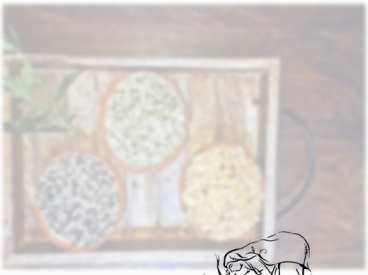
GROW, COOK & EAT

TALES OF RICE AND MORE

Sreedevi Lakshmi Kutty



Thanal

CREATE

save our rice

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Published by :

Consumer Research Education Action Training
& Empoverment Trust (CREATE)
76,2/84, Melachathram street,
Paramakudi, Tamilnadu, INDIA 623707

This publication was made possible with the support from
Bread for the World (BftW)

Campaign Office :

Thanal,OD - 3, Jawahar Naghar, Kowdiyar,
Thiruvananthapuram - 695003, Kerala, India
Tel : 0471 2727150
Email : indianricecampaign@gmail.com
Website : http://indianricecampaign.org

Year of Publication: 2018
Printing Press : Akshara offset, TVM-1
Illustrations : Praveen p
Design : Ananthu S Kumar

FOREWORD:

This book is a collection of the writings of a food enthusiast, activist and literally a good food evangelist, whose vistas on food expanded more than ever before when she walked into the Save our Rice (SoR) Campaign as a consultant.

And in a decade of her involvement with the Campaign, she literally opened up her kitchen to the large and sometimes unfathomable diversity of our edible crops, re-discovered traditional cuisines and practices, ate as well as fed people with it, and then as any evangelist would , she started talking and writing about it. Some of that featured in the mainstream media, to be read by people who actually understand that kind of food, or have to understand them.

We are very happy to present this book, which is a compilation of these articles published during the last few years. The Campaign in its twelve year journey has discovered that one of the most significant factors to ensure successful conservation of agro biodiversity is for people to actually appreciate and consume agro-biodiversity. And hence even as the SoR Campaign boasts of having revived a thousand indigenous paddy seeds back into the agrarian landscape, we believe it would not have happened without the consumers adopting many of them back into their cuisines. Traditional food is hence an important pathway to seed conservation. As Wendel Berry succinctly puts it, "Eating is an agricultural act". We would probably stretch it and say "Eating diversity is a conservation act" as well.

We hope that through these articles the reader will be able to better appreciate the large diversity of crops and food, ranging from the hundreds of varieties of rice, millets, cooking styles, those less used fruits, leaves and vegetables that exist in this part of our country, the need for safe and diverse food, farming, cooking and the interconnectedness of it all.

So,

Pick up the book. Pull up a chair. Give into the taste, endlessly diverse, eternally delicious.

R Ponnambalam, Honorary Co -ordinator, Save Our Rice Campaign & Managing Trustee, CREATE.

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LOVING RICE

The Save Our Rice Campaign has been a turning point for all of us involved with the Campaign. Most of us who grew up in rice growing and consequently rice eating families had by then lost our intimate connection to growing paddy, even though we continued eating copious amounts of rice every day. Growing paddy had been relegated to a few hapless farmers, who had no choice but to farm for their livelihood, in the face of mounting losses. It was as if none of us had to worry about how our rice was grown, what kind of rice varieties were grown, what it cost to grow it. We also became mere consumers of rice, a commodity that we brought home from a shop, the varieties, the properties, the challenges, the losses, nothing mattered to us.

All that changed for us in the Campaign. We began identifying rice varieties by their names, we began talking about the taste and texture on one hand and season and duration and growing conditions on the other. This evolution manifested in myriad forms within the Campaign. The Campaign encouraged and motivated seed saver farmers to become seed conservers, conserving over 1000 varieties of paddy ranging from red to white to black to brown. The Campaign brought to light good agronomical practices of many innovative farmers, promoting it far and wide. We worked on localised seed banks

and rice diversity blocks for in situ conservation. We celebrated field days and seed festivals to bring seeds to the farmers and food festivals to attract consumers to traditional rice varieties.

Each of us involved in the Campaign became rice evangelists. Personally for me, this growth and understanding manifested in preparing, eating, becoming an evangelist and marketing these rice varieties.

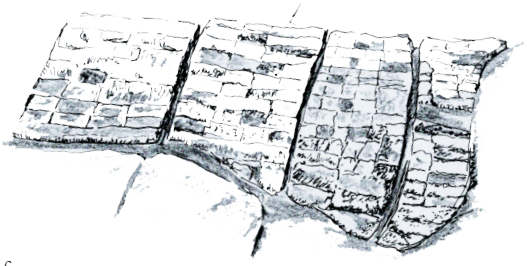
Below are a few articles that were published by the mainstream print publications. 'Rice to the occasion' talks about the now almost iconic rice diversity block maintained by us in Wayanad that has become a kaleidoscope of colour, variety and scents attracting birds and people every growing season. The 'Nel Thiruvizha' that the Campiagn has institutionalised in Tamilnadu is featured in 'Heritage in every grain' and 'Seed festivals promote seed conservation'. Our engagement with diversity as consumers is critical to diversity on the farms and fields. It is only if we 'eat our way into rice diversity' will farmers grow it, so the responsibility lies with us fair and square. The variety and diversity of scented rices in this land is beyond imagination, 'Beyond Basmati' gives us a glimpse. In the conservation work one of the greatest learnings was that much of our diversity, particularly in the South was in red rices, which may have contributed to our robust health in the past.

These were always part of our diet, however, now we have developed almost a fear of them. 'Who is afraid of red rice?' talks about the role of red rice to protect diversity and preserve our health. Kanji, the most popular version of rice gruel that was the staple of most rice growing regions that has now become a rarity is featured in 'The Desi version of a healthy soup'. Below are my rice tales !

RICE TO THE OCCASION

This Pongal, celebrate Nature's bounty by trying out some indigenous varieties of rice.

When we began our rice-with- bran experiment 10 years back, I proudly presented the unpolished, small grained organically grown Komal rice from a friend's farm near Mumbai; our son looked at his plate and balefully asked, "Can we have some normal food in this house for Sunday lunch?" From that not so great beginning we have become a household that relishes Kuruva from Kerala, repeats Rajamudi from Karnataka, respects the deep red Mappilai Samba from Tamil Nadu and reveres the dark as the night Karuppu Kavuni. We find the universal, unnamed, polished white rice quite bland, having got accustomed to the distinct flavours of these rices.



The fully polished white rice that we get in the market is not the paddy rice our forefathers ate. They ate the flavourful, hand pounded rices grown locally during season. We have a rich cornucopia of rices ranging from white to red to black to scented rices. What we need to do is to welcome these back into our homes and diets. It is easier said than done, with all of us having become accustomed to fully polished white rice.

But on a misty, chilly December morning, with the dew drops on the grass soaking our city shoes when we walked to reach the rice diversity block in Panavelly, Wayanad at the Thanal Agro-ecology Centre I saw fully grown paddy plants, swaying in hues of green, yellow, red , rust, brown and purple and heard the cornucopia of names, Thondi, Kala namak, Mullan kazhama, Jeeraga saala, Burma black, Kuruva and the stories accompanying them. This rice diversity block with 219 varieties is one of the many maintained by the Save Our Rice Campaign, working across six rice growing states to conserve and promote traditional rices. Every year sees more rice farmers

from across the country joining the ranks of seed savers, conserving our rich heritage, to ensure protection of our diversity, food security and to create insurance against the vagaries of climate change. Interestingly most of these varieties do well under organic/natural conditions. Traditional paddy varieties are impressively climate resilient, Kattuyanam is flood and drought resistant. Ottadayan takes all of 180 days to mature but grows seven to eight feet tall providing plentiful fodder whereas arupatham kuruvai, as the name suggests, matures within 60 days providing short term income to the farmer.

What is good for biodiversity is also good for health and eating these traditional rices is a route to good health and promoting agro-biodiversity. Sundararaman Iyer, a well known organic farming guru says, 'we all complain of micro nutrient and mineral deficiency while eating the same food year in and out, if we eat different rices across the year we could get many of the micro nutrients we require.' However, there are many misconceptions about rice including that it causes obesity and is the cause of diabetes, and consequently there is an en masse exodus from rice to wheat or millets. Gandhasaale, my all time favourite rice, grown in the Western Ghats, known for its fragrance, reminds me of my father every time we cook it. This was the only rice he relished and could digest in his last few years while in fragile health. My farmer friend tells me that when grown in the plains it loses its fragrance. Almost all varieties have distinct nutritional benefits; for example the famous Navara rice is known for its medicinal properties and is used extensively in Ayurveda.

Pongal is upon us and it will be time to celebrate nature's bounty. This is the best time to welcome these traditional rices into our plates. These would lead to a colourful and varied pongal array- a ven pongal with Kichadi Samba, Thuyamalli or Rajamudi rice (a rice from Karnataka favoured by Wodeyar kings), a sakkarai pongal with one of the scented rices like Jeeraga Samba, Gandhasaale or Mullan kazhama, a payasam with Karuppu kavuni. With the accompaniment of organic jaggery, cashew nuts, raisins, green gram dal and delicious pepper from the Western Ghats, make it a healthy and tasty Pongal.

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on January 09, 2017
Link: http://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/Rice-to-the-occasion/article17012918.ece

HERITAGE IN EVERY GRAIN

Paddy farmers from across Tamil Nadu and neighbouring states congretgate at the 12th Annual Nel Thiruvizha at Thiruthuraipoondi

Nel Jayaraman, Tamil Nadu State Coordinator of the Save Our Rice Campaign, stood tall, unmindful of the heat, greeting people and keeping an eye on the preparations. The 12th annual Nel Thiruvizha brought together thousands of paddy farmers from around Tamil Nadu and a few from neighbouring states as well. The wedding hall in Thiruthuraipoondi was a sea of colour with farmers in white ***veshti*** and shirt with a bright green ***thundu*** thrown over their shoulder, and the women in bright saris. Youth volunteers were everywhere — managing logistics, serving food and water and manning the registration desk.

People who came early were witness to the rally that began from the centre of Thiruthiraipoondi town. A handsome Kangeyam calf was led out, followed by a bullock cart with vegetables, fruits and other crops, a basket made of straw, plastered with cow dung and filled with paddy seeds alongside a photo of agricultural scientist and environmental activist Nammalwar. The idea was to create awareness about traditional food and seeds. The seeds were brought in and placed reverently in front of the hall, signalling the beginning of the Nel Thiruvizha, organised by the Save Our Rice Campaign and other groups.

The thiruvizha has become an integral part of the agriculture calendar of Tamil Nadu farmers. It is no longer an event by Save Our Rice alone. It has become a public event with local people from in and around Thiruthuraipoondi and Thiruvaroor participating in large numbers and paddy farmers coming from all corners of the state.

An enclosure with 12 tonnes of seed was the focal point of the meeting. The thiruvizha is the high point of the year and sharing these seeds is sacrosanct. Jayaraman reeled off facts and figures, "We were ready with 12

tonnes of seeds across 164 traditional paddy varieties. We multiplied large quantities of Karuppu Kauni, Mappilai Samba, Jeeraga Samba, Thuyamalli, Poongar, Kullakar, Kichadi Samba and Kuzhiyadichan. By the end of the second day, approximately 11.5 tonnes of paddy seeds were distributed to 5742 farmers. Farmers also returned around 3.5 tonnes of seeds. This is a system of barter based on honour. We give each farmer two kilos of seed; they bring double the quantity back the next year. Almost 60 per cent do this. Many share the seeds with their neighbours leading to a multiplier effect. Every farmer signs a pledge that he/she will grow the seeds though organic methods".

Farmers collect paddy varieties and also return varieties that they had taken earlier and multiplied. The event has become an annual meeting point where farmers growing traditional varieties of paddy using organic techniques meet fellow sojourners, share notes, listen to speakers, visit exhibition stalls with seeds, books, food products and agriculture implements.

