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Dublin Institute of Technology

Year 2006

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Articles

Dublin Institute of Technology

Year 2006

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Mike Butt

✿ 1926–1988 ✿

ALSO CALLED: Mahmood Butt

MAHMOOD (MIKE) BUTT WAS BORN IN NAIROBI, KENYA ON MAY 7, 1926. HIS parents were Indians from Lahore and Amritsar. He moved to London, then in the late 1940's came to Ireland with a civil-service cricket team for what was intended to be a six-week stay. He never left.

He met and, in 1955, married Terry Foy of Dublin, a graduate of the College of Catering, who was manager of the Green Rooster Restaurant in O'Connell Street. Mike's first business, called "Fruity Frost," involved the production of fruit ices on a stick. He had a factory near Mespil Road but was refused funding when he tried to expand. An Irish company took the concept, received the funding, and prospered.

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

As pioneering restaurateurs, Mike and Terry had to import all the spices, rice pappadoms and even tomato purée from London and store them in their garage at home. The English firm Evans, Gray and Hood blended the restaurant's curry powder specially. It was not until the early 1980's that these ingredients became more widely available in Ireland. In the April, 1956 issue of *Good Cooking*, Ireland's first food and wine publication, Mahmood Butt was featured in the "Chef's Choice" section, giving recipes and advice on producing a good curry and accompaniments.

Mike noticed that his winter-time business was not as healthy as in the summer, when tourists were more plentiful. To keep busy and also to educate the Irish public on Indian food, hence increasing future custom, he traveled around the provinces in the winters, running Indian food festivals in hotel restaurants from Donegal to Clare. In the 1960's he set up Golden Orient Foods, producing frozen Indian TV dinners—but he was ahead of his time, as very few people then had freezers. He worked with Irish meat packers to produce a range of canned Golden Orient curry products that held pride of place in many gourmet shops' window displays.

In the early 1970's he noticed the appearance in England of gourmet or "fine-dining" Indian restaurants, evolving from the simpler curry houses. He decided to move first to preempt the competition, and opened the Tandoori Rooms in the basement of his Leeson Street premises. He drew up plans for a tandoor oven and had it made by a friend who worked in a foundry. His style of food was eclectic:



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He would often take crayfish and monkfish from Hanlons fishmongers that might have been in their window display but would never have been sold and create Indian dishes with them. Recipes from the Tandoori Rooms appeared in many publications, including *Gourmet*, and the restaurant was listed in the Gault Millau guide and in every Egon Ronay guidebook from the first edition.

Mike Butt was the founding president, in 1970, of the Irish Restaurant-Owners Association (IRA), which soon changed its name to the Restaurant Association of Ireland (RAI), for obvious reasons. John D. Carroll, Mark Kavanagh, Peter Robinson, Maurice Cohen, Heather Gay and Rachael Bewley were the other founding members. The main purpose of this organization was to lobby for reduced taxation and a special licence that would permit restaurants to serve spirits and beer as well as wine. Mike was also director of Dublin Tourism for a period, as well as being honorary consul of Pakistan in Ireland.

In 1975, Golden Orient, Ltd. started a service called "Dine Around" which allowed visitors to Ireland to 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* found the tastes and the bonhomie of the Tandoori Rooms unchanged as the restaurant completed a quarter-century of business. At this stage Mike was sharing the cooking tasks with Mohamad Yusuf and Kevin Pigot. In 1986, however, because of Mike's ill health and a severe downturn in the economy, the restaurant closed.

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

— MÁIRTÍN MAC CON IOMAIRE