

Pulling the Rabbit Out of a Half Loaf: The South African Bunny Chow

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ABSTRACT: The Bunny Chow, one of the most iconic food items in the South African cuisine, is a section of white Government loaf bread (commercially baked sandwich loaf), hollowed out and filled with a spicy curry. This much beloved cross-cultural food item however does not contain any bunny. The Bunny Chow's conception and historical development are somewhat shrouded in mystery, leading to many contradictory beliefs regarding its origins. This historical review traced the origins and development of the Bunny Chow from a limited number of publications that included cookery and recipe books, on-line web pages, and newspaper and magazine articles, in order to create a contextualised summary of the Bunny Chow. The results gleaned from publications reflect several similarities and contradictions in the historical development of the Bunny Chow and identified gaps in the existing literature that may require further research.

Introduction and Background

A BBC Travel documentary referred to the Bunny Chow as 'The Indian Dish You Can't Find In India'.³ This is primarily because this well-known and loved²³ 'homegrown'⁸ food item was developed by Indian indentured labourers in South Africa, and is not found in India or anywhere else in the world. Nowadays a sought-after food item, historical references giving information on how it came to be are scant and contradictory, and its origins remain obscure and 'shrouded in mystery'.^{13, 33}

Various theories about the origins of the Bunny Chow exist. The first is that it evolved to meet the needs of indentured Indian labourers (referred to as the *bania*, *bhannia* or Hindi *banya*, or the Gujarati *vaniya*),²¹ who came to South Africa from western parts of India to work on sugar cane plantations owned by the British in Natal. There appears to be consensus about the fact that Bunny was derived from the word 'bania'.²⁴

Even the second part of the name, 'chow', which some understand to mean 'food' and is understood to have been derived from Chinese, is contested. This understanding is disputed in *Natalia*, the official journal of the Natal Society Foundation, by Elwyn Jenkins²⁰ who explains that Adrian Koopman²¹ quoting of lexicographer Jean Branford regarding the word 'chow' being a Chinese term for 'food' could be incorrect. It is possible that the colloquial South African English word for food, chow, has been derived from 'chow-chow', a relish getting its name from the French word chou, for cabbage.²

Eardley¹¹ (no Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail) made it clear that the Bunny contains no actual rabbit or bunny, but is rather the Zulu slang word for 'food of

the Bania'.³⁵ They stated that the Bunny Chow developed first in Durban Indian eateries which served hunks of bread filled with a saucy bean curry.

The curry filling is as important as the edible bread 'packaging';³¹ the 'ingenious edible packaging' combined meal, crockery and cutlery all in one.²⁷ Since it has become so deeply entrenched in South African cuisine, adaptations, reinterpretations, and modernisations of the Bunny abound. The Bunny Chow is acknowledged as the forerunner of the Kota and Sphatlo, more recent versions of quarter breads filled with a range of items such as fried egg, polony, Russian or Vienna sausages, French fries and sauces.²³ The Bunny is an inexpensive and very filling meal²¹ that could also be filled with 'achaar-pickled mango and liver spread', where the scooped out bread is placed back as a lid.²⁹

The aim and purpose of the research were to present the historical background behind the origins and development of one of South Africa's most beloved foods. The study investigated possible similarities and/or differences between content from a limited body of existing published work (which included cookery and recipe books, on-line web pages, and newspaper and magazine articles) to contextualise the Bunny Chow as a cross-over cultural food favourite for many South Africans and to identify gaps in existing literature. Only a 'paltry collection of sources'¹⁴ are available detailing the origins and development of the Bunny Chow, and this study aimed to identify additional research to conduct in future that could confirm said uncertainties.

Methods

The historical review methodology was used to track and contextualise the origins and development of the Bunny Chow. A rigorous literature review, which included alternative forms of literature, assisted the author to frame the exposition of the Bunny Chow, document the work, and to execute the depth of argument regarding the origins and development of the Bunny Chow,⁵ and to create an agenda for further research.³⁴ Only a limited body of existing published work included references to the origins and historical background, as well as recipes for Bunny Chow. These sources included cookery and recipe books, on-line web pages, and newspaper and magazine articles. These sources were comprehensively reviewed, and their content analysed in order to present the development of the Bunny Chow through a period of time as a cross-over cultural food favourite of the South African nation. The analysis furthermore offered insight into the problem of contradictory information regarding the creation and development of the Bunny Chow.

