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Mike Butt...Pioneering Curry King

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MIKE BUTT... PIONEERING CURRY KING

Mairtin MacConlomaire

Mike Butt... restaurant pioneer

MAHMOOD (MIKE) BUTT was born in Nairobi, Kenya on 7 May 1926. His parents were Indian coming from Lahore and Amritsar. He moved to London and came to Ireland for the first time in the late 1940s with the Civil Service cricket team. He had a friend in Dublin, came over for six weeks and never left. He met and later in 1955 married Terry Foy from Dublin who was a graduate of the College of Catering, Cathal Brugha Street and was manager in The Green Rooster Restaurant in O'Connell Street. The Green Rooster was owned by an Australian, Billy Willis, and Terry recalled once throwing Gorganzola cheese in the bin because she thought it was gone off, much to the horror of her boss who threatened to stop the cost from her wages! Mike's first business called 'Fruity Frost' involved the production of iced fruit lollys. They had a factory near Mespil Road but he was refused funding when he tried to expand. An Irish company took the concept, received the funding and prospered.

He had two options, to return to Kenya or to set up a new business. Terry did not want to leave Ireland and they decided to use her catering experience and his Indian cooking knowledge and open one of Ireland's first Indian restaurants. They searched for premises and took a long lease on premises in 27 Lower Leeson Street, which was a residential area. They opened the Golden Orient Restaurant in February 1956. The restaurant had six tables and a curtain separating the kitchen from the dining room. They were fortunate that Terry O' Sullivan from the 'Evening Press' came in on the opening night and wrote a great review of the restaurant that helped secure a loyal following from early on. The restaurant became like a club and was opened until 3am. Students from University College Dublin in nearby Earlsfort Terrace would often work waiting tables just to get their dinner for free.

Evans, Gray and Hood in England specifically blended the curry powder for the new restaurant. He had to import all the spices; rice poppadoms and even tomato puree from London and stored them in their garage at home. It was not until the early 1980s that the ingredients became more widely available. In the April 1956 issue of 'Good Cooking' (Ireland's first food and wine publication) Mahmood Butt is featured under the Chef's Choice section and he gives recipes and advice on producing a good curry and accompaniments.

Mike was quite the visionary and he noticed the winter time business was not as healthy as summer time when the tourists were more plentiful and to keep busy and also to educate the Irish public on Indian food, hence increasing future custom, he travelled around the provinces running Indian food festivals in hotel restaurants from Donegal to Clare. In the 1960s he set up Golden Orient Foods producing frozen tv Indian dinners but was ahead of his time as very few people had deep freezes. He worked in conjunction with Irish Meat Packers to produce a range of canned Golden Orient Curry Products that held pride of place in many of the gourmet shops window displays.

In the early 1970s he noticed the trend in England towards gourmet or 'fine dining' style Indian restaurants evolving from the Curry Houses. He decided to move first to avoid competition and he opened the Tandoori Rooms in the basement of the Leeson Street premises. He drew up the plans for a tandoor (special Indian oven) and had it made by a friend who worked in a foundry. His style of food was eclectic and he would often take crayfish and monkfish from Hanlons fishmongers that would have been in their window display but would otherwise have been thrown out, and create Indian dishes with them. Recipes from the Tandoori Rooms appeared in many publications including Gourmet magazine and Guilt and Millau. He appeared in Egon Ronay's first guidebook and in every subsequent edition until the restaurant closed in1986.

Mike Butt was the founding president in 1970 of the Irish Restaurant-Owners' Association (IROA), which later changed its name to the Restaurant Association of Ireland (RAI). John D. Carroll, Mark Kavanagh, Peter Robinson, Maurice Cohen, Heather Gray and Rachael Bewley were the other founding members. The main motivation behind this organisation was to lobby for reduced taxation and the Special Restaurant Licence to enable restaurants to serve spirits and beer and not only wine. He was also director of Dublin Tourism for a period as well as being Honorary Counsel for Pakistan in Ireland. In 1975 Golden Orient Ltd. started a service called 'Dine Around' where visitors to Ireland could book meals in top Irish restaurants before leaving home and pay for them with special vouchers purchased from their local tour operators. The 1980 'Good Food Guide' published some of Mike's maxims 'strength through joy' and 'variety through spice' and the inspector found the tastes and the bonhomie of the restaurant unchanged. Mike at this stage shared the cooking with Mohamad Yusuf and Kevin Pigot. The restaurant closed in the mid 1980s due to a combination of Mike's ill health and a severe downturn in the economy.

Mike Butt enjoyed shooting pheasant and was an avid fly fisherman, favouring particularly the Connemara lakes. He loved to drive fast cars and was the proud owner of a Bristol 404, Aston Martin DB4 and the first MGBGT in Ireland. In his latter years he took up painting and became an Irish citizen. He died on 15 January 1988.