Ponnambalam, one of the pillars of the campaign, reminisced, "The first thiruvizha was inaugurated by Nammalwar in 2007. Adirengam village, eight kilometres from Thiruthuraipoondi town, was the venue and the meeting was held in the paddy fields lying idle post-harvest. We welcomed the 147 farmers with seven traditional varieties (Kattuyanam, Kuzhiyadichan, Kudavalai, Panangkattu kudavalai, Poongar, Sigappu kauni, Garudan samba)."

Usha Kumari, who has led the Save Our Rice Campaign since its inception, remarks, "Seed saving and conservation is an integral part of agriculture. They lost favour with the introduction of high-yielding seeds and commercialisation of seed production as part of the Green Revolution. In the process our wealth of traditional varieties was lost. The thiruvizha is not only a reminder of what we have lost, but also of what we can recapture. The conservation and revival of traditional paddy varieties has become an imperative with climate change causing havoc in agriculture. We have to revive these resilient traditional varieties and introduce them into the fields."

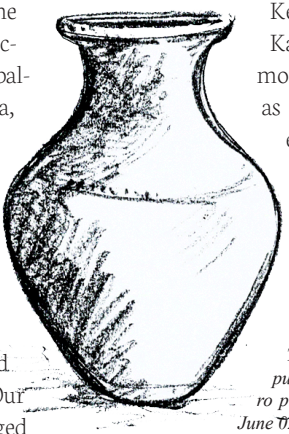
These farmers and seed conservers are not rich. They battle adversity every day. They are challenged by climate change, lack of water and a market. Yet they have decided to adopt organic paddy cultivation and to conserve traditional varieties.

They have found that these traditional varieties, which are our heritage, could be their saviours in these uncertain times. In the process, they have become the saviours of these seeds that, if not cultivated season after season, could cease to exist.

Saving rice

In December of 2004, 150 ac-

tivists working on agriculture and environment came together in the small picturesque village of Kumbalangi near Kochi, in Kerala, to discuss the future of paddy farming. Usha Kumari and Sridhar Radhakrishnan, who led the campaign, travelled around meeting people working on seeds, organic farming and farmers and The Save Our Rice Campaign emerged with the objective of conserving rice ecosystems, sustaining rice culture and diversity. In 2006, the Campaign began work in the three paddy-growing states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and then moved to West Bengal as well. Twelve years later, the seed conservation work has been adopted by tens of thousands of paddy farmers in the four states.



This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on June 02, 2018

Link : https://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/paddy-farmers-from-across-tamil-nadu-and-neighbouring-states-congregate-at-the-12th-annual-nel-thiruvizha-at-thiruthuraipoondi/article24064829.ece#

SEED FESTIVALS PROMOTE SEED CONSERVATION: THE NEL THIRUVIZHA IN ADIRENGAM

There is renewed interest in conserving seeds and growing traditional paddy varieties among the farmers in South India. The annual seed festivals have played a significant role in bringing about this change. This initiative by Save our Rice Campaign has resulted in improving agro-diversity of paddy, re-introducing healthy red rice into the diet and also rebuilding the germplasm of climate resilient paddy seeds.

May 25th, 2013 was an occasion for celebration for farmers in Tamil Nadu. It was an occasion for celebrating biodiversity in paddy. More than 3000 paddy farmers from all the 32 districts of Tamil Nadu joined the two day paddy seed festival in Adirengam village in Tiruvarur district in Tamil Nadu.

Besides exchanging information and experiences, farmers also shared 61 traditional varieties of paddy, largely brought from Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. Farmers in the festival share seeds in good faith that they will cultivate the seeds organically, share the seeds freely and return double the quantity during the next festival.

Genesis of *Nel Thiruvizha*

The seed festival which has become a prominent event for many paddy farmers in Tamil Nadu, had its humble origins in 2006, two years into the Save Our Rice (SOR) campaign in India.

The CREATE team, an NGO, that runs the SOR campaign in Tamil Nadu, began its seed conservation work under the aegis of Mr. Jayaraman, the Tamil Nadu State Coordinator for the campaign. Initially, the team just began collecting traditional/indigenous paddy seeds from various groups and growing them in their training centre at Adirengam village. They began with three varieties of paddy seeds including the famous Jeeraka Samba. The team had no idea about purification of seeds or the selection process. Seed multiplication and conservation was the focus.

In 2006, the idea of a seed festival originated to bring together interested paddy farmers. The first Nel Thiruvizha (paddy festival in Tamil) was born. Organised during the month of May, the first gathering in 2006 saw 425 farmers who chose from

sixteen traditional paddy varieties. Two kilograms of paddy seeds were distributed to all the farmers.

As Mr. Ponnambalam, Trustee, CREATE says, "The seed festival was not the result of a long term plan or strategy. The festival was a result of the interest of the SOR team to involve the farmers in the village and surrounding villages in the indigenous paddy cultivation effort; then it took a life of its own, growing bigger each year. The late Dr. Nammalvar, the legendary organic farmer in Tamil Nadu began talking about it at every meeting and slowly the word spread." The festival and seed conservation work grew organically with Jayaraman taking the lead with guidance from partners of the campaign and many other seed savers.

Further impetus for the festival came with coverage in the Tamil media. The story of Aruvatham Kuruvai (a paddy variety which matures in 60 days, as its name suggests), the seeds of which were procured by SOR from a farmer in one of the meetings and multiplied over years, made a cover story by Pasumai Vikatan, a Tamil magazine on agrarian issues. This brought considerable attention to the existence and need for revival of traditional paddy seeds. It aroused the interest of many farmers who read the story. The interest on traditional varieties grew. Today, around 2000- 3000 farmers cultivate Aruvatham Kuruvai variety. Similarly, Kattuyanam and Mappilai Chemba are two other varieties which have gained immense popularity through the campaign.

Growing seed diversity

Tremendous efforts are required to multiply and conserve seeds. Seed festival provides an opportunity for farmers to share and multiply traditional varieties. Though, initially only some farmers who took seeds from the festival cultivated, now, most farmers collect the seeds and plant them. Every year, more number of farmers return double the amount of seeds taken from the seed festival.

Among the 61 varieties being distributed, some are more popular than others. According to an analysis done by SOR, it was observed that 19 varieties are most popular, which include Mappilai Sambha, Jeeraka Sambha, kattuyanam, Kattu ponni, Aruvadam Kuruvai and others. Farmers have reported good yields for the

Year	Varieties	Total Farmers
2005-2006	16	425
2006-2007	26	1116
2007-2008	28	1629
2008-2009	47	2016
2009-2010	51	2320
2010-2011	53	2860
2011-2012 (Nov 2011)	61	2900+
2013	63	3000+

Table 1: Number of farmers who procured seeds during the seed festivals
Source: PADDY, July 2013

traditional varieties they have grown and have observed high resilience during adverse climatic conditions.

Sometimes SOR made extra efforts to multiply seeds. For instance, in the last two years, when the Kaveri belt in Tamil Nadu was reeling under drought, the SOR team had to lease-in land with irrigation facility to produce the required quantity of paddy seeds for the festival.

Growing popularity

The festival has gained tremendous popularity among farmers with the 2013 festival witnessing farmers coming from Kanyakumari district in the south to the Tiruvallur district at the northern tip of the state. Starting from a little over 400 farmers in 2006, the number of farmers participating in the festival has increased to more than 3000.

With growing popularity, the support for the festival has also been pouring from numerous organizations and individuals. Many organizations and individuals have been supporting the festival and the two day event has seen many illustrious people come to address the farmers. Many banks including NABARD have been supporting the festival since many years. Presently, the government is also showing interest. Last year, the agriculture department took the responsibility of sending invitations to farmers across the districts of Tamil Nadu which resulted in farmers being represented from Kanyakumari to Thiruvallur.

The support from farmers is also worth mentioning in organizing this event. Though initially farmers did not bear the costs, gradually they started paying an entry fee to cover some costs. The entry fee which was Rs 10, has been increased to Rs 50 and to Rs.100 last year. Inspite of the fee,

there has been tremendous response to the festival. Now the festival is so much in demand that in the last two years small seed festivals were held in other districts to reach farmers who could not attend the seed festival at Adirengam.

In addition to the thousands of farmers who come directly, many more thousands are involved in organic paddy cultivation, by further sharing of seeds. In many cases, a farmer from a far away district comes on behalf of more than one person.

Outcomes

Save Our Rice Campaign

The Save Our Rice campaign was initiated in India by Thanal (Kerala) with CREATE (Tamil Nadu), Sahaja Samruddha (Karnataka) and Living Farms (Orissa). Subsequently the campaign also moved to West Bengal in 2009 with a new formation called the Save Our Rice, West Bengal. The campaign is founded on five objectives:

(1) conserving rice ecosystems
(2) sustaining rice culture and diversity
(3) protecting traditional wisdom

(4) preventing GMOs and toxics and (5) ensuring safe and nutritious food. The groups have been working in their respective states on all these areas. The farmers who are cultivating traditional paddy through organic means are finding a distinct economic advantage as well. "While conventional farmers spend around 15,000 – 20,000 rupees on inputs and reap around 32 bags of paddy (each bag containing 60 kilos) these farmers are on an average spending 5,000 as input costs and reaping around 24 bags of paddy. In addition, their paddy fetches 1,200 rupees per bag as against the Rs 800 that conventional paddy fetches in the open market" says Jayaraman. However, the sad reality is that the Government does not procure traditional paddy and procures only high yielding varieties or hybrids.

Many families of small farmers earn their livelihood by processing traditional red rice, creating value added products and selling it. Further, many people in Tamil Nadu across different cross sections of the society have started talking about traditional red rice and its benefits. Anecdotal observation is that now supermarkets in many or most towns are stocking red rice, a marked change from the times when one would find only white rice. Also, another interesting outcome is that all the paddy farmers who are growing traditional paddy varieties, the seeds of which they had collected during the festivals, are now using these varieties for home consumption too. They also preserve some quantity for special occasions like weddings and festivals. Earlier, most of these paddy farmers sold the paddy they grew and bought white rice from the market for household consumption.

According to Usha, the National Coordinator for the SOR campaign, "The interest shown by farmers

to grow traditional paddy is encouraging. It shows that farmers still value their traditional agro biodiversity and given a choice they will adopt it. The experience of these farmers also shows that these varieties have a great potential for good yield, quality in terms of nutrition and climate resilience".

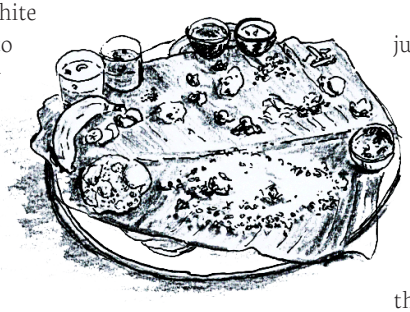
The traditional seed festival has achieved the very important purpose of popularizing traditional paddy among many farmers all over Tamil Nadu. There is a clear revival of traditional paddy cultivation and renewed interest in conserving seeds and growing them. This is a great step in improving agro-diversity of paddy, re-introducing healthy red rice into the diet and also rebuilding the germplasm of climate resilient paddy seeds.

This article was originally published in Leisa India Magazine ,May 2013
Link: https://leisaindia.org/seed-festivals-promote-seed-conservation-the-nel-thiruvizha-in-adirengam/

EATING OUR WAY TO RICE-DIVERSITY

Recently, studies have established that the causative link to diabetes is with "polished white rice" not any rice. It is increasingly being established that unpolished red and brown rice do not cause diabetes.

Rice is my soul food, what I long for when I am hungry and what I miss when I don't get it. Belonging to the post-green revolution generation, white rice came into our family pretty early despite living in the land of red rice, Kerala. When we were young, my great grandmother who cultivated our ancestral paddy lands used to send us unpolished parboiled red rice. When she became bedridden the lands were left fallow, eventually sold, and the money used to buy a then much-coveted refrigerator, prompting my mother to say, "we sold our rice-growing lands to buy an ice-box to store stale-cooked rice!"



I lived in different cities in India and abroad and bought polished white rice. I was concerned about the quality and price, beyond that I didn't think it mattered. Moving to Mumbai, I found that the south Indian stores provided red rice; sadly, this was red only in name and appearance. The colour washed off like from a bad fabric!