Results

What Is a Bunny

The Bunny Chow is a half loaf of soft, white, Government bread, filled ‘to the brim’ with curry, mostly lamb or mutton today, although originally predominantly vegetarian – a real ‘curry-in-a-loaf’.^{3, 11, 12, 38} In his award-winning writing, Sanjiv Mistry – he is the 2022 AA Gill emerging food critic winner – says that the Bunny Chow it is ‘an unbeatable combination of a bland white bread loaf filled with an intoxicatingly complex curry’,²⁶ and longingly writes about the delicious Bunny Chows from the Britannia Hotel restaurant.³³ The Bunny contains no actual rabbit or bunny meat (see Figure 1), but is generally filled with curried lamb or beef stew or, as previously mentioned, vegetarian versions.³

Patel’s in Durban, has been serving Bunnies for over 100 years and is considered to sell the best Bunnies in Durban.¹⁰

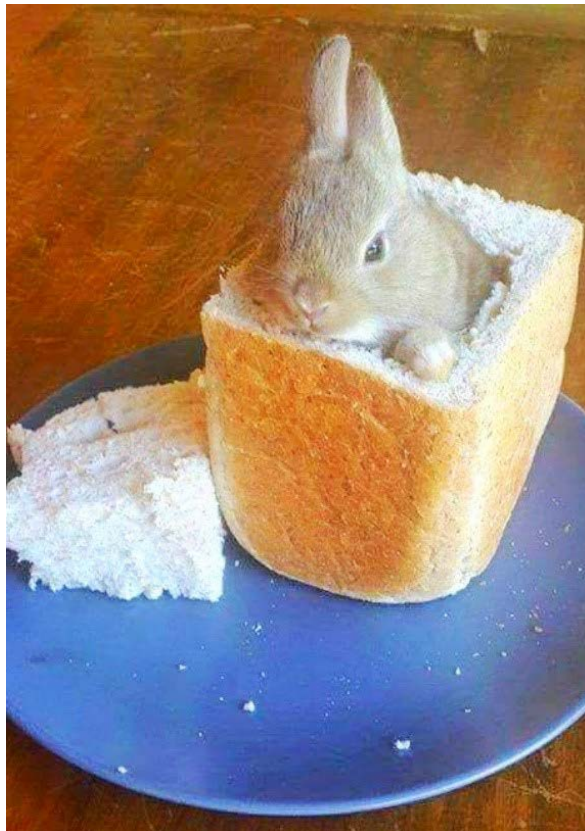


FIGURE 1: Not a real Bunny Chow ³

Hope Malau²³ reveals that a Bunny needs a wet, saucy curry which is confirmed by cookbook author Cariema Isaacs¹⁸ who states that one wants all the flavours of the aromatic and spicy sauce to be soaked up by the pillowy soft bread.

Origins of the Bunny

There is no dispute that Bunny Chows emerged from the large Durban Indian community.³⁸ Between 1860 and 1911, more than 150 000 mostly lower caste

Indian immigrants arrived from Gujarat in South Africa to work as indentured labourers on sugar cane plantations, and in the railways, fishing and boating industries.¹⁵ Although these labourers expected to escape the harsh economic and social conditions in India, their fate in South Africa was not much better as they soon found themselves ‘toiling in the sugar cane plantations and railway stations, living in conditions akin to slavery’.¹⁴

Notwithstanding these challenging conditions they faced in their new land – ‘beatings and worse for minor transgressions and an understandably strained relationship with the indigenous Zulus who refused to acquiesce to British demands’ – most immigrants clung fiercely to their religion and food culture.¹⁴ The labourers were allowed to practice their religious and communal customs, meaning that food rituals associated with prayer and ceremony were also preserved.¹⁵ This postulation, which is based on the avoidance of meat, accounts for the assumption that the original Bunny Chows were exclusively vegetarian. Literature further indicates that the Bunny Chow developed because these migrant Indians needed a way to carry their lunch to the sugar cane plantations,^{20, 36} and it may have been easier, and cheaper, for them to carry a piece of bread, hollowed out and filled with vegetable curry.²² The shell of the hollowed out loaf served as trencher-cum-plate.¹⁹ It was an economical yet filling food item, often for people in cities who are seeking employment and may therefore not have a lot of money to spend on food and could rely on Bunnies as a way of not going hungry.²³

According to Zuleikha Mayat,³ the merchant caste of Indians were known as ‘Bania’ or ‘bunny ou’s’, where the word ‘ou’ is the Afrikaans (another South African indigenous language) equivalent of the word ‘guy’,^{4, 8} leading to the ‘Bania-Chow’ and from there took a linguistic turn to become the Bunny Chow as we know it today.²⁷ A spinoff from a different timeline postulates that Bunny Chows were developed by Durban golf caddies who could not break for lunch and therefore needed a portable food item.³⁸

