he says that all the Brick Lane restaurants are awful, except this one. It is at best a back-handed complement, and the restaurant owner himself admits there is not much value in being a single shining star under such circumstances. The curry competition, by its very nature, encourages differentiation between the individual establishments, and winners are quick to capitalise on the distinction by rushing to produce banners announcing their credentials in the three days between the competition and the festival. However, the competition also focuses attention on the quality and variety of the food overall. Several observers noted appreciatively the growing number of fish dishes, a speciality of Sylheti cooking. Imam, the competition organiser, told me that a few years ago no one would order fish in a Brick Lane restaurant ‘unless you’d talked to them about it for ten minutes’. Regional specialities, rather than generic ‘Indian’ favourites, are gaining a certain amount of ground, and the competition is seen as an ideal way to showcase this.

Second, and more generally, Imam emphasised that as a group Brick Lane restaurant owners feel beleaguered by constant negative media exposure. Infamous, if not notorious, in the public imagination, and very accessible for London-based camera crews, Brick Lane ‘has had its fifteen minutes’, as one observer put it, and invariably for the wrong reasons. The curry competition, and the Brick Lane Festival as a whole, provides a rare opportunity for local businesspeople actively and constructively to influence media coverage of the area. This is not an exact science, particularly when food is involved. The ‘message’ of the 2006 competition was Brick Lane’s growing interest in healthy and environmentally friendly food. One restaurant owner for example had been experimenting with colouring his chicken tikka with beetroot, instead of artificial red food colouring, and had been canvassing customers’ opinion about it. The green curry was designed to exemplify this shift. Charles Campion’s assessment, while generally positive, however reiterated concerns about additives and oil – unwittingly undermining the impression the BTRA had hoped to propagate. It was a reminder that food as strategic cultural good cannot be separated from its material relationship with taste. Food’s social (or political, cultural or economic) function is mediated through our individual experience of it.

In parallel (and potentially in conflict with) with these economic concerns, the curry competition is a forum for demonstrations of political affiliation and influence. There is a keen interest in local politics among businesspeople in Brick Lane. With George Galloway as the local MP there is strong support for the Respect Party, matched by an equally enthusiastic (and rather more long-standing) Labour movement, and support for the then Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone.7 Personal relationships with either Galloway or Livingstone are close, and are highly prized. Rivalry within and between community organisations, including festival organising committees and business associations like BTRA, tends to mirror the respective political affiliations. Those associated with the curry competition in 2006 were primarily Respect supporters: Badrul, the director of EMEP who organises the Brick Lane Festival stood as a Respect candidate in the 2006 local elections, and Azmul Hussein was by his own account a

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7 Tower Hamlets borough council is held by Labour, with a healthy sprinkling of Respect councillors, especially in the wards around Spitalfields.
significant donor and manager of George Galloway’s campaign. Galloway’s presence at the curry competition therefore was interpreted by those present against Ken Livingstone’s non-appearance, in spite of the fact that he was only yards away in the Old Truman Brewery, opening the environmental exhibition. Importantly, none of the restaurants owned by ‘Labour’ people in Brick Lane were represented in the curry competition. Veiled (and not so veiled) comments made during the speeches pointed to the recent controversy within BTRA, which involved accusations of corruption, and had resulted in control of the association being wrested from an influential ‘Labour’ restaurateur. So the successful organisation of the competition was seen by some as a feather in Respect’s cap, though the extent of the political posturing annoyed those whose concern was for a prosperous local curry industry, free from such wrangling.

In this context, food acts to anchor political gesture, and to stitch it into the local cultural fabric. A canny politician, Galloway serves the Green Curry to passersby – surely the Brick Lane equivalent to kissing babies. He underlines the wholesome, down-to-earth character of this activity in comparison with the precarious world of politics – cooking is a trade to fall back on. However Galloway also acknowledges the differentiation embodied in the competition, and in the culinary landscape of the street. Sampling the entries, he asks, twice, to be sure he’s heard: ‘do we know whose this is? I don’t want to offend anybody’. Abdus Salique, standing beside him, immediately understands what he is asking, and jokes: ‘a friend of Tony Blair’s, come on!’, at which one of the festival organisers responds, a little plaintively, ‘It’s all from Brick Lane, that’s all you need to know’. The curry operates as a material medium through which potentially inflammatory affiliations and aspirations can be expressed implicitly.

