Episode Book

EPISODE #5538

One Pot, 120 Curries: How BIR Kitchens Work

PUBLISHED	25 September 2026 at 00:53 UTC
DURATION	22:09
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/bir-base-gravy-home-kitchens/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:37 UTC

SYNOPSIS

A busy British curry house sends out 120 dishes a night, and every one of them starts from the same vat of base gravy. This episode breaks down what's actually in that vat (onions, oil, carrot, cabbage, peppers, tomatoes, garlic-ginger paste, a standard spice set), why the sauce is deliberately bland, and how a two-to-three-minute pan finish turns one ladle into a rogan josh or a dhansak. Then it gets practical: batch sizes, portioning, freezing before dilution, fridge and freezer life, and the 30-minute quick versions. Along the way, the episode takes seriously the sharpest objection out there — that base gravy isn't a curry technique at all, just meal planning in a curry-shaped container.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A hundred and twenty curries. That's what a busy British curry house will send out of one kitchen in a single night, and every one of them starts from the same pot.



Herman

The same pot. Which sounds like a confession when you say it out loud.



Corn

It sounds like a magic trick. Daniel's been sitting in these restaurants watching a menu the size of a phone book arrive at his table in ten minutes, and he wants to know how. He's heard the answer is base gravy, made in huge vats as a general flavour foundation, and he thinks it's brilliant. Specifically for harried parents. People who want something that tastes like a proper curry without standing over a pan every night of the week.



Herman

That's the pitch.



Corn

So he's asking three things. What does the technique actually involve. Can it be applied domestically in a way that saves time, rather than just looking like it does. And what would a practical routine look like for a busy household that loves curry. He's not asking whether it's authentic. He's asking whether it works at home.



Herman

Those are different questions with different answers, which is the whole episode.



Corn

So let's start with what's actually in the vat.



Herman

An onion stock. That's the honest description. Dan Toombs, the Curry Guy, says it straight out: this sauce is bland, just like a good chicken stock is bland. The magic happens when you use it.



Herman

It's the point. If the base tasted like curry, you couldn't build forty dishes on top of it. You'd just be eating the same curry with different garnishes. It has to be neutral enough to accept whatever you throw at it, which means it can't taste like much on its own.



Corn

So what goes in?



Herman

His version is about three litres out of a big pot. Nine hundred grams of Spanish onions, which is roughly seven of them. A quarter litre of rapeseed oil. Carrot, cabbage, red and green pepper, a tin of chopped tomatoes, five tablespoons of garlic and ginger paste. Then garam masala, cumin, coriander, paprika, optionally fenugreek and turmeric. You simmer it covered for forty-five minutes, add the spices, top up the water, simmer another thirty, then blend it for about four minutes until it's completely smooth.



Corn

Four minutes of blending.



Herman

Super smooth is the phrase. And that's not cosmetic. The texture is the product. If it's grainy, the finished curry is grainy.



Corn

What's the long cook actually doing to those onions?



Herman

Two things. It breaks them down so far that no raw, sharp or sulphurous note survives. That's the harsh edge you get when you undercook onions in a curry, that slightly aggressive bite. Long cooking kills it. And it develops sweetness, because the onions' own sugars are converting and concentrating the whole time. What you end up with is something meltingly tender that blends into a pourable sauce.



Corn

So it's not that the onions are browned. It's that they're dissolved.



Herman

Dissolved is the right word. And that's the fork in the road for this entire episode. Because there's another way to cook onions for a curry, and it's the opposite. Glebe Kitchen calls it hotel style. You brown the onions deeply, thirty to ninety minutes of stirring, and you get a darker, bolder, more intensely flavoured gravy.



Corn

And the British version doesn't do that.



Herman

Deliberately doesn't. His line is that UK cooks dropped the deep browning of the onions. Because it was easier. Simpler. Less work.



Corn

There it is.



Herman

That's not a slur. It's a description of a trade. You give up depth and you buy speed. And you can see the trade sitting right there in the recipe, in the thing that isn't in it.



Corn

So walk me through the service end. What happens when an order comes in?



Herman

Two or three minutes of hard, high-heat cooking. That's the number. The chef fries garlic and ginger paste, fries the dish-specific spice blend, adds a ladle or two of base gravy and lets it bubble and reduce, adds pre-cooked protein, finishes with coriander, butter, garam masala, lemon. Done.



Corn

And a rogan josh and a dhansak start from the same ladle.



Herman

Identical ladle. The difference is entirely what goes in the pan. The spice blend, the chilli, the souring agent, the cream, the lentils. One base, many finishes. That's the architecture.



Corn

Which is why the base can be bland and the menu can be enormous at the same time.