A second possibility for the origins of the Bunny theorises that Indian merchants sold their wares under a ‘bania’ tree. The staple meal taken from Indian restaurants were called bania chow,²⁰ and that eventually the traditional roti was replaced with bread.³⁶

Another contrasting proposal by Roake and Laurénz³¹ suggests that the Bunny was developed by shopkeepers on Durban’s Grey (or Gray) Street, an area to which Indian merchants were restricted by the apartheid regime. During the apartheid years, Indian people were limited to specific businesses and trades. They were also not allowed to serve black people in their restaurants and cafés. According to Ishay Govender-Ypma,¹⁶ black South Africans were not permitted to visit restaurants and tea rooms during these years, hence the postulation that the Bunny Chow was created around the 1940’s to serve these patrons. As such restrictive rules and regulations are wont to do, in reality these customers were served ‘hastily and illegally’¹⁹ through the ‘back window’²⁰ or door. Under the apartheid rules, even eating utensils and cutlery were segregated into sets for whites

and non-whites.³⁸ The Bunny, which required no silverware, was a creative solution to this limitation.¹⁹

One aspect that most authors agree upon is that under South Africa's oppressive racial segregation laws during apartheid, the mixing of races in public spaces and the sale of food to black people by Indian people and others were strictly prohibited. These laws were defied by certain individuals, such as Ranchod Patel of Patel's Vegetarian Refreshment Room which was established in 1932, who sold food to everyone 'even if some customers couldn't sit down to enjoy their meals'.¹⁴ Others credited for defying apartheid laws and who possibly served Bunny Chow in defiance of these laws were Queens's Tavern, as well as the original Victory Lounge, whose last owners Billy and Kanagee Moodley credits an eatery called Kapitan's.¹⁶ Bhagat's have superseded Kapitan's, but it, along with Patel's Vegetarian Lounge and the Victory Lounge, were considered the pre-eminent Indian eating houses of the period from the 1920s to the 1980s.^{4, 8} The invention of the Bunny Chow was thus a solution for Indian and other workers of colour who were not allowed to sit down to enjoy a meal in restaurants under the South African apartheid system.²⁷

The Bunny Chow thus became not only a subversive food item designed to counter government oppression, but also an early street food which acquired serious street and struggle credibility.^{27, 30} The Bunny Chow evolved from a 'bleak tale about the abuse of mighty colonial power',¹¹ and acquired serious 'street and struggle cred' to beat 'the system in apartheid South Africa, which dictated a Whites-only clientele in the city's sit-down restaurants'.²⁷

Finally, there is a fourth but far less intriguing consideration, which believes that the Bunny Chow was simply an invention in regular homes as a convenient way to transport a meal without a container that was later copied and sold inexpensively by takeout shops to workers who could not take a long lunch break.¹⁴

The Bunny is furthermore considered to be a forebear of the Kota (or Sphatlho), a quintessential Gauteng and North-West Province townships speciality, which literally means 'quarter' after the fact that a loaf of bread is cut into halves and halves again with the soft centre hollowed out. Jenkins²⁰ believes that 'Kota' is just another name for the bunny. Instead of a curry filling, the crusty cavity of the Kota is filled with an array of complimentary items such as French Fries (also called *slap chips* in South Africa), fried egg, atchar, polony, Russian or Vienna sausages and some or other sauce.²³ Since the etymology of the Bunny Chow is so murky, one could speculate that the Bunny Chow was the forerunner of the Kota and Sphatlho.²³ The Kota can be anything from a less expensive two-ingredient version to the full-house version featuring the full range of available fillings. It is rumoured to be an excellent meal for school kids when compressed by placing it in front of the wheel of the school bus to be rolled over, evenly distributing the filling ingredients and creating a flattened version which is easier to share.