Finally, the curry competition tells us something about the relationship between food and space on Brick Lane. Significantly, the competition takes place outside: there are no neutral indoor spaces in a crowded street lined with rival restaurants, indeed no public spaces at all. Food in Brick Lane is typically a private, commercial affair. On this one occasion, food is not associated with particular restaurants (the competition entries are identified only by number), it is free, and it is served on the street itself. In 2006 this happened in a rather unofficial way. To my knowledge, the organisers did not have formal permission from the council to close the road, or a licence for the amplified music. At a festival planning meeting a couple of days previously the council licensing officer had made it clear that, even had they wanted to, there was no time to apply for the required licences. There is a history of such departure from official procedure. At events such as the Brick Lane Festival, officials from the borough council expend considerable energy attempting to ensure that health and safety regulations, mostly relating to the preparation of food, are adhered to by restaurants and stallholders. Inevitably there are transgressions: people using barbeques or gas burners to serve hot food on the street, for example, playing amplified music outside, or placing tables and chairs in forbidden places. There is a clear limit to the extent to which the authorities are able to manage the use of space in Brick Lane at festival time.

The creation of a temporary public space for the curry competition under mildly illicit circumstances therefore, while not in any way deliberately provocative, suggested an assertive inhabiting of this space which lends a new weight to the rather synthetic, circumscribed idea of ‘Banglatown’. One local resident described the Banglatown branding as recognition that Bengali people belonged in Britain. Others see the initiative rather less ambitiously as promoting cultural tourism based on a circumscribed image of multicultural exotica (Eade

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8 The committee responsible for organising the Baishakhi Mela, another annual one-day event held in May to celebrate Bengali New Year, is seen as associated with the Labour Party in a similar way.
In this version the restaurants play an important role, offering an accessible means of participating in otherness, for a price. Relocating these culinary practices from private premises to a collective public sphere is a subtle but significant shift, and indicates the collaborative aspect of regional regeneration, despite individual competition (Eade and Garbin 2002:143). Galloway’s speech however reminds us of the impossibility of monopolising the cultural capital that is Brick Lane curry. His talk of ‘imposters’, who ‘do not represent Banglatown’ only serves to underline the fact that this brand cannot be owned in a conventional way. Those restaurants not participating in the competition nevertheless do healthy business on Festival day.

Conclusion
It has long been recognised that food and foodways play a critical role in migrant experience (Kershen 2002). Most attention has focused on culinary practices in a domestic context, while there has also been acknowledgement of the important economic function of food-related employment for migrant groups in numerous contexts (Harbottle 1997; Leung 2003). This brief examination of the curry competition and related festivals has shown how the production, consumption and marketing of curry in Brick Lane operates on several levels as a means for tracing threads of political allegiance, as well as economic strategy and social relations.

For Bangladeshi restaurant owners in Brick Lane, food obviously has an important economic function. The ‘curry industry’ was recognised as a primary vehicle for the regeneration of the area a decade ago, and continues to be both a significant employer, and the core of the Banglatown ‘brand’. The Green Curry is an example of efforts to sustain and update this vehicle in order to continue to attract non-Bengali custom. As one local Respect councillor at the curry competition remarked: ‘it’s very important to note that food can unite people of all cultural backgrounds.’

In Brick Lane however curry both unites and divides. The tendency towards collective evaluation of the Brick Lane curry houses ensures that to a degree they all stand and fall together. The necessity for coordinated action, and its festive, celebratory manifestation, however belies the ferocity of competition between restaurant owners, both in business and in politics. As well as being a focus for proactive economic activity, the curry competition is a point at which the energetic personal and political rivalry among restaurateurs and other Bengali businesspeople in Brick Lane becomes visible.

Food is more than an incidental medium for these functions. Its unavoidably material nature has a grounding effect on commerce, placemaking and political rhetoric alike. The familiar, practical aspect of food can be employed and appealed to for particular strategic ends, be they courting electoral favour or marketing cultural tourism. This apparent malleability however belies the complexity and consequent unpredictability inherent in attempts to ‘own’ Brick Lane curry.

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