SNACK PEEK

Earthy, crunchy and nutty

Learn how to make the simple, and endlessly popular *kadalai urundai*

:: A SHRIKUMAR ■ PHOTOS G MOORTHY

The arid belt of southern Tamil Nadu is home to groundnut fields, palm groves and the crunchy *kadalai urundai* (peanut balls) – a humble snack made from roasted peanuts and palm jaggery syrup. Carrying the scent of the earth and subtle sweetness of the palm, this is a sweet entirely made from natural ingredients without any artificial additives or flavours. At MotherWay Traditional Sweets and Snacks, in Kariyapatti near Madurai, we watch a family make some of these delicious treats.

For orders, visit motherway.in

1 An iron vat is heated on an earthen *chulha.* Two handfuls of fine sand are poured into it. Onto this bed of sand, half a kilogram of peanuts is added and roasted. The gentle indirect heat helps roast them evenly, without the nuts getting burnt. The sand also lends its unique earthy flavour to the nuts.

2 Once the nuts splutter, they are retrieved with a sieve to filter sand. They are cooled briefly before being gently pressed with a wooden roller to ensure that each nut is uniformly halved.

3 These roasted nuts are then winnowed in a *muram* to remove the skin or outer coat.

4 Meanwhile, about 250 grams of palm jaggery are dissolved in steaming water to prepare the sweet syrup, which is stirred continuously for about 20 minutes till it achieves a thick, translucent and thread-like consistency.

5 The roasted nuts are then added to the syrup and mixed thoroughly to form a gooey, sticky, mass. Pinches of powdered dry ginger and cardamom are added for a subtle flavour.

6 While still piping hot, the blobs of peanuts are shaped into tiny balls with bare hands.

7 The resulting *kadalai urundais* are left to cool and dry.

8 Each ball weighs about 18 grams, and is then packed in cardboard boxes and sent out for orders.

For that taste Not just tamarind, but kokum and dry mango are also used ■ GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Tart and tangy

There are many more souring ingredients other than the regularly-used tamarind, tomatoes or lemons

:: CHITRA BALASUBRAMANIAM

Say sour and tamarind, tomatoes, lemons, curd and vinegar come to mind. Yet, if you closely examine cooking practices across the country, you will come across a host of other alternatives from plants, leaves, bark and flowers to dried and fresh fruit, which are also used to give the required sourness to a dish. These are popular add-ons in particular dishes. While they are not widely used, they are community or region specific. Culinary experts, inquisitive cooks and connoisseurs do work with them, but in a limited manner.

Pooja Pangtey, Co-founder of Meraki Bombay, a travelling pop-up kitchen focusing on various hill cuisines, says, "It is interesting to see how the *khatta*-loving *pahadi*s introduced a sour flavour to their recipes, especially in the context of local produce and wild ingredients."

One of the oldest and easiest substitutes is raw mango. Dried raw mango powder or small mangoes ground to paste have been a part of innumerable dishes. *Amchur* is used extensively in cooking across the country. In parts of Maharashtra and Kerala, it is not unusual to dry slices of raw mango, which are then carefully stored and used to make a variety of *dals* and *sambars*.

Besides mangoes, dried pomegranate seeds are also used as souring agents. Uttarakhand uses the *desi* variety of pomegranate called *darim,* which is smaller than the commercially-grown ones and is also more sour. The trick in using pomegranate seeds is to first soak them in water for a few hours and then grind them to a paste using the same water they were soaked in. The black colour that the famous *pindi chole* gets is because of this procedure.

The Garcinia family, comprising *kokum*, *kodumpuli* and *tekera*, are other popular ingredients to add sour flavours to a dish. *Kodumpuli* is also called cambodge, brindleberry or Malabar tamarind. The rind of this matured fruit is dried over fire naturally to get the black colour. It is more of a backyard crop. *Kokum* has also gained prominence and is grown commercially more these days.

The advantage of using these is that, unlike tamarind, which has to be soaked in water and the pulp extracted, these souring agents can be used directly as they dissolve easily in a dish. *Kokum* has a refreshing taste and can be made into a sherbet too. So can *tekera* or *thekera* from Assam.