Ingredients and Method

For a traditional Bunny Chow, old fashioned, factory-manufactured Government white loaf is essential. Nowadays, these breads are not that easy to find, given the adoption of pre-sliced breads. It is clear that the traditional Bunny eschewed brown bread and certainly artisanal bread would be frowned upon. Depending on the size of the loaf (in South Africa an overly large loaf is sold as a Boerebrood), the bread could probably not only be cut in half, but in quarters. The bread is cut vertically in half in the same direction as one would cut a sandwich slice. The problem with cutting a whole loaf in more than two halves through the middle of the bread, is that there will be no crust to contain the filling. In other words, a loaf cut in half will have five sides of the six-sided cube with a baked crust on, with the remaining soft part at the top. The bread is therefore stood 'up' with crusts at the bottom and sides. One should 'take care not to break through the crust – each hollowed half-loaf needs to be robust enough to be filled to the top – without leaking – with your curry'.¹¹ The bread is hollowed out, 'in one neat piece',¹⁹ from the non-crust side, which becomes the 'lid' of the final assembled Bunny. This is done by simply removing a large hunk of bread out of the loaf in one piece, following the square shape. Apparently this 'lid', or in fact the whole hollowed-out piece of bread, is referred to as 'The Virgin'.^{2, 20}

Initially mostly a bean curry filling (particularly broad beans) was used.⁸ Fillings today are often made from lamb, mutton or even goat,³⁷ onions, garlic, fresh ginger, cumin, fennel seeds, bay leaf, cinnamon stick, ground coriander, ground turmeric, curry powder, tomato purée, seasoning and/or additional pulses such as lentils or vegetables,^{10, 12, 23} to produce a basic stewed meat curry that follows the typical preparation method. Others contain cardamom, cloves, bay leaf and fenugreek.¹¹ The preeminent author on curries, Madhur Jaffrey¹⁹, writes in her *Ultimate Curry Bible* that the spicing of the initial Bunny fillings was simplistic as a result of poverty, which obliterated most Indian regional distinctiveness. Now that spices are readily available, those initial memories of 'home foods' have become dulled, so that fillings are no longer reminiscent of specific regional Indian curry flavours but have adopted a generic 'Indianness'.

Finally, the piping hot curry is spooned into the hollow and the bread 'lid' replaced. Using any utensils to eat a bunny is mostly frowned upon. It is therefore essential for the diner to eat quickly, 'before the bread becomes too soggy to handle'.³⁸ The perfect Bunny should be paired with carrot salad, chillies soaked in vinegar, pickles or sambals as sides.²²

How to Eat the Bunny

There is a 'protocol' to eating a Bunny, which is predicated on the very nature of the dish.³³ One has to eat it with one's fingers (a normative eating behaviour amongst Indian people), taking turns to scoop up the curry with pieces of bread torn from the loaf, ensuring that one eats a polite mix of meat, potato and sauce with the bread.¹¹ Today, for less than \$3 for a vegetarian version, those seeking out a Bunny Chow range from serious gourmards and gastro tourists to labourers and

budget-conscious travellers. 'Use the piece of bread placed at the top like a lid to eat the curry from the centre and work your way outwards',¹⁶ essentially foregoing the use of cutlery and crockery to eat with your hands and fingers.¹² The only real requirement would be plenty of serviettes.¹¹

Bunny Chows are often sold with tiny bags of vinegary grated carrot and green chili salad as an accompaniment. As the curry stew inside the bread is often fairly hot, no drink really appeases the burn according to those who regularly eat hot food. Those in the know therefore tend to reach for an untainted piece of bread to give the curry sauce another go.¹⁶

Ordering a Bunny requires a little know-how. One should never ask for a Bunny Chow, but rather for a 'quarter beans' or 'quarter mutton'.⁸ The Bunny should be eaten 'whilst walking or sitting on pavement or grass' writes Nick Zehnder in DeWitt, et al.⁹

Bunnies Today

South Africa, and particularly Durban, has the 'highest concentration of Indians (800,000) of any city outside of India', according to the office of the Indian Consulate in Durban.¹⁴ It is therefore no wonder that this street food is being kept alive and continues to thrive.¹² One of South Africa's favourite street foods, the Bunny Chow is an economical yet filling food item in today's economic climate. For those seeking employment in cities 'with little money in their pockets', the Bunny Chow is a 'necessary survival tool'.²³

Even though the first Bunnies were intended to be an unimpressive, inexpensive yet filling portable food eaten with one's hands, things are somewhat different today, ranging from 'common-or-garden variety basic to designer glamorous'.¹¹ Cookbook authors Hope Malau²³ and Cariema Isaacs¹⁸ both call for a wet, saucy curry, which would ensure that the pillowy soft bread would soak up all the flavours of the aromatic and spicy sauce.