Herman

The base isn't the dish. The base is the substrate. Richard Sayce, Misty Ricardo, is almost aggressive about this. He says base gravy should not have a strong taste, like a mild soup. It's a foundation, not a finished dish. And then he says the line I think is the whole technique in one sentence: ingredients will only get you so far, it's what you do with them that counts. It's as much important what you do with the base gravy than what's in it.



Corn

That's a man who's had the argument before.



Herman

Many times. Because the first thing anyone says when they hear about base gravy is that it's cheating. And the answer is that the cheating, if it is cheating, happened at the pan, not in the vat.



Corn

Say more.



Herman

The vat is just onions. There's no mysterious ingredient in there. The British Curry Network piece is very good on this. There is no mysterious ingredient and no withheld trick. There is just a kitchen that decided, long ago, to cook its onions properly and in advance.



Corn

Properly and in advance. Those are doing different jobs.



Herman

That's the sentence. Properly is the technique. In advance is the logistics. And the episode is really about the second one.



Corn

Because the technique is not secret. It's published. It's on a dozen blogs.



Herman

It's more than published. The Curry Guy's post has been up since 2011 and gets updated. Tiffin and Tea's base recipe was published in 2018 and was updated about a week ago. This isn't a guarded trade secret. It's a documented method that anyone can read.



Corn

So the mystery was never the recipe.



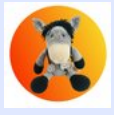
Herman

The mystery was the timing. You sit down, you order, and food appears. And the reason it appears is that the hours went in before you arrived. That's the British Curry Network line, and it's the correct one. The hours went in before you arrived, which is exactly why the curry reaches you so fast.



Corn

So the honest framing is that this is a kitchen logistics system that happens to produce food.



Herman

It's both. But if you only look at it as a recipe, you miss why it exists. It exists because a menu with a hundred and twenty items cannot be cooked to order from raw onions. It's not a preference. It's a constraint.



Corn

And that's where I want to push, because Daniel's question isn't about restaurants. It's about his kitchen. So let's be clear about what this thing is and isn't before we take it home.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

It's not traditional Indian home cooking. That's the correction that has to go in early. The Curry Guy is explicit. Do authentic Indian restaurants use base gravy? Not usually. Most authentic Indian restaurants will have their chefs cook up the curries, creating each individually. And he notes that's part of why more authentic restaurants can be a lot more expensive.



Herman

The labour is in the price.



Corn

The labour is the price. So this is a British Indian Restaurant technique. BIR is the acronym and it's a real category, not a sneer. It's a cuisine that developed in the UK, in Bangladeshi-run kitchens, to serve a British appetite at a British pace. It has its own logic and its own standards.



Herman

And that matters for the home question in a specific way. If you're trying to cook traditional Indian food at home, base gravy is the wrong tool. If you're trying to reproduce the curry you get from the takeaway down the road, it's the only tool.



Corn

Because the takeaway curry is a different dish.



Herman

It's a different dish. The browning is different, the finish is different, the whole structure is different. You cannot get there by cooking a traditional curry harder.



Corn

So the first question Daniel asked, what the technique actually involves, is answered. Onions, long cook, blend smooth, finish to order in a pan. The second question is the one that's actually contested.



Herman

Whether it survives the trip home.



Corn

That's the restaurant version. The question Daniel actually asked is whether any of this survives the trip home.



Herman

The pro-case is real and it's specific. The British Curry Network says many home cooks now make a batch of base gravy at the weekend, blend it smooth, freeze it in portions. And then: with a tub of base in the freezer and some marinated, part-cooked chicken to hand, a weeknight curry comes together in the same few minutes it would at a restaurant.



Corn

Same few minutes.



Herman

That's the claim. And the numbers behind it are not trivial. Tiffin and Tea's batch is ten onions and two kilos of tinned plum tomatoes plus the pastes and spices, and it makes approximately twenty to twenty-five meals. Prep is twenty minutes. Cook is about an hour.



Corn

So an hour and twenty minutes buys you twenty-five dinners.



Herman

Before you count the finishing. Which is the part people skip. The base is not the meal. You still have to fry your spices and add your protein and finish the dish. That's ten to fifteen minutes on the night.



Corn

And the storage logistics?



Herman

The Curry Guy freezes in five hundred millilitre portions, which is enough for two or three servings. He's specific that you should freeze it before thinning it with water, because that saves freezer space, and then dilute it when you reheat. Typical usage is about three hundred millilitres of diluted base per recipe. Double the undiluted base with water.



Corn

Fridge life?



Herman

Three to four days, up to a week on the more generous reading. Freezer, up to six months.



Corn

That's a real buffer.



Herman

It's a real buffer. And there are quicker versions if the hour is the thing putting you off. Ome Made's is described as really really simple and it's done in forty minutes, six to eight portions. Misty Ricardo's quick base is thirty minutes and enough for about five single-portion curries.



