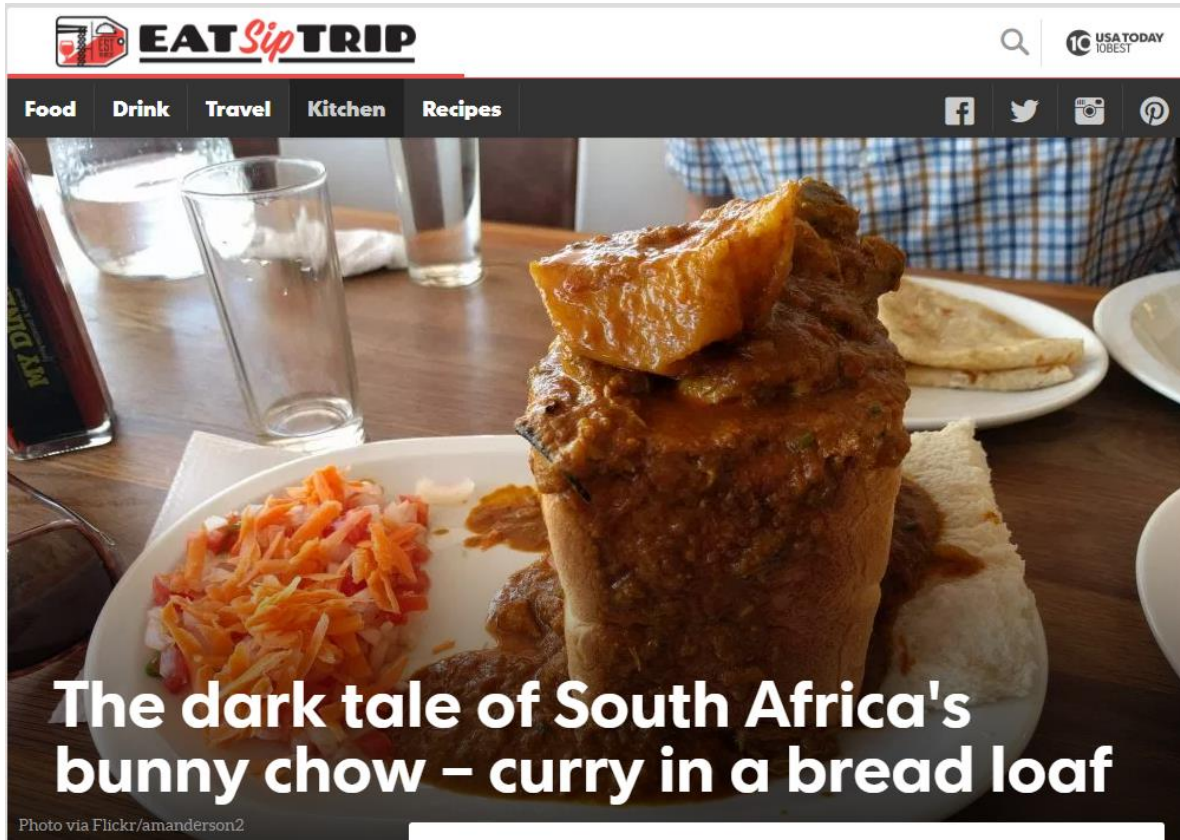




# EAT *Sip* TRIP



By [Michele Herrmann](#) / July 20, 2018 5:45 pm

Chances are, the thought of eating bunny chow for dinner seems extremely unappetizing. That's assuming you're not from South Africa, where bunny chow has nothing to do with adorable little rabbits or their food – instead it's a dark curry with a dark history.

Bunny chow – an apartheid-era street food originating in Durban, South Africa's third largest city – is a rich curry of vegetables, spices and often lamb, mutton or chicken, served in a hollowed-out white bread loaf and eaten with your hands. The vegetarian variety generally comes with a choice of beans: butter, sugar or broad, and you can always expect a side salad of sliced, vinegary carrots and green chilies.