Paddy Problems

It was at this juncture, as part of my work with agriculture and food issues, I got involved with the 'Save Our Rice' campaign. It was at this time that the spread of diabetes in India, particularly in the south, began to be associated with the consumption of rice.

Recently, studies have established that the causative link to diabetes is with "polished white rice" not any rice. It is increasingly being established that unpolished red and brown rice do not cause diabetes. In fact, red rice is known to have many beneficial health effects and is also nutritionally

superior.

Watching and sharing the dilemma of the farmers, I realised that we as consumers have a role in reviving rice.

To save agro-biodiversity, we have to eat diverse foods, thereby promoting their cultivation and propagation -that is exactly how rice consumers will become rice savers!

Whither Rice-diversity

We, in India, are rich in rice heritage and had till about 40 years back over 1,10,000 varieties of rice; now we are down to about 6,000 varieties, according to Dr Debal Deb, one of the foremost rice savers in India.

Why do we need this diversity? We need it to keep the robustness of the crop and diversity aids the evolution of stronger and more adaptable varieties.

And how do we protect this diversity? Simply by growing and eating. The more varieties of rice we all eat, greater the range of varieties farmers will grow season after season.

Rice Delights

During the last few years I have eaten various kinds of red rice - raw and par boiled with full bran or partly removed, the fragrant 'Gandhakasala' from Wayanad, the smell of which tempted my aged and ill father to eat rice after many days, 'Mullankazhama' - a lovely flower-like rice which makes delicious 'payasam' and the small grained brown rice called 'Komal', cultivated by Susheel an organic farmer and a good friend.

I have also come across other rice varieties like the 'Rajamudi' rice used by the Wadiyars of Mysore, the fascinating variety named 'Thavalakannan' (literally means frog's eyes) which is favoured by temples in Kerala for preparing beaten rice flakes and 'Njavara' rice that is recommended for diabetics. There are rice varieties that are good for lactating women and numerous rices with medicinal properties as well.

Why don't we unearth some of the indigenous rices we have and their uses and find innovative ways to cook them for our families? In Karnataka, farmers are conserving around 140 varieties of rice, in Tamil Nadu, around 40 varieties are distributed every year through a seed mela, groups in Wayanad are trying to conserve traditional varieties used by the tribals, even in Thane, Mumbai, over a hundred varieties of rice are being conserved.

'Natabara Sarangi', a rice saver in Orissa, conserves 310 varieties. But, we need more rice savers who relish traditional rice, to conserve the most valuable grain known to mankind.

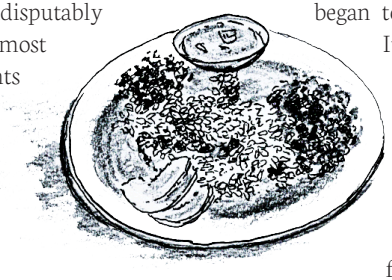
This article was originally published in The New Indian Express, edition of Thiruvananthapuram on 04th July 2012
Link : http://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/thiruvananthapuram/2012/jul/04/eating-our-way-to-rice-diversity-383400.html

BEYOND BASMATI

Over 300 fragrant rice varieties are being rescued from obscurity and extinction by committed farmers

"I saw this beautiful paddy, golden yellow, with a reddish awn swaying in the wind. It is that vision that attracted me to seek the seeds and grow it. Then I fell in love with the aroma and taste. Now I grow acres of it and convince others to fall in love with Mullan kazhama."

That is Rajesh, activist-turned-organic farmer describing how he fell in love with Mullan kazhama paddy. Paddy fields, the rice and the verdant paddy landscape are indisputably among the most beautiful sights on earth.



Till a few years ago, we knew nothing about Mullan kazhama rice from Wayanad or any other scented rice variety except the ubiquitous Basmati.

Unconventional variety

Mullan kazhama is a rather unconventional scented or aromatic rice variety, neither long nor slender. Instead it is rather round with an amazing taste and aroma. Today it appears regularly at our lunch table. It is my spouse's favourite food in illness and good health. It is delicious in payasam and a friend who made Malabar biriyani with it can't stop raving. Its cultivation had dwindled to almost nothing but has now been revived by a handful of committed organic paddy farmers in Wayanad.

Mullan kazhama is just one example. The Indian sub continent is a treasure trove of scented rices with every region having its own favourites. With my involvement with the Save Our Rice Campaign, I began to see beyond Basmati. It all began with Gandhasaale, which grows in Wayanad , Kerala, and some hilly regions in Karnataka. I came across the slender, beautiful Jeeraga Samba after we moved to Tamil Nadu.

I began hearing paeans about Gobinda Bhog from my colleagues in West Bengal, and tasted this small-grained fragrant rice from West Bengal only last year. An organic farmer friend in Pune introduced us to Ambe Mohar, a scented rice supposedly favoured by Chatrapati Shivaji. Tulaipanji from West Bengal, Kaala jeera from Odisha, Chinnor from Madhya Pradesh, Vishnu Bhog

from Chhattisgarh, Badshah bhog of Eastern India, the aromatic black rices Chakhao amubi and Chakhao poireiton of Manipur... the roll call has only just begun.

Committed and passionate

The revival of these scented rices is happening due to a small number of committed, passionate farmers and campaigns/groups working on seed and diversity conservation. They have scrounged and found lost seeds, worked to build markets where none existed, and educated the unaware about these delicious rices.

Eating and cooking these rices is far better when grown organically. The aroma is also dependant on certain factors: cool temperatures during and after flowering stage and use of farmyard manure, manual de-hulling among others.

Complete enjoyment of these rices can be derived if one is around while the rice is being cooked. The aroma wafts around the house and is almost like an appetiser. Scented rices tend to be relatively expensive, as they are generally low-yielding.

It is not only humans who are addicted to aromatic rices. Birds love them too. A farmer from Wayanad explained how the gandhasaale fields have to be protected as the birds swoop down to pluck the tender fragrant grains from the stalk.

The flip side is our ignorance about this treasure trove and our singular pursuit of Basmati to the exclusion of the scores of local varieties. This has led to a sad situation where farmers in South India or Eastern India try desperately and at great financial risk to grow Basmati to garner consumers and markets. As consumers, it is only our conscious choice of selecting these local scented rice varieties that will motivate farmers to grow these instead of pursuing varieties unsuitable to the climate and soil.

Rice facts

- Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh have over 350 varieties of fragrant rices, while Odisha has 50 documented varieties.
- Almost all scented rices were accessible only to the royalty and not to the com mon man in earlier times.
- Gobinda Bogh is categorised as a Khaas Dhan or special grain and is the chosen offering for Lord Krishna. It is great for payesh , and used for Janmashtami offerings, pujas and festivals.
- Gandhasaale is much favoured in Tamil Nadu and used extensively for making pulavs and other dishes during special occasions.

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on June 30, 2017

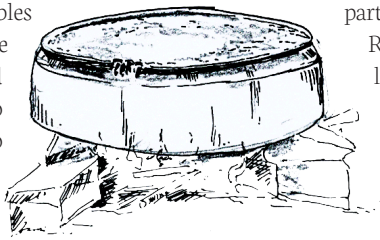
Link: https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/beyond-basmati/article19183050.ece

WHO IS AFRAID OF RED RICE?

Make the pretty red grains a part of your daily meal, as the much-maligned red rice is actually a healthy choice

"Try it," I urge my friend, who is sceptical of making idlis with red rice. She is of the school that believes that rice leads to weight gain and causes diabetes. I send her some ponmani red rice and ask her to make idlis. "Three is to one, if you are using a mixer, four is to one if it is a grinder," I advise.

She grumbles a bit saying no one at home likes it and that the grain is too bold and it takes too long to cook... the list of complaints is interminable. But she makes the idlis and I have a convert.



She is not alone in her misconceptions about rice. Many people think rice is the fount of lifestyle diseases. But it is not. The culprit is not the rice, but the kind we eat. We polish it and strip it of its bran and process it so much that most of its minerals and vitamins are lost.

Red rice had sort of disappeared from my table too. It made its second appearance into my life in my mid 30s. As a young child, I ate red rice grown by my great-grandmother. She sent us freshly milled rice once every two months.

Once I moved out of Kerala, red rice became a memory and polished slender-grained white rice the norm. But when I began re-examining my food choices, I decided to bring red rice back. As part of the Save Our Rice Campaign, I learnt that most of the South Indian traditional varieties are red rice varieties.

Since the revival of paddy seed work began in the Cauvery Delta region in Tamil Nadu, farmer families have reintroduced red rice into their own diet. While they began eating red rice as it was easily available to them, today these farmer families are well aware of the health benefits and cooking properties of the kattuyanam, sigappu kauni or kullakar grains and recommend it to visitors too.

"What pretty pink rice!," exclaimed a little girl to whom I served some red rice and she promptly pol-

My name is Red!

Tradtional red rice is grown widely in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka (Sigappu kauni, Kattuyanam, Mappilai samba, Kuruva, Thondi and Thavalakannan are a few of them)

Red rice, minimally processed, has more micro nutrients and B complex vitamins than the polished rice

Ayurvedic physicians in ancient times used these varieties as medicine and for therapies

Rice is polished to increase its shelf life, but its nutrition is largely lost in the proccess

Parboiled red rice keeps longer, gives better recovery rate during paddy milling, retains more nutrition, is firmer, less sticky and more digestible but takes longer to cook

Medicinal red rice varieties are consumed unpolished to get maximum benefit

The more bran there is in the rice, the lower is its glycemic index (compared to its polished counterpart)

We also tend to eat less of red rice

ished off her plate. The red-coloured kernel is due to the presence of anthocyanins and bran. Even when fully polished, the grain have a reddish tinge, and unpolished grains look like shiny maroon pebbles.

Traditionally in Kerala, hand-pounded raw red rice (called onakkal-ari, meaning dried rice) is offered to temples. This is then cooked and served to the devotees. Many have this as part of their main midday meal.

Flakes (aval) made from red rice retains almost all the bran. Full-bran red rice can be turned into red rice flour to be used in dishes like idiyappam, kolukattai, modakam, adai, kinnathappam and various snacks. The broken red rice is great for kanji (one of the tastiest dishes in my lexicon); nothing to match it with a dash of pickle.

I have found innovative food bloggers also making rice cakes and puddings with red rice. I am waiting to cook a red rice risotto. We take pride in our ability to try foreign cuisines and be adventurous. So why be afraid of red rice?

What is parboiled rice?

When paddy is parboiled and dried and then milled, the resultant rice is called par boiled rice. This is a combination of the words partial and boiled. The process involves soaking the grain and cooking the paddy within the husk. It is then sun-dried to remove the moisture. It also leads to the transfer of nutrients in the bran to the rice kernel. The parboiling leads to the starches within the grain becoming gelatinised and hardened and the rice attains a translucent appearance. It also makes the cooked rice firmer and results in grains being distinct and separate

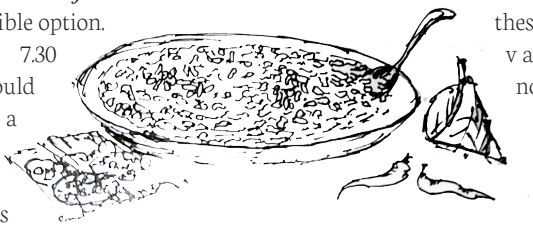
This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on June 19, 2018

Link: https://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/why-one-should-go-back-to-the-tradition-

THE DESI VERSION OF A HEALTHY SOUP

Kanji or kanji water made of different rice varieties offers not just nutrition but also a lot of comfort

Now that the rains are making their reluctant appearance, I long for ***kanji*** (rice gruel). It evokes memories of our annual childhood holiday in a small village on the banks of the Periyar river in Kerala. We were 18 grandchildren and, almost every year, at least a dozen would gather to spend time with our grandparents. So ***kanji*** for dinner was the only feasible option.