Pooja also tells us about *almora patti*, a flower which she chanced upon on one of her trips to Uttarakhand. "During my trip to the Jaunsar-Bawar regions, I came across these wild pink flowers. They are used to add a sour touch to chutneys and fish curries."

The North East, especially Assam, uses many such ingredients. *Tengse tenga* from Assam is a creeper, which is used as a souring agent.

Varied options

Elephant apple or *tenga* is another option. This fruit is cut into small chunks that can be stored in a refrigerator and used when required. *Bogori* is a kind of berry, used to make a sweet-and-sour pickle. The hog plum is used in cooking in the Mangaluru coast. *Bilimbi* or *irumban puli* are other souring agents. The leaves of *gongura* or *roselle* are used extensively in Andhra Pradesh. Beside these, *carambola*, star gooseberry and dried *amla* are also used.

Unripe plums are used to make sour pickles and chutneys, while the dried version occasionally finds its way into meat dishes. *Kachri* is a kind of wild cucumber, grown in Rajasthan and other parts of the country, which is used to make chutneys or dried *kachri* powder.

When compared to the freely available tamarind and tomatoes, these ingredients are not easy to come by. Yet, each of these can be developed into a range of preserves, chutneys, jams, jellies, pickles and more.

Perhaps, more research and better availability of these ingredients will see such alternatives take off in a big way.

That sweet thing you do

A brown treat Which is healthy and eco-friendly ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The making of organic jaggery is a beautifully choreographed process

:: SREEDEVI LAKSHMIKUTTY

COLOUR CODED If your jaggery has a golden hue, it has probably been processed using multiple chemicals, one of them being sodium hydrosulphite. The non-chemical, naturally processed jaggery is a darker brown in colour.

The aroma of boiling sugarcane juice greets us as we approach a small, thatched shed. The background music of the thrumming sugarcane crusher and the spiral of smoke going skywards from the roof augurs well, as farmer Kannan and his wife Satya welcome us with freshly extracted sugarcane juice with the promise of as many refills as we want.

My mother, who hails from a sugarcane-growing region in Kerala, has regaled us with her childhood memories of sugarcane juice and large, jaggery balls. I can't wait to see for myself how jaggery is made.

Kannan and his team process the crop at the farm. The thatched shed is a makeshift sugarcane processing unit, shifted from one ready-to-harvest farm to another. A massive furnace is dug into the ground and the juice is poured into a large pan that can hold almost 400 to 500 litres.

It is stirred continuously, with the fire being constantly adjusted. The fuel of choice is dried sugarcane bagasse. The boiling sugarcane juice is cleaned using small quantities of baking soda (and in some cases the juice of okra stems) to bring out dirt and impurities. It is then filtered and the dregs are used in the farm as manure to fertilise the fields.

Men skilfully and rhythmically stir the liquid, not allowing it to become lumpy or burnt. After about two hours, the thickened juice, now free from impurities, is poured into another dry pan sitting on the mud floor.

The dexterity with which the men tilt the hot pan and its contents, without spilling even a drop, is amazing.

In the next hour, they turn over the thick liquid with large flat ladles. This continues till the thick liquid begins to take on a powdery consistency. A tiny bit of lime and a little organic coconut oil is added to it for the right consistency.

Then, a clean long-handled wooden press is used to press down the jaggery powder, section after section, moving around the vat.

The circular motion around the vat, turning over the slowly solidifying liquid with geometric precision, brings to your mind images of synchronised swimming. An hour of this, and the powdery raw cane sugar is deftly shifted to bags, while the next batch of liquid is now ready for the same treatment.

This skilled craftsmanship is dwindling, and the number of people who can do this is also diminishing. Most conventional farmers sell sugarcane to the large mills instead of processing it in their farms.

The traditional way is eco-friendly, with no waste being generated. It is thanks to committed, organic sugarcane farmers and processors that we still find unrefined jaggery powder, containing the molasses that are rich in iron.

Such a contrast to white sugar, that has no nutrients, processed in distant mills and loaded with chemicals.

It takes very little effort to make the switch from white sugar to this naturally-processed jaggery powder. It also helps us, the farmers, skilled processors and the environment.

EARTHY SOURCE

Jaggery is also made from the earth of termite mounds in Sri Lanka.