Durban is home to the [largest concentration of Indians](#) of any city outside of India, and people first came from India to this port city from the 1860s through the 1910s as indentured servants for British-owned sugarcane plantations. The Indian servants brought with them their culinary traditions. Not long after the wave of Indian indentured servants

arrived, Indians started immigrating to South Africa on their own accord, looking for work as merchants or artisans.

According to Ishay Govender-Ypma, a culinary and cultural journalist, and author of the cookbook, *Curry: Stories & Recipes across South Africa*, the South African soil and climate were perfect for growing many of the same vegetables used in Indian cuisine from back home. The laborers successfully planted and harvested okra, cilantro, eggplant and a variety of beans.



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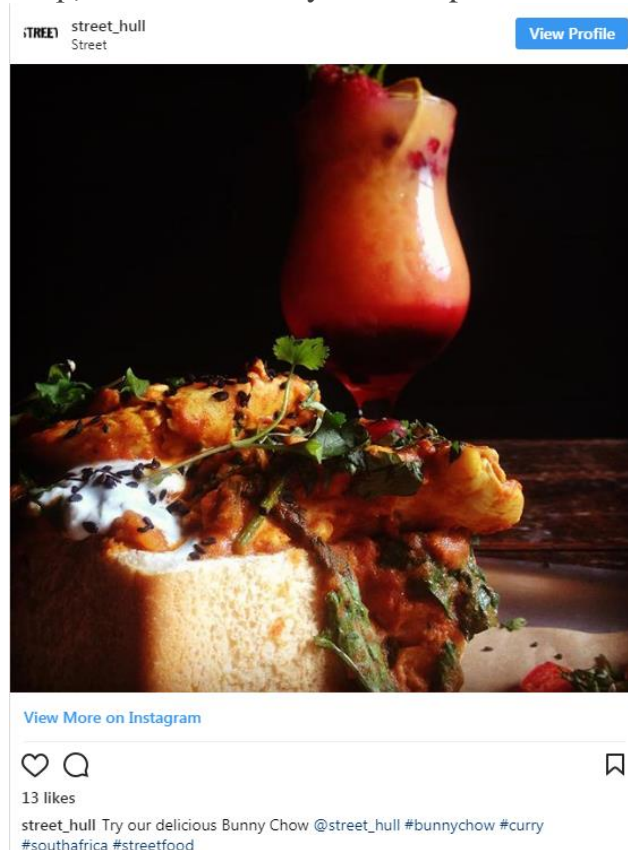


Certain staples, however, were not accessible, so substitutions had to be made. For example, rice was not readily available, so dried maize kernels were substituted and chipped to form an alternative ‘rice.’ “Durban Indian cuisine is a result of circumstantial adaptation,” explained Govender-Ypma.

According to Govender-Ypma, the Indian laborers also started using the Zulu people’s “running” (free-range) chicken, mutton and lamb, along with madumbi (a local yam), spinach, maize meal and the calabash gourd in their cooking.

But most importantly, where bunny chow is concerned, South African Indians substituted the chickpea or rice flour they’d normally use for bread back on the subcontinent with what was available in their new home: white bread flour.

Bunny chow itself wasn’t created until decades after the first Indians arrived in South Africa, but the exact story is a bit of a mystery. According to [NPR](#), the name bunny chow comes from the word “‘bania,’ which is Sanskrit for merchant: From the ‘bania man shop’ came the ‘bunny man shop,’ and from bunny man shop came the bunny chow.”



Whether the actual recipe was first created by the banias, by home cooks, or by a singular Durban restaurant (research by Govender-Ypma points to a restaurant called Kapitan's), one thing is certain: bunny chow's history is intertwined with the South African apartheid.