At 7.30 pm, we would line up on a mat on the floor. The steel plates and spoons fashioned out of jackfruit leaves would be laid out. We were served two ladles of hot red rice ***kanji***, a blob of coconut chutney and green gram ***poriyal*** on a small strip of banana leaf set beside the plate. While the jar of salt mixed with water went around, we would try to get a bite of each other's ***pappadam***. After dinner, my aunt would pour water into the leftover ***kanji***, if any, and keep it in an earthen pot. This, along with some pickle or leftover gravy stored in a kalchatti, was next morning's breakfast for the adults.

My aunt reminisced, "The kanji would be of Chitteni, Onattan,-Vatton, Navara or Erumakkari red rice – grown, parboiled and milled, bran mostly intact . Everything, except the pappadam made by a neighbouring family, was cultivated and processed by us. I don't think many farmers grow these paddy varieties now."

The preferred mid-morning drink/meal was ***kanji*** water flavoured with a little salt and pickle. Before pressure cooking came into vogue, rice was cooked in an open vessel with lots of water, which was then drained into another vessel and kept aside. Passers-by would ask for ***kanji*** water if they stopped for a drink .

Kanji made with different varieties of rice tastes different. Red rice ***kanji*** is arguably the best. But I have recently fallen love with ***kanji*** made with ***Ilupai poo samba*** (a

white rice) and semi-polished ***karuppu kavuni*** black rice (almost purple in colour and rich in taste). We use coconut chutney, roasted gram chutney, tuvar chutney, ridge gourd ***thuvaiyal*** or any of the numerous chutneys that are an integral part of the South Indian cuisine. Kanjis can also be flavoured with steamed greens like moringa leaves and curry leaves or cooked along with green gram. Kanji is usually made of broken rice, as it gets cooked faster.

- Right in many ways
- It is a convenience food
- It is delicious and wholesome
- It is easy to cook
- It is a great one-pot meal
- It is local and seasonal

Three years ago, when we were visiting organic seed saver paddy farmers in Karnataka we stayed with Nandish, an innovative rice farmer. We had a wonderful surprise in the morning: a small bowl of leftover rice was mixed with buttermilk and chopped onions and accompanied by another bowl of sprouted groundnuts, green gram and Bengal gram. Nandish said, "The only thing better than this is the water in which the rice was soaked. This is the best source of Vitamin B12 for vegetarians."

Red rice ***kanji*** and ***kanji*** water are used extensively in Ayurveda as part of the diet and during treatment. According to Ayurveda practitioners, ***kanji*** cures fatigue, removes toxins, stimulates the appetite and helps facilitate bowel movements. In Kerala, medicinal ***kanjis,*** prepared using medicinal rices like Navara, Raktasali and herbs, are consumed during Aadi (Karkidakam).

I see adoption of ***kanji*** and ***kanji*** water as a way to rediscover our own version of healthy soups instead of chasing artificially flavoured soups. Why don't we introduce it to our children on a rainy evening in a soup bowl, with some roasted ***pappadam*** crisps or and green gram on the side? They may actually surprise us and enjoy it.

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on July 29, 2017

Link : https://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/benefits-benefits-of-rice-kanji/article19384922.ece

EATING DIVERSITY

Paddy rice is seen as monocrop by many and believed to be a water guzzler and climate change contributor. That is not the reality in traditional paddy agro systems. These are mostly rain or surface water fed wetlands that not only hold the paddy crop but also form water sinks for those regions. Also the 'paddy after paddy after paddy' rotation is a relatively new phenomenon that came into being after irrigation became available.

Traditionally paddy is followed by pulses, which on one hand builds nitrogen in the soil, uses residual moisture and is a great addition to nutritional security. Also another summer crop in paddy fields is vegetables- gourds and beans. Farming families grow an array of greens, gourds and other vegetables providing for that season and the following few months. Keeping in view the traditional paddy agro systems, the Save Our Rice Campaign has always insisted on agro-biodiversity based paddy farming.

We have promoted and supported a culture of ecological bio diverse paddy systems in all the campaign areas. This inspired us to support the Naba Diganto system of paddy farming in the Sunderbans combining paddy, vegetables and fish. In the hardcore Thanjavur paddy belt it has resulted in innovative farmers experimenting with millets when water became scarce. This not helps nutritional security but also helps build the soil and provide economic security to the farmer who has a varied basket of marketable surplus crops.

Our explorations also led us

to conducting various studies in paddy field diversity. One of the studies revealed that in Wayanad, unsprayed, organically cultivated paddy fields and surrounding areas had over 90 varieties of edible uncultivated greens growing wild. This is a rich source of nutrition, which was part of the traditional diet, which was lost since chemical agriculture came into vogue. However, even in organically cultivated fields where these greens exist; ignorance about these is a nutritional loss for the community. Therefore, there is a strongly felt need for food education along with agricultural education for promoting biodiversity based agriculture and food systems.

It is as part of my understanding of ecologically bio-diverse diets that I began exploring millets as a component of our diet. 'Eating from trees' evolved from my pain about the drought and our ignoring tree based crops as an important seasonal or perennial source of nutrition. As climate change ravages the resource base we need to increasingly depend on trees for nutrition. Flowers and edible greens are an important component of diversity. Eating almost every part of the plant from the root to the fruits with everything in between is yet another practice which we have given a go by since vegetables and greens come home from the shop rather than from the kitchen gardens or family farms.

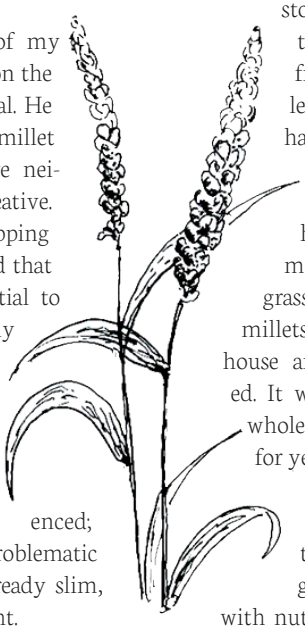
Read below about eating diversity.

THE BIG DEAL ABOUT THE SMALL GRAINS

With each millet boasting its unique properties and benefits, they are a great alternative to rice and wheat, but in moderation

Our serious engagement with millets began three years back when we moved to Coimbatore. We were already into traditional varieties of rice and strains of wheat; but I jumped onto the millet bandwagon with gusto.

To the dismay of my spouse, millets appeared on the table at almost every meal. He stoically ate through my millet experiments, which were neither appetising nor creative. But there was no stopping me, since I was convinced that eating millets was essential to living an environmentally friendly life.



Initially, we were thrilled with our low ecological footprint and the weight loss both of us experienced; then things became problematic when my better half, already slim, couldn't stop losing weight.

For all seasons

Experimenting with millets revealed some interesting facts. These small grains are the ultimate survival food, as they can grow in the harshest of climates and the poorest of soils with a meagre supply of water.

Years back, during a meeting of millet growers, we listened open-mouthed to a millet grower from a tribal community in Madhya Pradesh, as he explained that the storehouse of millets that he inherited from his father, collected over bountiful harvests, was his primary wealth.

The storehouse, made with mud, cow dung and grass, carrying tonnes of millets, was built near the house and zealously guarded. It was a revelation that whole millets can be stored for years.

More than mere material wealth, these gluten-free grains are also packed with nutrition, fibre, contain an array of minerals and are rich in calcium, magnesium, iron and other nutrients.

Each millet is different, with its own unique properties and benefits. We would be best served if we

Millet Know-how

- The eight common millets of South India are : Little millet (Samai), foxtail millet (thinai), barnyard millet (kuthiraivali), kodo millet (varagu), proso millet (pani varagu), finger millet(ragi), sorghum (ari solam) and pearl millet (kambu).
- Little millet and barn yard millet raw rice cook very easily (need water in the ratio of 1:2 cups). Foxtail, kodo and proso millet take longer to cook and require 1:3 glasses of water.
- The par-boiled millet rices need more cooking time and water compared to raw millet rices.
- The raw millet rices are good for saadam, curd rice, sambar rice etc. The par boiled millet rices are good for preparing idlis and dosais and also suitable for making pulav, lemon rice etc.
- Millet flours can be used to prepare appams, idiyappams (string hoppers), puttu, kolukattai (dumplings) paniyaram and also sweets such as ladoos, kheer, barfi, etc.
- Millets generally expand more on cooking and one cup of cooked millet rice can stretch to three people instead of two with paddy rice.
- Millet rices are best eaten warm /hot for the soft mouth-feel and tend to become a little dry and unappetising when cold.

experiment and figure out which of them work for us.

We may derive benefits from some, while others may not suit us. Interestingly, the way millets are prepared also changes the properties.

For example, in Western India, pearl millet is consumed in winter as a warming food (in the form of bhakri, a hard roti), whereas in the South, it is cooked, fermented and consumed along with buttermilk (kambu kuzhu) as a cooling summer food.

At home, it dawned on us after many consultations with an Ayurveda physician friend and others that so many millet meals a week did not work for one of us. It also reinforced the oft-repeated, but forgotten lesson: listen to the body and don't jump into the latest food fad.

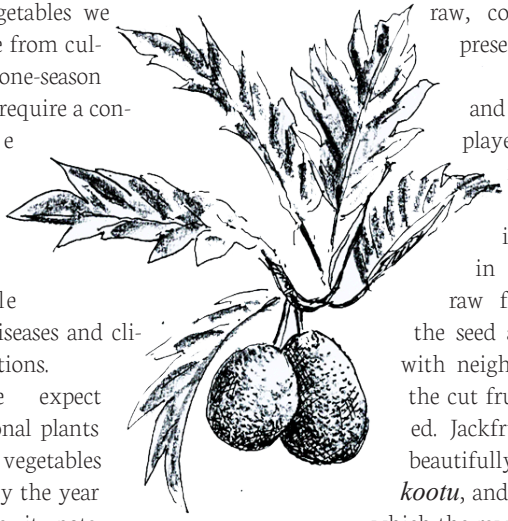
This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on April 06, 2017
https://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/the-big-deal-about-the-small-grains/article17847051.ece?_escaped_fragment_=

EATING FROM TREES

There was a time when lots of our vegetables came from trees in our backyard or that of the neighbours. May be it is time we revisited those days

Imagine if we got our veggies from trees just like we do our fruits. This thought has been at the back of my mind through this summer while working with organic vegetable farmers during this unprecedented drought.

I realised that almost all the vegetables we want come from cultivated one-season crops that require a considerable amount of water and care and are vulnerable to pests, diseases and climate variations.



We expect these seasonal plants to provide vegetables consistently the year around: be it potatoes, tomatoes, okra, beans, gourds or cool seasonal veggies. Maybe it's time to think differently.

We, in the south of India, are fortunate to have many trees with edible fruits. In fact, during my childhood in Kerala, the role of tree-based vegetables was significant. We consumed drumsticks, drumstick leaves and flowers in various forms; we made delicious poriyal, erisherri, kootu and other preparations with raw papaya. Summer food at my paternal grandparents' home revolved around jackfruits, mangoes, grapefruit and breadfruit – raw, cooked, roasted, preserved or fried!

Jackfruit and jackfruit seeds played a stellar role with the whole family involved in cleaning the raw fruit, skinning the seed and sharing it with neighbours, so that the cut fruit is not wasted. Jackfruits converted beautifully into ***aviyal, kootu***, and ***puzhukku*** (in which the raw fruit and seed are cooked together along with coconut). The seed was made into a delicious ***poriyal*** with drumstick; it was combined with roasted coconut into ***theeyal***. The ***chakka puzhukku*** was also eaten as a rice replacement.

How can we forget the crisp jackfruit chips and the rich ***chakka***

varatti (jackfruit jam), which was preserved to be eaten for the next few months and used for making *chakka prathaman*.

Raw mangoes went into everything – the sour ones into pickles chutneys, *sambar, aviyal*, fish curry and mango rice or were salted away for rainy days. Apart from eating the ripe ones, we got *pachadi* and *pulisheeri*.

We also consumed the sour *bilimbi* (supposed to reduce cholesterol) that was made into an aviyal with small onions, added in fish curry, made into pickles and used in almost every curry that requires a souring agent.