Corn

Thirty minutes.



Herman

Which changes the calculus. That's not a weekend project. That's a Tuesday evening.



Corn

So the pro-case is: batch once, eat for weeks, weeknight assembly is fast. What's the counter-case?



Herman

The counter-case is the sharpest thing in the research and it comes from a Cooking Stack Exchange question from 2020. The asker puts it bluntly. Is there really an advantage to this as opposed to simply making a curry from scratch, or is this more a case of slavish mimickry?



Corn

Slavish mimickry.



Herman

His argument is that the batch-and-freeze approach could be useful, but that it's not specific to curry. His words: it's just meal planning, like people making twenty portions of tomato sauce.



Corn

Ouch.



Herman

It's a good ouch. Because if he's right, then base gravy isn't a curry technique at all. It's a container. You could do the same thing with a ragu, a chilli, a soup. The curry is incidental.



Corn

And he also raises the question of who's teaching this.



Herman

He notes that the BIR gurus are overwhelmingly not of South Asian origin, and suspects that South Asian families cook from scratch. Which is a real observation and also an unanswered one. Nobody in the sources actually answers whether British Bangladeshi or Sylheti families use base gravy at home. The question gets raised and it just sits there.



Corn

That silence is interesting.



Herman

It's very interesting. Because it suggests the technique might be a restaurant method that got documented by enthusiasts and then sold back to home cooks as a lifestyle.



Corn

Not sold maliciously. But that's the shape of it.



Herman

That's the shape. And here's the thing I keep coming back to, and I want to be honest that I can't resolve it. Nobody quantifies the saving. Every pro-batching source asserts that it saves time. Not one of them measures it against cooking from scratch.



Corn

So we have a claim with no denominator.



Herman

We have a claim with no denominator. And the counter-argument is that the denominator doesn't exist because the saving isn't curry-specific. It's just the general saving you get from cooking anything in bulk.



Corn

Which is real. It's just not a discovery about curry.



Herman

Right. It's a discovery about freezers.



Corn

Let me put the strongest version of the pro-case back on the table, though, because I don't want to leave it as a wash. There's a comment on Glebe Kitchen from a reader, and it's the most honest testimonial in the whole pile. He says an hour or so of effort and you too can turn a large amount of onions and spices and chillies and tomatoes into the purest gold. And then: I can think a curry would be nice this evening, grab a bag of gold from the freezer, and forty-five minutes later have a stunning curry on my plate.



Herman

Forty-five minutes, though. Not ten.



Corn

Forty-five minutes including the finishing and probably the rice. That's a weeknight dinner. That's not nothing.



Herman

That's a weeknight dinner. And notice what he's describing isn't speed. It's optionality. He's describing the ability to decide at four in the afternoon that he wants curry, and then have it, without a shopping trip and without an hour of prep.



Corn

That's the real product. Decision removed.



Herman

Decision removed is a better description than time saved. Because the effort didn't disappear. It moved to Saturday.



Corn

Which is exactly the question. Does it make everyday cooking easier, or does it just relocate the effort?



Herman

It relocates it. That's not a criticism, it's a description. The question is whether the relocation is worth it, and that depends entirely on your household.



Corn

And on your freezer.



Herman

And on your freezer, which brings in the edge case that I think is the most useful thing in the research. In January a reader wrote to Dan Toombs asking how to scale the recipe down to about a litre, because they live alone and don't have the freezer space for three.



Corn

A single person with a small freezer.



Herman

And his advice was to scale it down but add hotter, overpowering ingredients to taste. Which is a real answer and also a slightly sad one. Because the whole pitch is twenty-five meals. If you can only store four, the pitch collapses.



Corn

The batch size is the feature and the bug.



Herman

It's the same number doing both jobs. Twenty-five meals is a triumph if you have a chest freezer and a family of five. It's a burden if you have an icebox and a cat.



Corn

So the honest answer to Daniel's second question is: yes, it can save time, and the saving is real but conditional. It's conditional on freezer space, on household size, and on whether you actually like eating the same base across many different dishes.



Herman

And on the second half of the system, which the sources are clear about and which I think people miss. The base alone doesn't give you a ten-minute dinner. You need pre-cooked protein. Marinated, part-cooked chicken in the freezer, or a rotisserie chicken you shred on the night. The base is one half. The protein is the other half. If you only do the base, you've done half the work and you'll still be waiting on chicken.



Corn

That's the practical routine, then. Batch the base, portion the protein, assemble on the night.



Herman

That's the routine. And it's a real routine. It's just a bigger commitment than the phrase make a batch of base gravy suggests. You're not doing one thing. You're doing two things, on a weekend, in advance, forever.