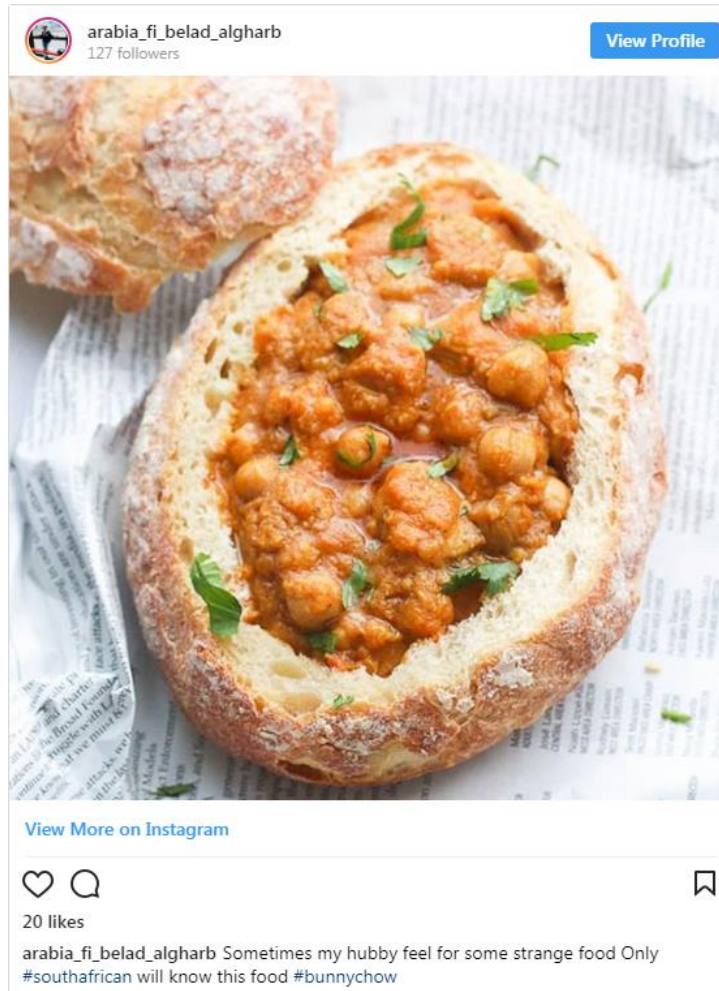
Bunny chow started appearing on the streets of Durban in the 1940s, and its popularity grew during apartheid – the nearly five-decade-long segregation that lasted from 1948 through 1994 – until it was one of the city's most popular street foods.

During this time of segregation, only white patrons could eat in restaurants, but restaurants still wanted to be able to sell food to people of color, who weren't allowed to even linger outside white restaurants, let alone sit in one. So what was the best vessel for takeaway food? Bread.

“You'd have all of these workers that couldn't [dine] in a restaurant and they were hungry,” said Charmain Sithappah, executive chef and owner of catering firm, The Seasoned Pot. A Durban native, Sithappah recalled memories of growing up in her family's restaurant and seeing bunny chow orders for black and Indian customers served through a side window.

“To me, it just belonged to the neighborhood,” said Sithappah. “They all lived with us, but we could not still serve them.”

Not only did bread make the perfect vessel for takeaway food, it was also easily accessible through state-owned bakeries in operation during apartheid, and – perhaps most importantly – it was sturdy enough to hold up to the thick, wet curry without falling apart.



“Traditional Indian breads, like roti, didn’t travel well,” said Kevin Joseph, executive chef of The Oyster Box, a luxury hotel in Umhlanga, a town north of Durban, which makes a specialty bunny chow.

Apartheid ended less than 25 years ago, but bunny chow remains as popular as ever in Durban. Though, in what can be considered a lingering consequence of apartheid, many black residents can no longer afford to eat bunny chow, which costs between 15 rand for a vegetarian (about \$1.10) and 48 rand for mutton (about \$3.60). “The black regular workers around here, it’s quite pricey for them,” Billy Mowbray, whose father opened the Victory Lounge, which has been serving bunny chow since 1948, told *NPR*. “They get a quarter (loaf of) bread and butter in the center, with a cup of tea. That’s fine for them.”

While you can still find bunny chow on the streets of Durban, the dish has transcended its humble street-food origins, and many sit-down restaurants serve the classic dish – including some more upscale versions. Just whatever type of bunny chow you're eating, know things might get messy, but whatever you do, don't ask for a fork.

*bunny chow, curry, Durban, Indian food, regional foods, South Africa, Food, History + Culture, International Cuisine*