Bananas were as much vegetable as fruit. Every part of the banana tree was cooked and eaten – from the stem and flower to the raw and ripe fruit. We used the ripe *nendran-pazham* in *pachadi* and *kalan*. After the chips were made, the leftover skin was made into a delicious and nutritious *poriyal*.

Then there was my favourite vegetable: bread fruit, a wonderfully adaptable vegetable that arrives in February and disappears when the jackfruit season begins. Breadfruit made delicious *theeyal, poriyal*, chips, and masala curry.

Not to forget that the essential curry leaves, the healthy *agathi keerai* come from shrubs or small trees; and that tamarind and Malabar tamarind also come from trees. I am sure there are many more.

Once irrigation and transportation across long distances made other vegetables easily available, we began to ignore what was available in our backyards. It is time for us to seriously re-look some of these tree-based veggies and uncultivated greens.

As we face unprecedented drought and shortage of groundwater, the increasing tree cover could be our salvation. For a warming planet, these trees would be a gift to bring the much-needed rains while providing food, shade and biomass. This change will require us to do some additional work, get used to seasonality and availability and also explore growing some of these trees in and around our homes.

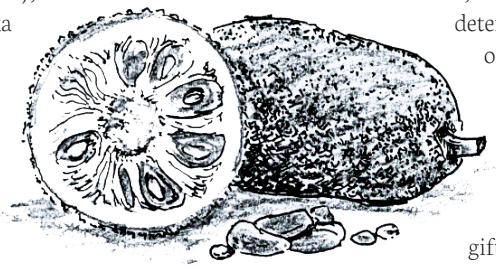
Maybe climate change will force our hands whether we like it or not and lead us to these tree-based vegetables again.

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on April 27, 2017
Link : http://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/a-look-at-the-many-vegetables-that-come-from-trees/article18250052.ece

JACKFRUIT, THE JACK OF ALL TASTES

In praise of the versatile jackfruit, which has been declared as the state fruit of Kerala

Chakka a.k.a. jackfruit, meant summer vacation, long, carefree days, sticky fingers that when pulled apart produce those strings from the resin, the distinctive aroma of a ripening fruit in the house, and the array of delicious dishes that will follow through the summer up to Onam. Growing up in Thiruvananthapuram (then Trivandrum), my chakka (jackfruit) memories are wrapped around both the city; where we lived and in Nedumbassery, my father's ancestral home. The large mammoth trees with pendulous fruits hanging were a sight we looked forward to. When it comes to jackfruit, delicious things come in large packets.The beginning of the season is usually heralded by the arrival of ***idi chakka*** (the small tender jackfruit used for cooking) in the local shanties. Peeled and chopped up, the pieces are steam-cooked and then mashed (seed and everything inside) with a wooden pestle (don't try the blender, it will become an inedible mush) and then garnished with coconut, jeera etc to make a delicious thoran. We all obviously live and swear by our thorans.



Then, as the season progressed, we would slowly see chakka in the local market, large, medium and small. Thanks to Omana and my mother, who were not deterred by the onerous task of cleaning the jackfruit, we bought and accepted the fruit's gifts with open arms. The only deterrent was that as much as I loved ripe 'varikka chakka' (the variety with firm flesh), the 'koozha' (the flesh tends to have a slimy feel) made me gag. So, despite the taste, I could never down the flesh. Of course that's what ada allowed, a way to eat it. The fruit was all cleaned, steamed and mixed with jaggery and rice flour to be steam-cooked in banana leaves.

Jackfruit was the mainstay in the menu along with mangoes

when we went to my father's ancestral home located in a remote village. There would always be young men who could bring down these heavy fruits from the trunks of tall, old trees with just a rope and a few shouts here and there to the person standing below. It was important to get the fruit down uninjured. I don't remember the trees requiring any care, after the initial one year or so.

Family ritual

Chakka was a summer family ritual, unlike mangoes that one could steal away and eat in solitary splendour; jackfruit had to be community or family fruit. It doesn't take a village but at least two determined souls to clean and get it into an edible form. Around mid-morning, the sisters and the sisters-in-law sat down to chat, clean and chop the raw fruits for lunch. The older kids sat around late afternoon after oiling their hands to clean the ripe jackfruit for the evening snack, all the while eating the pods they cleaned. Unless one of the elders rescued sufficient pods, the others would have been left with nothing to eat. The seeds were collected in a jar to be used later.

In the meantime, the younger ones were tasked with picking up clean jackfruit leaves. Twisted into a cup and pierced with a small piece of *irkil* (coconut leaf midrib), these instant spoons were used for eating our kanji in the night. The outer prickly skin and all the white stringy bits were fed to the cows that munched happily on them.

Jackfruit featured in almost all the meals during the summer. The chakka puzhukku, a quintessential Kerala preparation using raw jackfruit and seeds, were a staple during lunch. Coconut, cumin and green chillies along with garlic was used in this dish that was also consumed as a rice replacement. When our grandmother got some time, she sat down to clean a large pile of seeds to make a small thoran made with drumsticks, which also fruits prodigiously during summer, and grated coconut. I realise how patient she was, now that I am forced to clean the seeds myself.

The raw jackfruit pieces are chopped lengthwise to make thoran and aviyal, each seed is cut into four pieces lengthwise after scraping off the two layers of skin. The raw fruit

is chopped into small round pieces to make erishheri, spiced with pepper and cumin and garnished with grated, roasted coconut. The seeds are again a big favourite with me, I love them in thorans, mezhukku varatty (the seeds sauteed in oil with some spices), pulinkari (made with mango, drumstick and jackfruit seeds with a coconut gravy) or the delicious theeyal made with the seeds cut into round shape. Every preparation had its specific geometry, I never understood why, but followed it diligently. I checked with my mother who is all of 75 and she told me, "That's how my grandmother used to do it". How the embedded memories dictate our tastes and actions!

Raw and cooked

Almost everybody in Kerala loves ripe jackfruit; however, it is the raw fruit that won my heart, even as a child. I loved and continue to love all preparations with raw jackfruit and its seed; and possess a voracious appetite to eat it uncooked. Even today, if anybody is cleaning a raw jackfruit, I would shamelessly sit beside them to pop a few pods into my mouth. I am told that it would give me a stomach ache, which has never happened.

My indomitable farmer-aunts could make chips that crunched between your teeth satisfyingly with that right amount of crispness without being chewy (a problem with most commercially bought chips). They made chakka varatty that one would kill for, which went into chakka prathaman for Onam or came in small delicious packets back with us to Thiruvananthapuram. This was used as jam and spread or eaten plain till the last bit was licked off the bottom of the container.

Today, I have the privilege of being friends with Lilly chechi who makes me delicious chakka varatty that lasts me through the year and chakka chips, almost as good as my aunts', during the three months jackfruits are available on the natural farm, she shares with her environmentalist husband. It is from her that I learnt that you need jackfruits with thin-layered pods to make good chips. She makes chakka varatty only from the fruits of specific trees. Today, jackfruit has become all the rage, and innovative cooks and chefs are doing wonders with it. I look forward to the new tastes but my jackfruit memories are anchored in the tastes of my childhood.

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Thiruvananthapuram on March 24, 2018
Link : https://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/in-praise-of-jackfruit/article23320770.ece

THE MANGO WITH A BEAK

Looking back at a lifelong love affair with the totapuri or kilimooku, which revels in chaats, gravies and desserts alike

Come summer and drawing rooms are abuzz with mango talk: pedigree, quality, quantity and price. The arrival of various exotic varieties is awaited with bated breath. But in this land of connoisseurs, the most ordinary variety has been my favourite – the ***kilimooku manga*** aka ***totapuri*** or ***kilichundan manga***.

This year, my Valentine's Day gift was the first bunch of ***kilimooku*** mangoes of the season from our farm. The first mango chutney of the season was prepared that night, and eaten with gusto. The fragrance of ***jeeraga samba*** rice combined with the freshness of mangoes and sweetness of coconut milk was indescribable.

With its greenish-yellow colour, reddish spots on the outer skin and the light yellow inner flesh when raw; its crunchy sweet-and-sour taste when mature; and its yellowish-orange outer hue with creamy inner pulp when ripe... no other variety has the impact of this 'ordinary mango' with a beak.

It is my good fortune that the otherwise treeless plot of land we bought has a few ***kilimooku*** mango trees. It's mostly relished by our neighbours and passersby, but we do get a few dozen every year, some years more than the others. The trees are not too tall: easy for me to climb and pluck the mangoes.

I first fell in love with these mangoes when we moved to Mumbai two decades ago. The hour-long daily commute made a quick evening ṣnack at the local railway station necessary. The ***totapuri,*** sliced and arranged enticingly on the plate, with bright red chilli powder sprinkled atop, was irresistible. I would invariably ask for the ***bhel puri*** as well, with chopped mango giving it a distinct flavour.

Another unforgettable experience was my first ***aam panna***,

a cooling Maharashtrian drink made from raw mangoes. On that hot day, I drank the refreshing concoction made by women who had pulped the uncooked green ***totapuri*** with sugar, mint, and roasted and powdered cumin.

That was the day I decided this was my mango.

In season, ***kilimooku*** mangoes go into almost everything we make at home. Starting with the chutney made with coconut, pepper and curry leaves — what else can you expect from somebody born and brought up in Kerala? — right to the raw pieces on a plate.

The gravy we make with pumpkin or ash gourd and drumstick is made with half a mango, which gives it just the right amount of zing. The ***sambar*** and ***aviyal*** are cooked with mango pieces, and tamarind is relegated to the back shelf till the raw mangoes run out.

They go into ***pachadi,*** with mustard and grated coconut. They work beautifully in salads and, of course, are ideal for sweet-and-sour mango rice.

Despite being a lackadaisical cook, raw ***kilimooku*** gets me into a frenzy of making cut mango pickles. I make this in sesame oil with just red chilli powder, mustard, salt and curry leaves.

And this year, finally, the ***kilimooku*** mangoes inspired me to make my first batch of homemade ***thokku*** and ***chunda***. Armed with simple, easy-to-follow recipes from my friend Radha, I made spicy mango ***thokku*** and sweet ***chunda*** — both organic, local and seasonal.

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on April 28, 2018
Link : https://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/the-mango-with-a-beak/article23612770.ece

MURINGA MEMOIRS

At the end of the tedious four hour long journey we all tumbled out of the van and looked at the strange two part house with a terrace over the front and a tiled roof behind which was to be our home for the next couple of years....

Amma spied the large muringa tree whose tear drop leaves and slender stems fanned all over the part terrace and exclaimed 'we have our own muringa tree and we are going to have lots of muringakka', to me a very grown up 9 years to Jayan's 6 years it still meant nothing. I could have understood her excitement if she had spotted a mango tree.

Days flew past with achan leaving for Delhi, Jayan and me adjusting to new schools and making friends with kids in the neighbourhood, amma struggling alone with us and taking care of her eighty-nine year old ammumma, who was paralyzed and beyond therapy, which was why we had to leave behind our life in Delhi, stay away from achan and move to Trivandrum....

Omana happened to us like a stray puppy who adopts you, homeless and jobless; she appeared at our doorstep and agreed to help take care of ammumma in return for a roof over her head. The all woman household in the true matrilineal tradition, with the token 6 year old man trundled along, on All India Radio which was ammumma's lifeline, Omana's garrulousness, amma's quiet conviction and our innocence.

Amma and Omana were of one heart in their attention to the muringa tree which they would examine at regular intervals and exclaim over the amount of fallen flowers and the muringakkas which were too high up to be reached .Jayan and I never realized its importance in the scheme of things...

Omana turned out to be a wonderful cook with an inordinate fondness for muringakka and muringa leaves. Amma made a game of plucking the leafy branches and sitting with a tray and separating the tender leaves, which we thought was great fun. Jayan and I eagerly plucked the leaves in no time and heaped it on a tray all the while looking to see if

Amma was watching. The tediousness of plucking the leaves put paid to our enthusiasm for the job, but amma had decided that this was a safe chore for two hyperactive kids .So many an evening found us around the radio in ammumma's room listening, talking and plucking muringa leaves for dinner or next day's lunch…

Jayan and I were reluctant converts to amma's muringa religion and found muringa leaf preparations a trial and called the muringa leaf dal as amma's kashayam .But amma wouldn't budge, so we had no choice but to eat it with rice and crisp fish fry which Omana conjured up. The muringa leaf thoran was not bad at all when laced generously with grated coconut.