The Bunny Chow Barometer was developed in 2004 by Chris Chappé and Donovan Baney while having many Bunnies at The House of Govenders (also referred to as Govenders House of Curries or Govenders Curry Kitchen) to provide customers with the definitive list of excellent Bunnies. Initially part of the 'Celebrate Durban' initiative, 50 eateries competed in 2011.²⁰ This initiative has since become the Coca Cola Bunny Chow Barometer and last took place in September of 2018 on the banks of the uMngeni at the Blue Lagoon in Umgeni Park.²² The Bunny has also been awarded the status as 'one of Africa's 15 favourite dishes by CNN travel'.³³

The Bunny has crept into all spheres of life, and has featured in a 2006 comedy film *Bunny Chow*,^{20, 28} and was also the *raison d'être* for a small restaurant (which has since permanently closed) at number 74 Wardour Street, London W1 called *Bunnychow*.²⁵

Modern Interpretations

Today a Bunny Chow can be found on the menus of many five-star establishments where rich Indian people (*lahnee*) eat them with a knife and fork.⁸ Deeply entrenched in South African cuisine, it is not surprising that adaptations, reinterpretations and modernisations of the Bunny Chow will abound, to the extent that the Bunny is even referred to as Le Bunny.³¹

These days ‘about any curry can go into a bunny chow, including prawn and meatball chutney²² or a plain fish curry.²¹ Small bread rolls baked in an upright tin with a domed head is used by Anna Trapido and chef Coco Fathi Reinartz in their elaborate version called chicken Bunny Chow with tomato Kachumber and Inkomazi chutney from their book *To the Banqueting House: African Cuisine: an Epic Journey*.³⁵ There has been a Deconstructed Bunny Chow Bowl, where the bread was transformed into croutons,³² while chef Jacque Fourie of Licorish Bistro serves a simple chicken curry in dinner rolls on his tasting plate menu with brinjal chutney and chickpea fritters.³⁷ Chef Seelan Sundoo serves small snack-sized versions of Bunny Chow at his restaurant in Cape Town’s V&A Waterfront. A celebration of South African cuisine with nods to Kerala, Mauritius and Durban, Seelan’s version of the Bunny Chow is served in segments of baguette.⁷ An even more modern butter-chicken in pita self-assembled version with a side of tomato sambal is offered by Sarah Graham.¹⁷

Other modern innovative fillings include Kebab Chutney, Trotters & Beans, Cabbage & Mutton, Chicken & Prawn, Tripe & Gram Dhal and Prawn Curry⁶. Mimicking a stew-cum-burger, the Bunny Chow curry filling is sometimes served in a large bun, with a dollop of yoghurt as a nod to its Indian roots¹². Figure 2 illustrates a modern version served in a ‘hollowed out bread bowl’ that makes it even more appealing for carb lovers.¹



FIGURE 2: Carb conscious Bunny Chow¹



FIGURE 3: Traditional Bunny Chow^{6, 38}

An entry in the Cape Times referenced by Jenkins refers to the bunny as an old Cape favourite: a loaf stuffed with snoek or curry, which the author said would make ‘a KwaZulu-Natal purist shudder’.²⁰

However, perhaps Bunny Chows served with fancy bread rolls or artisanal bread often elicit comments such as ‘what a shame!’ When the Durban curry is good, one should ideally not spoil your Bunny Chow by ‘trying to pimp it up with fancy bread’.¹⁸

Conclusion and Recommendation

Even though the anthropological origins of the Bunny Chow remain unclear, and the truth may lie somewhere between the various speculative theories outlined above, it remains one of South Africa’s most proud heritage cuisine items. This hearty, spicy, economical meal (See Figure 3 for a traditional version), the Bunny Chow, precedes the Big Mac as one of South Africa’s original fast foods in its own biodegradable packaging.⁹ It is a food now firmly entrenched in the South African cuisine as a national food item.²⁴ According to Sanjiv Mistry²⁶ it is very easy to become misty-eyed about it and ‘cut to a sepia-tinted photo montage outlining the history of the dish and its supposed origins in a segregated South Africa’. He believes that much about the origins of Bunny Chow may be of doubtful authenticity, even though it has been widely accepted as true.

Despite these misgivings, there appears to be agreement that it ‘probably first appeared in Durban during the late 1940s, and its primarily black, poor, and apartheid-oppressed purchasers tagged it as Bunny Chow-bania food’.¹¹

It appears that the knowledge of making a Bunny Chow is passed from one generation to the next.³⁶ It is a living food that is made and consumed every day, and for Durbanites, and to a certain extent all other South Africans, ‘Bunnies are not just food – it’s a culture’.²²

Given the contradictory information presented in this historical review, possible future research could include investigations of maritime records into the first Indian arrivals in South Africa. Sole dependence on reviews of cookbooks, websites and blogs appears to not have brought any clarity regarding the origins and development of this much-loved South African street food, the Bunny Chow.

Notes

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