

The Good Food Guide

The Flavour of Winter

Through poets and writers have waxed eloquent about springtime in England, nothing can match the infinite variety and splendour of an Indian winter says Gitanjali Prasad.

Fields of ripe yellow mustard flowers stretch endlessly before our eyes as we traverse from our cooped-up apartments in overcrowded metros to the open spaces of our 'native place' in Kashmir and Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Bihar. Everywhere there is an abundance of the freshest, greenest, sweetest peas you can hope to get anywhere on this good earth. And carrots, bright crimson and full of flavour (nothing at all like the tasteless pale orange 'English' variety on sale for the rest of the year), oversized cauliflowers, fresh green cabbages and a host of leafy vegetables like spinach and methi (or coriander leaves), that are so aromatically delicious that they transform the most mundane dish of potatoes into a gourmet's delight.

It is interesting that through DD' documentary film-makers have created short films on so many aspects that illustrate our unity in diversity, one very significant fact seems to have escaped their attention. And that is that mid-January spells festival from coast to coast and Kashmir to Kanyakumari. Khichri Amavasya in Kashmir, Pongal in Tamil Nadu, Lori in Punjab, Makar Sankranti and Til Sankranti in Maharashtra, Bihar, Bengal and a host of other states are observed, honouring the beauty of an Indian harvest and the joys of fresh jaggery and sesame or till, puffed rice or chura, eaten with yoghurt, and khichri, the homely, infinitely comforting dish of lentils and rice, which is another culinary binding force.

Let me take you back to sunny winter days in Dinapore, where my grandparents lived in a rambling double-storeyed house set in five acres of orchard land. At one far corner of the garden was a set of stone chairs and tables, and life, as I remember it so many years later, was a succession of wonderful meals out in the open with the slight nip in the air tempered by the winter sun. They were simple meals, hara channa (fresh green gram), small packets of which sell for fabulous amounts in Breach Candy, grew in luxuriant profusion, and shelling the delicate little green shells to extract the tender green gram was a task which was laborious, time-consuming and infinitely pleasurable. That one activity captured the essence of the relaxed, lazy winter days. The green leaves of the plant made an excellent salad with the addition of the tiniest amount of salt and fresh lime juice. And the meals that went along with such wonderful seasonal offerings were simple and easy to eat.

Even though North Indians are normally terribly fastidious about their cooking, which generally involves many hours of grinding and browning (purists like my mother insist that the flavours are totally lost unless each masala is freshly and separately ground and then browned sequentially), in the winter, a totally different set of rules operate. The 'tehri' that is traditional fare. On Sankranti, is really nothing more elaborate than a dish of lightly steamed rice replete with a profusion of wonderful winter vegetables, small flowerlets of cauliflower, a handful of peas, sprinkling of diced carrots, flavoured only with a dash of saffron, the rich juices of vegetables, a single slit green chilli, some peppercorns and a couple of sticks of cinnamon. Yet, it tastes like ambrosia. The usual accompaniments to a 'tehri' are a yoghurt raita, a sweet tomato chutney and a coriander chutney.

But even if a 'tehri' is flavoured and delicious, it still can't stir the olfactory senses and set one drooling the way a simple mooli paratha can. The paratha in winter, is a dish of mindboggling variety. You can stuff it with radish, of course, but also cauliflower, potatoes, green peas, methi. For reasons I have never fully comprehended, when a paratha is stuffed with dal (mashed seasoned lentils) or sattu (powdered roasted gram flour enlivened with a dash of raw mustard oil, chopped onion and green chillies), it's called a puri, thus dal puri, and sattu puri.

However, it's easy to be understanding of such idiosyncracies of nomenclature, when one is seduced by the tantalising sight of a crisp paratha, sputtering with hidden delights, giving off the most tantalising aroma that exists this side of paradise! Of course, much of the appeal of these traditional winter foods

lies in the whole connotation that has grown around them, of carefree days in the sun, when household responsibilities and the unending demands of the kitchen, can temporarily be forgotten. It is doubtless the Indian answer to the English sandwich and perhaps it's been created for much the same reason.

To truly enjoy the spirit of the myriad offerings of this festive season, you must consume fresh fruit juices or kanji - the zesty carrot wine which is as beautifully delicious with its jewelled ruby red colour as it is stimulating. Teetotallers can relax however, as it is totally non alcoholic!

Suggested surroundings are certainly outdoorsy, the vicinity of mustard fields are perfect as you can savour the pungent smell as the occasional mustard stalk is trampled underfoot. Gardens luxuriant with giant hollyhocks, dahlias, nasturtiums and the delicately scented sweet peas are next best. However, if you're stuck in your tiny apartments, move a table to a window with a view, set 'chatai' mats to evoke a rustic setting, and tuck in. it's a brief season.

RECIPES

Mooli parathas (to serve six)

- 1/2 cup water
- 4 cups of whole wheat flour - or atta (more if you are catering to healthy appetites)
- 12 white radishes
- 1 lemon
- 2 green chillies (more if you like things hot)
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1/2 cup oil add water to atta to make a dough.

Grate radish, finely chop green chillies. Sprinkle green chillies and salt on to grated radish. Add lemon juice. Wait for the water of the radish to drain out. Roll out a roti. Sprinkle the radish mixture on it leaving a border of 1/2 cm all around, roll out another roti. Moisten inside edge of roti with water. Place second roti on top, press edges together till they adhere to each other. Place a griddle on fire. When it's hot, add a little oil. Place a paratha on griddle. When it's cooked and looking deliciously done with just a few black speckles, turn paratha over. Remove when cooked both sides.

Mooli parathas are best eaten straight off the fire. But they can be stored for a few hours in a hot case.

Tamator ki mithi chutney (to serve six)

- 6 large ripe red tomatoes
- 1/2 teaspoon asafoetida
- 2 dry red chillies (more if you like it hot!)
- 1 tsp sugar
- 1/4 tsp salt
- 2 tbsp oil

Chop tomatoes into small chunks. Heat oil in a deep, thick bottomed frying pan or karahi. When oil is hot, gently add chillies and asafoetida. Wait for these to sputter gently and turn black. Add chopped tomatoes and seasoning. Cover with a lid, lower temperature and wait till it is cooked - approximately 15 minutes

Raita

This is inspired by a delicious and rather painstaking Kumaoni dish. However, this wonderful recipe of mine, tastes almost as good as it is simplicity itself. Try it! 1 1/2 cups yoghurt, 1 tsp mustard powder (any good brand will do) 1/4 tsp salt 1 cucumber 1/4 cup water grate cucumber. Add salt, pepper, mustard and grated cucumber to yoghurt. Serve chilled.

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