Muringakka was better received and at the end of the meal we had huge mounds of muringakka peels beside our plates when amma made mouth watering muringakka chakkakuru thoran and muringakka potato avial. Omana took the cue from amma's success stories and added muringakka to Jayan's favorite sambar and my favourite thiyal and the holy fish curry…and slowly and insidiously muringakka and muringa leaves became an integral part of our diet like the morning glass of milk, which nobody questioned.

None of this prepared us for Amma's and Omana's muringa masterpiece on a Saturday evening. When we saw patties for tea we downed the first couple without even pausing and then realized that they were different. We savored the next couple and found that Omana had cooked the patties with a mixture of potato and tender muringakka flesh. We were really and truly beaten and amma won hands down. After that there weren't too many protests during the next two years filled with innocence, laughter, books, missing achan, amma's love and of course the muringa…

When we moved into our new house two years later matters had improved and our dependence on muringa leaves reduced. But one of the first things we did on moving was to take a few sturdy branches of the muringa tree from the rented house and plant it in our new backyard. A muringa tree of the same parentage has stood proudly all through these years in my parent's backyard till it was felled by a mighty storm during the rains last month.

The muringa was our lifeline not only to good health but also to our financial health at that point. Years later older and wiser, I realized that it was amma's insistence on our muringa diet which kept us within our budget in those tough years and taught me the value of living within my means. She showed me how not to compromise on essentials by continuing to keep us both in wonderful schools even while we were on a muringa diet laced with our favourite fish.

I learnt from her that being creative made anything and everything palatable. I also realized that you can win over children, malnutrition and adversity with love, perseverance, and a muringa tree. Jayan and I are rudely healthy middle aged people and I have little doubt that amma's muringa diet had no small part to play in that. Amma and achan are a serene old couple who are teasing a new muringa branch to replace her favourite giant who was mercilessly felled by the rains last month.

Muringakka- drum stick * Muringa - drum stick tree * Ammumma – grandmother *

Amma – mother * Achan – father * kashayam –Ayurvedic medicine which are usually bitter * Muringa leaf dal – A gravy with drum stick leaves and thur dal with or without coconut * Muringa leaf thoran – A dish with the drumstick leaves and grated coconut * Muringakka chakkakuru thoran –A preparation with drum sticks and jackfruit seeds laced with coconut, which is a favorite with malayalees * Muringakka Potato avial- A variation of the traditional kerala avial made with drum sticks, potatos and ground coconut * Thiyal- A traditional kerala gravy made with fried and ground coconut with a choice of vegetables

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The memories were triggered by project moringa of 'Trees for Life'

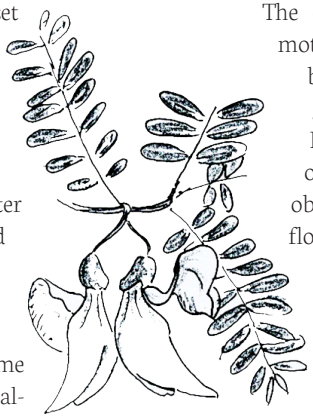
(http://www.treesforlife.org/project/moringa/default.en.asp) a non-profit organization which among other things, is trying to popularize moringa leaves in India and other Asian countries as an antidote to malnutrition.

orriginally published in www.sulekha.com

EATING IT WITH FLOWERS

From neem and moringa to agathi, there's a wide range of floral flavours to be discovered

I remember the morning I found my friend Sujata plucking flowers from the neem tree in front of our house. She showed me the tiny white flowers with their subtle fragrance and told me the flowers would go into making a delicious ***rasam*** for lunch. That's the first I had heard of ***rasam*** with neem flowers, and that set me thinking about other edible blooms.



Contrary to popular belief, which is that all of us are eating better and more diverse food than ever before, I believe that we have given up on some delicious and wholesome local foods. We are always looking elsewhere for the rare and exotic, and hence miss the wonders right under our noses. Flowers are one such category of plant foods that we often overlook.

Banana blossom is the first thing that comes to mind, being a commonly used ingredient in South Indian cooking. My favourite dish with banana flower is a stir-fry using chopped banana blossom and cooked green gram, which is a staple at home. While many people have started using banana blossoms again, and featuring it on cooking blogs, it is a difficult flower to clean and prepare. I choose to think of it as a meditative process, but since most of us don't even have time to breathe in the mornings, let alone meditate, that is not a great selling point.

The edible flower that my mother favoured was the blossom of the moringa olifera. As children, I can't say we loved it; our mother overrode our objections and moringa flower stir-fry appeared on the table whenever in season. As I grew older, I learnt to appreciate the distinct flavour of the tiny, creamy-white flowers. They can be eaten steamed or slightly cooked, and we usually have them in a steamed salad along with sprouts and peanuts, or in the traditional stir-fry with a lot of grated coconut.

Another discovery in the last few years is the ***agathi*** flower (sesbania grandiflora, also known as the humming bird flower). I love the shape and colour of these flowers, with their rich succulent petals

in cream or a rich burgundy. To me, they taste as delicious as they look beautiful.

I have eaten only the cream-coloured ones, which are available locally. I just wash the large flowers and buds, chop them into pieces and lightly steam them, to be added to salads and the ever favourite stir-fry, garnished with grated coconut or roasted and crushed peanuts. I don't throw away any part of the flower.

Cleaning a banana flower

Peeling the outer red leaves (called bracts, I have seen some cookery blogs using them as serving bowls), we need to clean the individual yellow tipped flowers. From every flower remove the matchstick like pistil and the outer petal that feels like plastic (the calyx). As you move into the inner layers the leaves and flowers can be used. A traditional method used in Kerala to avoid discolouration of the hands is to apply coconut oil over your palms before handling the chopped flowers. The chopped flowers are also gently rubbed with oil and then rinsed in water. It can be rinsed in lemon water to avoid discolouration..

A friend told me that a stir-fry of these flowers with eggs tastes great and these can also be fried in batter.

Pumpkin flowers are on my list too. The season starts with male flowers, and then the female flowers start putting in an appearance. It is popular in some cuisines, where fritters are made by frying the flowers in a batter of rice and gram flour.

The added advantage with *agathi* and moringa is that these are perennial shrubs/trees that are beneficial for the soil and easy to grow. Both are also nutritive powerhouses. Neem and cassia fistula are hardy trees and can withstand dry spells, more of which unfortunately seem to be coming our way. Banana trees are the constant companions in most South Indian homes. So, in effect, all of these are friendly neighbourhood flowers.

Being a pedestrian cook with a limited repertoire, I love anything that becomes flavourful with simple cooking, and I found to my delight that flowers fit the bill. What I enjoy about them is how lightly they need to be cooked and spiced.

Light steaming is usually enough; anything more and they can turn into mush. It goes without saying that we should choose flowers which have not been sprayed with any toxic chemicals.

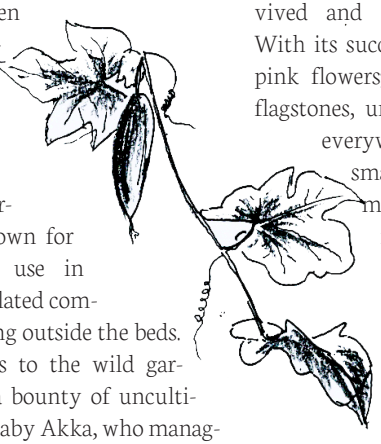
Now, it's time to eat some flowers along with fruits, leaves and stems!

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on February 16, 2018
Link : https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/eating-it-with-flowers/article22768336.ece#

MAKE THE ORDINARY EXOTIC

Instead of chasing produce from across the world, rediscover local greens that are a powerhouse of taste and good health

There is constant tussle between the spouse and I about the tiny strip in front of our home that we call our garden. He thinks it should have lovely plants, prettily lined up, whereas I am all about letting everything stay/grow indiscriminately. I am loathe to pluck anything even remotely useful. I will keep the tulasi and keezhanelli (stone breaker or seed-under-leaf plant, known for its extensive use in curing liver-related complaints) growing outside the beds.



Thanks to the wild garden, there is a bounty of uncultivated greens. Baby Akka, who manages our home and garden, is a veritable encyclopaedia on these plants and their uses. A full-time farmer until 15 years ago, she moved to the city after being widowed. Her knowledge and fascination with these greens humbles me. The first time I had a cough she quickly went to the garden, plucked a few leaves from a thorny creeper and told me to make ***rasam*** with it. It was the ***tuduvalai*** plant (climbing brinjal) that is traditionally used for curing cough and asthma.

My interest in these uncultivated food plants grew after the drought last summer. The scanty garden dried up as the summer progressed. However I noticed that our Ceylon keerai (waterleaf plant) survived and continued to flourish. With its succulent leaves and pretty pink flowers; it grew wild between flagstones, under the bamboo trees... everywhere. Other than the small quantity I use to make a delicious dal, the rest I am forced to compost as nobody seems to want it. What a waste of a wonderful food, full of vitamin C, E, calcium, fibre, potassium and many other elements, making it a nutritional powerhouse.

Another beauty in the garden that I have fallen in love with is Kovakkai keerai (Ivy gourd leaves). The variety we have strangely doesn't fruit and flowers rarely. The first time one of the farmers showed me the plant and told me its benefits, I realised that this was the same creeper I

was indiscriminately uprooting and throwing into the compost. Now this is a regular addition to our dals and I think both this and the Ceylon keerai would make great additions to soups. Rich in beta carotene, the ivy gourd leaves have numerous healing properties.

Another discovery that I have eaten and relished but not dared prepare is the pirandai keerai (Veldt grape) high on medicinal properties; again Baby Akka is my guide to it. With its exotic, succulent, squarish stem and beautiful leaves, it grows lustily wrapping its tendrils around every other plant nearby. The tender stem is great to prepare ***thuviyal***. It has to be sautéed in oil and used along with tamarind, as otherwise it can cause itchiness in the throat.

- Panna keerai (Silver cocks comb) that grows plentifully in unsprayed fields
- Mudakathan keerai (Balloon vine leaves) is a great addition to dosa and idli batter
- Kattu ponnanganni keerai (Sessile joyweed) is great for poriyal

As part of the Save Our Rice Campaign, a study conducted in unsprayed paddy fields in Wayanad led to the discovery of 96 varieties of uncultivated greens all identified by older women and tribal community members. These were regularly consumed till modern vegetables made their way into the local diet.

It is not that I am a complete convert to eating these keerais. I am very much the spoilt urbanite who likes the sweetness of palak, and enjoys the ease of cooking vegetables that don't require attention and skill from me. However, the more I see micro-nutrient deficiencies among us, I learn that the best diet is what our ancestors ate. Above all, when I experience the vagaries of climate change, I realise that the luxury of cultivated vegetables has to be tempered with the pleasures of uncultivated greens. I have to learn to use them seamlessly in my daily diet and cultivate the palate to enjoy these uncultivated foods.

Each of us will find different greens growing in our backyards. The time has come to find nutrition in these plants that grow easily and make the ordinary exotic, rather than chase the exotic from across the world. The taste for exotics is cultivated, so why not cultivate a taste for the ordinary?

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on November 17, 2017
Link : https://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/rediscover-local-greens-make-the-ordinary-exotic/article20479348.ece

BEING ORGANIC

Organic, natural, bio diverse or any form of chemical free agriculture also requires an understanding of processing, cooking and eating the natural way. Generally the organic way of life requires us to be more mindful about the whole process of sourcing, processing and preparing our food. Today one of the greatest barriers to sourcing and eating healthy is the aversion to cooking. It is perceived as a time consuming task for which we cannot spare the time. Our disconnect with the source of our food is one of the reasons for this aversion.

