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**Special Section: Locations on the food menu**

**Title:** ‘Banglatown —Curry Capital of London and birthplace of ‘Asian Cool’

**Abstract:** This article acquaints the reader with the culinary heritage of a locality within London’s East End and how it has developed as a tourist and leisure destination and in so doing, revitalised this inner city neighbourhood. It explores the ebb and flow of immigrants and how the enduring Bengali population have established over forty curry houses plus food emporiums within the locality now known as Banglatown. An exotic cityscape attracts tourists who are progressively drawn by the post-industrial setting, Asian music and an exuberant night life. This gastronomic and touristic hotspot continues to re-invent itself so as to satisfy the young and increasingly affluent visitor.

**Keywords:** Banglatown, leisure and tourism-led regeneration, tourist orientated curry houses, culinary heritage, cultural quarters

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**‘Banglatown —Curry Capital of London and birthplace of ‘Asian Cool’**

London’s East End attracts tourists eager to gaze upon notions of Jack the Ripper, ‘cockneydom’ and Victorian slums. However, Brick Lane, situated between Whitechapel and Spitalfields and adjacent to the City of London, now offers visitors the largest cluster of curry houses anywhere in Britain and some of the capital’s most exciting night clubs, art houses and music businesses. Throughout history, this working class district has attracted diverse immigrant populations including French Huguenot refugees and later Jews fleeing Eastern Europe and both groups helped create the area’s thriving clothing industry – while the Jews also established the popular bagel shops. The East India Company introduced seamen from Bangladesh and some set up humble curry outlets to cater for their compatriots and as their numbers grew, many then sought work in London restaurants as well as the local ‘rag trade’. By the twenty-first century, of the 9,000 so called Indian restaurants in the UK, 85% were Bangladeshi-run and 41% of the population of Spitalfields and Banglatown were of Bengali origin.

The district’s clothing industry was then destroyed by global competition and associated jobs plunged from 10,000 to just 500. Unexpectedly, in the early 1990s, a few curry houses opened and appealed to the higher-spending, majority culture and this laid the foundation for the district’s reorientation. The local council, realising the redevelopment potential of its culinary heritage as a visitor attraction received regeneration funding for the promotion of Brick Lane and in 1997 the area was named a ‘Developing Cultural Quarter’ and encouraged to further develop as a tourist and leisure destination. The number of curry houses rose from eight in 1989 to 41 by 2002 and while some served typical Anglo-Indian hybrid dishes others served authentic Bengali cuisine and in total, they employed over 400 local people. Neighbouring shops sell gaudy misti sweets, enigmatic vegetables, fish from the Ganges, colourful saris and Bengali films within an animated streetscape and amidst a cacophony of Asian Dub music interspersed with recordings of religious prayers. The re-imaging of Brick Lane as an exotic cityscape then received a further £1 million to improve and decorate street lighting, street signs and build an Eastern-style gateway thus ensuring wealthier visitors felt safe and welcome to the neighbourhood. The popular, multi-cultural Baishakhi Mela and Brick Lane Curry Festival were then established and the name of ‘Banglatown’ was adopted as the place brand.

Artists including Tracey Emin and Banksy have left their mark on the area and the old Truman Brewery at the top end of Brick Lane and now smothered in graffiti, has been converted into vibrant indoor markets, exhibition space, design studios, galleries and night clubs where underground Bengali bands might play. The enhanced evening trade along with the overall transformation of Banglatown has created remarkable economic benefits but also criticism for the growing presence of alcohol, drugs, prostitution as well as for being a ‘disneyfied’, re-invention of the exotic. Proximity to the City, growing gentrification of the East End and Brick Lane’s counter-cultural reputation ensures increasingly affluent and hedonistic visitors who are also demanding smarter eateries. However, the area has always adapted to the times. Rather like the Huguenot chapel built on Brick Lane in 1742, then transformed into a synagogue in 1898 only to be converted into a mosque in 1976, Brick Lane continues to re-invent itself. Banglatown remains a popular urban, ethnic tourism attraction and a progressively more eclectic and upmarket food offering will ensure it remains a much visited gastronomic hotspot with a significant tourism ingredient, at least for a while longer.