Corn

So the verdict is unresolved.



Herman

I think it has to be. The technique works. The restaurant case is airtight. The home case is real but it's a meal-planning case, not a curry case, and the sources never prove otherwise.



Corn

I agree with that, and I'd add one thing. The reason it feels unresolved is that we've been asking the wrong question. We've been asking whether it saves time. The better question is whether the restaurant needs it for a reason that a home cook doesn't have.



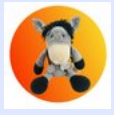
Herman

Say that again.



Corn

The restaurant has a hundred and twenty dishes on the menu. That's why the base exists. Not because the chef is lazy. Because the menu is too big to cook any other way.



Herman

And a home cook has three or four dishes.



Corn

A home cook has three or four dishes. Which means the constraint the base solves might not exist in a home kitchen at all.



Herman

That's a different way to look at it.



Corn

I've been driving a van.



Herman

Sorry?



Corn

I've been driving a van. I drove for a British Indian takeaway for about eight months, evenings, and I want to agree with most of what you've said and then correct one thing.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

The base gravy is real. Everything you said about the onions is right. But you've been calling it a time-saving trick, and from where I stood it wasn't a trick. It was the business. That kitchen didn't have a base because it saved time. It had a base because there was no other way to send forty different dishes to forty different houses in one evening. The time saving was a side effect of the menu being too big to cook any other way.



Herman

So the constraint came first.



Corn

The constraint came first. And the thing I remember isn't the food. It's the back door at six on a Friday. A row of enormous stockpots on a steel bench, cooling, and the owner's son ladling it into plastic tubs with a jug while he took phone orders with the other hand. I never once saw anybody brown an onion in that kitchen.



Herman

Never?



Corn

Never. And the owner said something to me once that I've thought about since. He said the gravy was the only thing in the kitchen that wasn't a shortcut. Everything else was assembled around it. The pre-cooked chicken, the portioned spice mixes, the tubs of finished sauce. The base was the one thing they actually cooked.



Herman

The one real thing.



Corn

And that reframes your question, doesn't it. If the base exists because the menu is too big, then a home cook with a small menu may not need the same solution. You might be solving a problem you don't have. Which is not the same as saying it doesn't work. It's saying it was built for a different kitchen.



Herman

That's a much better frame than the one we had.



Corn

I'm not saying don't do it. I'm saying know what you're copying. You're not copying a recipe. You're copying a restaurant's answer to a restaurant's problem.



Herman

Which is a problem of scale.



Corn

And a household of four is not a restaurant, and a household of one is even less of one. Though I'll say this much. The ladle they used, they don't make them for anteaters. The handle was too short and the jug was worse. I burned my wrist twice and nobody offered to change anything.



Herman

So if the base gravy exists because the menu is too big to cook any other way, what does that mean for someone cooking three curries a week?



Corn

It means the case for it at home might not survive at all. And I think that's the honest place to leave it. If you're cooking three or four curries a week, from scratch, you're not running a restaurant. You're running a kitchen. And the base gravy is a solution to a problem you don't have.



Herman

Unless you want the same curry you get from the takeaway.



Corn

Unless you want that specific dish. Which is a legitimate thing to want. It's just not the same as wanting curry.



Herman

There's a second thing sitting unanswered in all of this, and I want to flag it because it's the most interesting silence in the research. The Stack Exchange asker raised whether British Bangladeshi or Sylheti families actually use base gravy at home. And nobody answered him.



Corn

Nobody.



Herman

Nobody. It's a question that got asked in 2020 and has just been sitting there. And that silence is doing work. It suggests the technique is a restaurant method that got documented by enthusiasts and then repackaged as a home-cooking lifestyle.



Corn

Which is not a scandal. It's just worth knowing.



Herman

It's worth knowing. And there's a forward-looking version of this that I find interesting. The technique is now firmly documented. It's on a dozen blogs, it gets updated, it's pitched at home cooks with freezer advice and portion sizes. And the question is whether restaurant-style becomes a distinct domestic cuisine in its own right, rather than a shortcut to something else.



Corn

A cuisine that doesn't pretend to be traditional.



Herman

Right. Not a lesser version of Indian food. Its own thing, with its own standards, cooked in its own way, by people who know exactly what they're making.



Corn

If you take one thing from this, take the trade. Base gravy isn't a cheat and it isn't a secret. It's a deliberate exchange of depth for speed, and the exchange is visible in the recipe, in the browning that isn't there.



Herman

The exchange is only worth making if you have the problem it solves. Which is a menu too big to cook any other way.



Corn

That's the one to keep. A technique is only a shortcut if you were going to do the long version. If you weren't, it's just a different dish.



Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

If you enjoyed this one, a review helps other people find the show. We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.