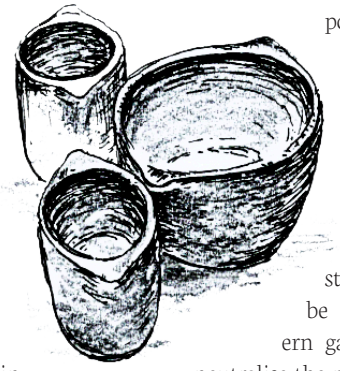
One of the greatest achievements of the Campaign has been how the farmers and their families have become champions of traditional rice varieties. Many of them are producing value added products and also creating awareness about the various properties of traditional rice. The biggest favour we can do for ourselves and farmers is to prepare and eat wholesome organic food. Such food habits are what will keep up organic/ natural growing, resulting in better health and progressively cleaner environment. In a system where the consumers of food are different from growers of food, the sustained demand from consumers is a key ingredient to healthy farming season after season. It is as part of my organic evolution, a journey that began 13 years back amongst the farmers' markets of a distant land with local foods I was unfamiliar with, that I learnt: what I eat is what will be grown.

I learnt that eating organic food does not simply mean replacing our conventional choices with organically grown equivalents. It is not that simple; eating organic also involves eating whole foods, as natural as possible, eating pulses with skin or rice with bran, raw cane sugar, and un-filtered oils. It requires us to retrain our taste buds. This shouldn't be difficult as we have all become experts in enjoying new and varied cuisines. An organic life style also requires us to develop the skill and patience to deal with the challenges of growing, storing and cooking organically. Also to explore cooking in vessels that are made with alkaline substances. It is all part of the learning and becoming organic.

BLACK AND BEAUTIFUL

Rummage through your grandmother's storeroom and see if you can unearth her old kalchattis

Omana amma would walk in mid morning with a day's worth of betel leaf and a beautiful smile. She would settle down to leisurely exchange of the day's news with my mother. Half an hour later, she would chop vegetables and build a small fire in the two wood stoves in the kitchen annexe. In the next hour, delicious aromas would waft from thekalchattis(stone vessels) and manchattis(mud vessels) bubbling over small well-managed fires. All of us relished her delicious sambars,aviyal, theeyals and kaalan. When she stopped cooking for us, the kalchattis were relegated to the loft.



As my interest in traditional food increased, Omana amma's cooking came to mind. A few years ago, I started rooting around my parents' loft and found a few kalchattis that my mother had inherited from her grandmother. These were bequeathed to me and so I have a few old black kalchattis of varying sizes and shapes. Some are tall with a small circumference and used for making puli inji or rasam. Another is suitable for sambar, a third for aviyal and so on. The surfaces have a matt black patina — the black from the wood stove and years of use and the smooth finish from decades of soft scrubbing.

Kalchattis are cooking vessels carved out of soapstone, a naturally occurring soft stone. Thick walled and heavy, they ensure slow and even cooking. Since they are porous, heat and moisture circulate through the pot while cooking, thereby enhancing the flavours. Traditionally used on wood stoves, these can also be used on the modern gas stove. Kalchattis neutralise the pH balance of acidic food items and thus enhance their nutritional value. Kalchattis can be used to prepare gravies, but not for dry preparations or sautéing.

Let the food cook slowly. Turn off the flame 4-5 minutes before the food is fully cooked. It will continue to cook slowly in the heat retained inside the vessel. The time taken to heat the kalchatti is compensated when the slow cooking process

continues even after the stove is switched off.

Food cooked in old kalchattis keep well for the next day as well without refrigeration. As the vessel ages, the cooking quality improves. Most important, the kalchatti has to be seasoned before you start cooking in it.

Even after seasoning, the kalchatti should be introduced gently and slowly into daily cooking. Use on a low flame and don't let the water dry while cooking. Periodically oil it and leave overnight before washing it in the morning.

My kalchattis have become an integral part of the cooking routine. Sourcing organic, whole foods from farmers and preparing it in my grandmother's kalchattis changes the tenor of the whole act of sourcing and cooking food.

Food is less of a commodity and more of a bond with the farmers; cooking has become less a chore and more an active connection to my grandmother. Search through your grandmother's store of vessels to find kalchattis or order them online. They are usually available in temple fairs.

Thick walled and heavy, they ensure slow and even cooking. Since they are porous, heat and moisture circulate through the pot while cooking, thereby enhancing the flavours

Kalchatti Care

- Traditionally kalchattis need to be seasoned before use
- Apply organic coconut oil inside and outside using coconut fibre. Leave it on for a day and wash off with non-toxic natural dishwash powder
- Use over low flame initially. As the kalchatti ages, it can be used on medium flame
- Never heat when empty and do not expose to abrupt temperature changes
- Do not drop them. I wrap a kitchen towel around it and and place it on a tray that is taken to the table

How to season it

- Soak the kalchatti in water in which rice was washed. The starch helps clean the grit and close the pores
- Put the vessel on the stove with either water in which rice has been washed or the starchy liquid obtained by draining boiled rice
- Bring to boil on a very low flame. Allow it to cool
- Wash the vessel with a non-chemical dishwash powder and apply organic cooking oil and turmeric powder. Leave overnight
- Wash it off and repeat the process two to three times

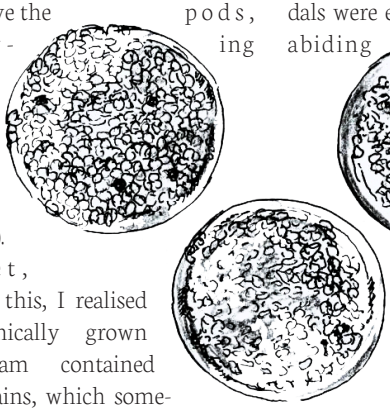
This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on May 03, 2017

Link : http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/black-and-beautiful/article18366847.ece

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

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.).

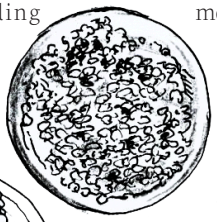


Yet, despite all this, I realised my organically grown green gram contained smaller grains, which sometimes did not cook well. I was also faced with the reality of insects attacking the pulses within a couple of months or less.

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).

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

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on June 02, 2017
Link: http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/the-colour-of-the-skin/article18703812.ece

POTTERING WITH POTS!

Why do pots matter? Is it middle age or yet another fad or is it a progressive evolution to mindful eating and preparing food that has made me fascinated with pots?

Anyway, I am the proud owner of two beautiful brown cazuelas, glazed inside and unglazed at the bottom and two mustard yellow cocottes that together take care of a good part of my cooking. Over months they have acquired battle scars of age and use and their surface have begun to look like my middle aged face, fine wrinkles which appear with my smiles and the frown lines that are here to stay. However, unlike steel or aluminium vessels that look unpretty with age, these pots have aged gracefully, becoming part of the household – evolving with our taste buds and with us, for the long haul.

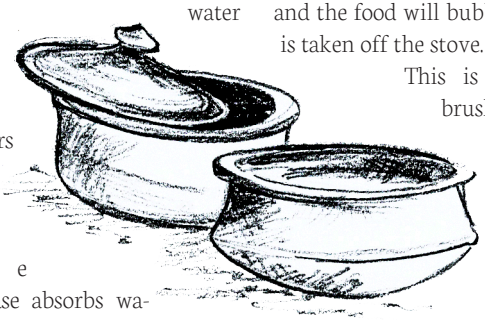
A tryst with clay cooking pots in Spain recalled memories of her childhood kitchen in Kerala, and revived Sridevi Lakshmi Kutty's fondness for cooking in them An array of multicoloured, deliciously attractive cazuelas.

They patiently and evenly cook the beans, red rice, quinoa, couscous, channa and our array of soups. In addition, they are also getting used to the idiosyncrasies of sambar, rasam and avial, dishes from a distant land – cooked by an Indian couple, in the cold climes of Netherlands, in cazuelas that originated in Spain. As far as I have understood, cazuelas and cocottes are essentially similar kind of cookware with minor differences; but there may be more to it that I am not aware of. Cazuelas are traditional, distinctive looking terracotta pots/pans from Spain, an essential part of any Spanish kitchen (also used widely in other Mediterranean countries) and usually passed down from mother to the daughter or daughter-in-law.

Apparently they have been in use since over 1000 years. What we get in the shops/markets today could be either hand thrown or mass produced, both kinds are fired twice in a kiln (once before glazing and once after) and glazed inside, but have an unglazed terracotta base. I came upon these quite unexpectedly while browsing in a fascinating shop that stocks hand-made artifacts from different countries. It was love at first sight, I was somehow so reminded of the beautiful mud pots in which we cook fish in Kerala (in Malayalam we call them meen-chattis – literally translated to pots for cooking fish). I

wonder whether it was the memory of the delicious fish curries eaten through the first half of my life or the grace of these pots that attracted me. Long and short of it, the first pot came home with me, and more joined the first! Since then quite a bit of our cooking has been in these cazuelas and cocottes.

The pots also demand care and attention. The store owner, an avid cook who uses cazuelas, cautioned me: "You can't just take these home and place them directly on the hob; these pots have to be soaked in water for at least four hours and preferably 12 hours to season them".



The unglazed base absorbs water, making the cazuela sturdier. He continued, "It is not enough to season the cazuela, using it also requires some deliberation and care; don't place an empty cazuela on an already lit hob and add food into it, put the ingredients in and then put the cazuela with the food on the hob." Clearly, he knew his cazuelas! Washing a cazuela is easy as the food doesn't stick to it. It is better not to use detergents; the best way is to just scrub it with a mild scrubber and rinse it.

Traditional unglazed clay pots are best washed with salt and water as they are capable of absorbing the dishwashing soap. I am told that some modern-day cazuelas can go safely into a dishwasher, but I am not testing that with my precious ones! Cooking with a cazuela is a slow process on a low fire, it takes time to warm up; once it begins cooking, it trundles along steadily and evenly; rest assured the contents will be evenly cooked and require hardly any supervision. You can switch off the stove a few minutes before the food is done as the pot will continue to cook and the food will bubble even after it is taken off the stove.

This is not my first brush with clay pans/pots, though they are responsible for converting me into a clay-pot cooking enthusiast. During my Mumbai days, I began collecting terracotta curios when I visited Kerala and struck upon the notion that I should use clay pots to cook. I bought three; two arrived intact and the third arrived in pieces! I seasoned the pots by applying coconut oil and let them stand for a day and then soaked them in water for a few hours and they were ready for use. These unglazed clay pots had the advantage that being porous, moisture circulates through the pot ensuring even moist cooking (without drying

the food). The alkaline clay also interacts with the food and neutralizes the pH balance in the food. My clay pots did turn out particularly tasty thiyal and other tamarind-based preparations.

As a child I remember that Omana, my mother's Lady Friday, used to buy new clay pots every year from the local markets or during the temple festival markets in Kerala. One or two of them were used to store water, one was used to cook rice and another to prepare tapioca and the special meen chattis (more than one) for preparing delicious fish curries with tamarind or raw mango in it. We also had stoneware, inherited from my great-grand mother, pots carved from sand-stone called kalchattis (available in Kerala and Tamil Nadu) in which all the sambars, avials and other gravies were prepared.

My strongest memories of kalchatti cooking are of Omana Amma (not the other Omana, they are two women with the same name), an inspired cook, who insisted on cooking all the curries for lunch on the wood fire in kalchattis, years after the LPG gas stove and aluminium vessels had conquered my parents' kitchen. I didn't know enough to know whether cooking in clay pots made a difference in taste but what I distinctly remember is the deliberate, methodical and mindful way that Omana Amma cooked.

A lovely woman, then in her early 60s, she would come after breakfast, cut vegetables, grind coconut for the different preparations and then settle down to having some paan. Once she was done, she would light the wood stove with a few dry twigs and firewood and turn out one delicious dish after another, all cooked on the wood fire in clay or stone pots! Generally a quick and impatient cook, I often struggle with the terracotta pots. I am slowly changing, planning dinner beforehand, starting it a little earlier and also developing patience to wait for the pot to cook at its pace, handle and wash it carefully. Yet, it has not been incident free. One of the cazuellas has developed a crack, thanks to my carelessness in letting it dry on the hob. I have a long way to go. But, it is worth it. Let us get out our chattis, kalchattis and claypots and regain those flavours!

