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## A taste of the hills

As traditional Badaga food slowly begins to vanish, a few people are making an effort to keep the memories alive

By SAMITA BALAKRISHNAN

For someone who is a foodie and a fitness freak, stumbling upon dishes that are both healthy and delicious is like hitting the jackpot. When I frantically scrolled through my Pinterest feed, looking for “healthy desserts”, I quite forgot that there was a satisfyingly delicious dessert that was made right at home. My favourite *hatchike*, a Badaga dessert made out of millets.

I remember when my *hethai* (grandmother) served us *hatchike* every other day. Now, living away from my *hatti* (village), it is a forgotten dish along with many other old favourites. Happily, all is not lost as there are people from the community who are striving to revive and preserve the fading traditions of the Badagas of the Nilgiris.

Harsha Bellie, 48, a Badaga from Coonoor, often invites people to visit or stay with her. She enjoys serving them a healthy and tasty Badaga *hittu* (meal). “Not many know what *hatchike* is,” she says and recounts, how earlier, her relatives sent ready-to-eat millet cereal. It is becoming a rarity now, she says.

*Hatchike* is made using little millet or *samai*, which is suitable for all age groups, says Bellie. It has several health benefits for both men and women. Preparing *hatchike* is a cumbersome process, she admits. It involves boiling, roasting and pounding the millet to de-husk it and, finally, winnowing to blow off the husk.

I still remember when my *hethai* would sit by the *ole* (fireplace) and roast grains in a *madake* (earthen pot) with a hole on the side, using a *huri-kolu* (a wooden stick with a cloth tied at the end to make a ball). Sadly, this now remains only in my memory. *Hatchike* is usually served with milk and grated coconut.

Bellie is keeping these memories alive by inviting tourists to sample Badaga fare. A group called Veg Voyages stops at her place every year as a part of its vegan tour. She introduces the tourists to some of the customs of community life, to a typical Badaga house where the grains are stored in the *atulu* (loft/attic), to Badaga music and dance and to *enne hittu* (a sweet dish of *maida*) that is dipped

### SAVOURY PUDDING

Scotland's national dish Haggis is a savoury pudding that is a combination of meat, oatmeal, onions, salt and spices. Traditionally it was cooked in a sheep's stomach but is today cooked in a synthetic sausage casing. It is served with bashed neeps (turnips) and mashed tatties (potatoes).



into black coffee and eaten. This is rounded off with an authentic Badaga meal, served in a *ganguva* (copper/brass plate) filled with *kadimittu*, *eragi hittu*, *batha hittu*, *avare udaka*, *soppu*, *sandage* and *bathal*. Of course, *hatchike* is the dessert. For vegans, instead of milk, Bellie serves it with coconut milk.

*Eragi hittu* – or *ragi mudde* in Kannada – is made of finger millets and is a healthy alternative to rice and wheat. A depression is made in the *mudde* and ghee poured into it. It is then eaten with *soppu* (greens) and *avare udaka* (beans curry). During the *hethai habba* (our biggest festival), it is a beautiful sight to see all Badagas wearing white, sitting in rows and eating *av-*

*are udaka* and *kuu* (rice) in the green hills.

Apart from millets, the earlier Badaga cultivated barley and wheat. It was common to see these grains spread out in the courtyards to dry under the sun. They would then be fried, and used to make a variety of dishes. With such practices disappearing, dishes like *ganjike*, the base of which is *ganje* (barley), have also become a rarity. The increase in tea cultivation led to the decline in the cultivation of millets and other grains in the Nilgiris.

Our ancestors consumed what they grew, made sure they replenished the soil and prepared almost everything from scratch. If they wanted butter, they would churn milk using a pot and plunger, a rope and bare hands. This process called *haalu sorakodu* has now been replaced by mixers and machines. Even the *hatti maasu hudi* (masala used in the gravies) was home made but is now available readymade in shops. Since everything was hand milled, there



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HARSHA BELLIE

was no adulteration and the food was extremely healthy. People stayed active and there was plenty of social interaction when relatives or neighbours lent a helping hand in grinding and pounding.

Bellie firmly believes that if more people followed older traditions, both the people and the earth would be healthier. She says that she would dearly love to grow more grains and encourage others to do the same in their *holla* (fields) for at least a few tasty meals every month.

**Keeping memories alive** (From top) The ingredients for *hatti maasu hudi*; A traditional Badaga meal served in a *ganguva*; Harsha Bellie; *Enne hittu* being made

\*SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## The colour of the skin

Don't rinse away the skin of your dals. Not only do they add texture and health to your food but also help small farmers

By SREEDEVI LAKSHMIKUTTY

On a bright December morning during my first season of farming, I was excited about harvesting my crop of organic green gram and looking forward to eating what I had grown. The work didn't end with sowing, tending and harvesting. There was sun drying the gram and processing (beating the pulses to remove the pods, winnowing and cleaning it to remove the soil and stones, etc.).

Yet, despite all this, I realised my organically grown green gram contained smaller grains, which sometimes did not cook well. I was also faced with the reality of insects attacking the pulses within a couple of months or less.

I found from our neighbours in the village that they split the pulses immediately after harvest to prevent insect attack. According to them, split pulses keep much longer. This set me thinking. The villagers ate their pulses split but with the skin intact (except for tuvar dal, for which most of the skin is removed).

But, in the urban diet, the skin is usually banished. The pulses in the market not only do not have skin but are also polished to a sheen. These are preserved using chemicals and last quite a while.

Until a couple of decades ago, dals were eaten skin and all. An abiding memory of my early childhood is idli/dosa batter being ground on a stone and the ritual of washing the soaked urad dal (with skin) before grinding it. The loose skin would be rinsed off during the washing. Despite the intention to rinse off as

much of the skin as possible – so that the resultant idlis looked white – some of the adamant skin clung on and provided us with fibre.

I decided to bring the skin back to the pot. The experiments began with the black-as-night urad. I soaked the split urad with skin, rinsed away about 50 per cent of the skin and ground the rest into my batter to give me marbled idlis (though it is hardly visible in the dosa). My farmer friend gave me another wonderful method to use the whole urad with skin. She recommends soaking the whole urad, sprouting it and then grinding it for idli/dosa batter. The result is idlis and dosas full of fibre.

Pigeon peas (tuvar dal) was another story. Its skin is not easily digestible and process of removing the skin is quite

complex and manual. The whole pigeon pea is soaked in large vats, drained and allowed to sprout. Then it is dried and stored. Once the whole dal is ready to be processed, it is split. Thus processed, pigeon peas have about five per cent of skin left and this adds texture to the cooked dal.

But I lost the battle with the split moong. I decided to make green gram paruppu along with the skin. When I cooked it, the skin stuck to the walls of the vessel. I scooped up the excess skin and lightly blended part of it into the dal. It did not go down well with the paruppu lovers at home. So we are still with the golden yellow moong dal.

Eating dals without the skin has implications for farmers as well. Large machines and huge quantities are required to process the pulses to meet the urban market demand. This discourages small farmers and as a result many grow just enough for their own needs. India today imports pulses, which are stored in granaries for years. If we adopt dals with skin, especially the organic ones grown naturally, we not only get the much-needed dietary fibre but also help small farmers with binding the soil and building their incomes.

**My farmer friend gave me another wonderful method to use the whole urad with skin. She recommends soaking the whole urad, sprouting it and then grinding it for idli/dosa batter. The result is idlis and dosas full of fibre**



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