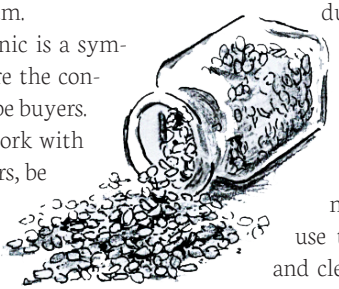
This article was originally published in Life Positive Magazine on May 2013
Link : https://www.lifepositive.com/pottering-with-pots-/

BUGS IN MY DAL!

How does one deal with the pests that infest your provisions? We list out a few simple tips to keep them away

Earlier, many families bought grains in bulk, which was then periodically dried in the sun and later packed into containers.

The pulses were first roasted and then stored. Today, we are used to cleaned and packed grains and pulses so much that we rarely have the time to dry and clean them.



Eating organic is a symbiotic process, where the consumers cannot just be buyers. They also have to work with farmers and suppliers, be ready to consume the produce that is local and seasonal. That is not all, one has to work on preserving non-perishables and understand the challenges of growing, storing, and transporting food without using chemicals.

At various stages, these grains are repeatedly dried, cleaned and natural control mechanisms such as neem leaves, vasambu or red chillies are used to control pest infestation. Of course, this does not guarantee 100 per cent protection. A few organic brands use nitrogen packing to prevent infestation. Yet, the grains become infested, and sometimes pretty quickly.

Organic grains and pulses are attractive to pests as well. This is proof of authenticity.

More importantly, these pests are not as dangerous as the chemicals used to prevent infestation.

Pest problems increase during the monsoons due to moisture in the air. It is also difficult to dry them during this season.

Pests can be easily managed. When you see a few weevils in your organic grain/pulse/millet jars, you can reuse them after winnowing and cleaning, or washing and drying. In the case of flours, putting it through a sieve is the only way. In the pest-attack hierarchy, the flour gets attacked the earliest, then the broken grains (rava) and then the whole grains. Among the pulses, those with skin are more vulnerable to attacks than the split versions.

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus edition of Coimbatore on January 28, 2017

Link: http://www.thehindu.com/life-and-style/food/Bugs-in-my-dal/article17108590.ece

EAT ORGANIC

The highpoint of my week is the visit to the weekly organic farmer's market in the city centre every Wednesday. It began the week after we (my husband and I) moved to The Hague two years ago, bringing us to a continent with stringent standards for pesticide residues in food, and making safe food available to its people. With high consumer awareness about food safety and plenty of options, Europe is the Mecca of organic food.

The Hague, a city with a population of 5,00,000, offers a centrally located weekly organic market, numerous organic stores, and a few organic supermarkets. My favourite destination is the organic market with around 10-15 stalls ranging from cheeses, dry goods, nuts, vegetables, fruits, flowers, a couple of bakers, and, believe it or not, a stall specialising in mushrooms. I have learnt the names of vegetables in Dutch, even though the vendors understand me better when I said the names in English.

Picking up strange vegetables that I had never seen before, I have prepared salads with the myriad greens, best eaten raw, winter purslane, lamb's lettuce, and others. I have added the salty sea beans, originally from the tidal marshes, to my vegetable dishes. By eating organic, local, and seasonal foods, we are promoting sustainable, earth-friendly, people-friendly farming. I have enjoyed raw milk cheese, and made European soups and Indian sabjis with the plump pumpkins and succulent zucchinis. I have relished the luscious plums and berries, and appreciated the difference between shitake and portabella mushrooms, helping me to become part of the local food culture and enrich our meals.Some of these delights cannot be found readily in stores, as they are seasonal, easily perishable, and do not handle transportation well. An added attraction of the market is that I can re-use my paper bags, using zero-plastic, a luxury no store or super store affords me.

Tryst with organic food

Our tryst with organic food began when I moved to the US in 2003. Mary, a cancer survivor, a neighbour

and a dear friend now, spoke to me about eating organic. This conversation was part of my explorations about food in general, which began due to the high levels of obesity that I observed in the Midwest of US, and the very low prices of highly processed foods.

Reading, watching documentaries, and understanding more led us into eating local, natural, and seasonal food, and led me to my second career, working on food and agriculture issues. Mary took me to the two large organic super stores in Louisville, Kentucky, and in return, I took her to the lively, open-air weekly organic farmer's market two miles away from where we both lived. I, who had never been too interested in food, began to enjoy buying food, interacting with the farmers, discovering new vegetables and recipes, and deepening my understanding about agriculture.

The Saturday market, with live music, hot omelettes made fresh by Ivor from eggs of 'free-range hens,' farm fresh produce, and families with babies and pets, was a magnet, which drew us to savour, linger and buy. We began enjoying food at different levels, seeing, buying, preparing, and eating. By the time we left four years later, I had volunteered at a farm and a farmer's market, and worked with a farmers' group in Kentucky! Once I woke up to this new world of sustainable and safe food, I realised, to my dismay, that we spend less thought, time, and money, on the food we buy, cook and eat, than on many other peripheral things in life.

Food is fundamental, but in our new paradigm, it has become merely a chore to be outsourced. We began evangelising about buying organic food and responses from friends and family varied from it being expensive, involving too much effort, and our bodies having gotten used to toxins so it does not matter. People wanted to know whether it was fear of falling sick or paranoia that prompted us to go organic. It is not that simple. Of course, being able to eat organic food is a privilege today. A situation created due to the mindless use of chemicals and genetic modification in agriculture.

Sreedevi Lakshmi Kutty believes that we are at the crossroads today with our food threatened from all sides by toxins, genetic modification, cloning, additives, preservatives, antibiotics, hormones, and denaturing through processing. Organic is the answer

However, it is also a conscious choice, which involves making ethical food choices a priority, and investing more effort, time, and money.

Why eat organic?

We have numerous reasons for eating organic. One reason is definitely that the food we eat is non-toxic, free of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), safer, healthier,

and tastier. However, there are other equally strong reasons. By eating organic, local, and seasonal foods, we are promoting sustainable, earth-friendly, people-friendly farming. We are supporting sustainable farmers, who go out on a limb to buck the conventional chemical-driven paradigm. With this choice, we contribute to a safer environment and more of our money reaches the farmer, making their livelihood secure.

By eating local and seasonal foods, we reduce our food miles, and nourish the local agro-bio-diversity. In most places, local vegetables are dying out, as they are being replaced with a few standard vegetables, thus decimating the biodiversity of our heritage. We learnt to appreciate the slightly bitter kale and arugula, beet leaves, fresh corn in season, and lovely variety of pumpkin, and heirloom tomatoes ranging from pretty to sour, and in strange shapes.

By eating organic, local, and seasonal foods, we are promoting sustainable, earth-friendly, people-friendly farming

Relocation brings new experiences

Our organic quest continued when we moved to Mumbai. Getting organic food seemed at best a joke, and at worst impossible. When I started asking around for organic food outlets, friends were amused, and laughed it off as my US hangover.

Gradually and serendipitously, friends and acquaintances began telling me about one store and then another, in south Mumbai, central Mumbai, suburbs, carrying everything from our newly discovered sweetener, powdered jaggery, to the brown rice with bran, and the varied millets. It also meant meeting many new people and visiting new parts of town in search of food.

Meeting Anand, an organic food exporter, listening to farmer and friend Venkat's droll tales about the farm, were all part of the experience of eating organic. Our Mumbai purchases were nicely supplemented with delicious hand pounded organic red rice, and spicy pepper from our hometown, Thiruvananthapuram.Of course, the irrepressible fruit and vegetable vendors of Mumbai put me in place, when I advocated organic and local. In response to my query about vegetables without chemicals, the vendors confidently told me, "Aunty, you can't grow vegetables without chemicals." The regular fruit vendor, who visited our building, greeted me the first day proclaiming that all his fruits were 'vilayati and badiya'(imported from abroad and of great quality).

Feeling righteous, I tried explaining to him about my principle of local, seasonal, and natural. He looked bemused, but nodded and left. A week

later he rang the doorbell, displayed all the fruits and announced with a flourish, "Madam, all the fruits are desi, no videsi fruits." A new spiel and the same fruits.

Organic and local vegetables and fruits were a problem in Mumbai. The supply was unreliable, erratic, and intermittent. We relished the times when Ubai, our friend and organic farmer, shared his delicious papayas and mangoes with us, when our regular organic store carried a rare supply of seasonal vegetables, and fruits, and when our balcony yielded the herbs for our teas and garnishes, and the rare tomatoes, greens and beans! In the process, I became an urban farmer and became a part of an urban farming group.I am enriched and humbled with the gifts of nourishing food and rich interactions with organic farmers from three different continents, so different yet so very similar.

Today we are at a crossroads with our food threatened from all sides, toxins, genetic modification, cloning, additives, preservatives, antibiotics, hormones, and denaturing through processing. We are also faced with the threat of enormous loss of biodiversity, and alienation of farmers from their seeds. To secure our food safety and sovereignty, and the future of our children, I believe that every one of us has to connect with the farmers who grow our food, and become food growers ourselves, in our balconies, kitchen gardens, and community spaces.

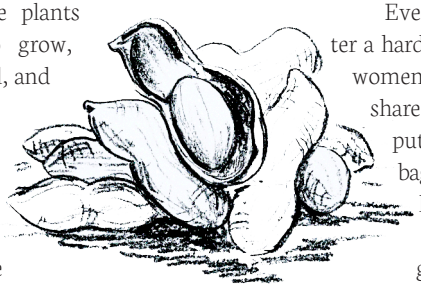
This article was originally published in Life Positive Magazine, on June 2012
Link : https://www.lifepositive.com/archive/others/eat-organic-

MEMORIES OF PEANUT FARMING

The pleasure of harvesting groundnuts and eating them fresh has few equals

I remember my first season of farming, when I ambitiously attempted growing groundnuts organically. The sight of mounds of groundnut plants on the harvested field, of women plucking the nuts and filling them in sacks, is still fresh in my mind. I had not realised back then, that growing this simple crop would drive us nuts.

When the plants needed water to grow, we had a dry spell, and when the harvest needed the sun, we had copious rains. But the harvest couldn't wait, so we worked in between spells of rain, bringing the groundnuts into the farm house: 15 women working on our two acres of crop. The women toiled hard at harvesting, drying and preparing stacks of the plant residue to be used as nutritious cattle fodder. Most of the groundnuts were dried and sent for making oil. Some of it went into making peanut candy.



Every waking moment was filled with nuts, and when I dropped into bed exhausted, I dreamt about more rains, nuts and snakes in the fields. We baby-sat the groundnuts for two weeks, which meant lugging a huge tarpaulin sheet full of drying nuts (easily weighing 100 kilograms, if not more) into the sun when it emerged, and dragging it all back at the first sign of rain. That was a particularly bad year of harvesting.

Every evening, after a hard day's work, the women collected their share of fresh nuts, put them into their bags and left for home. I realised then that fresh groundnut was a favoured food, eaten in plenty during the short harvest season. They told me to boil the groundnuts in the shell before eating them. So in the evenings, we settled down on the farm house veranda, and as dusk fell, we cracked open the shells with our discoloured fingers and popped the nuts into our mouths. I learnt that boiling groundnuts in their shell is the most nutritious and wholesome way to consume it, as it is

rich in antioxidants and fibre.

Groundnut cultivation opened my eyes to the hard work that goes into my food before it reaches my plate. Knowing where our food comes from and being involved in the growing process gives us a better appreciation of it. The delicate taste and aroma of the groundnut oil, the flavour of the peanut butter, and the crunch of the peanut candy always reminds me of my nutty season.

This article was originally published in The Hindu, Metro plus on November 16,2017

Link: https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/memories-of-peanut-farming/article25001225.ece

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

My thanks to:

The Save Our Rice Campaign for inspiring many of these pieces.

The Hindu newspaper and the Coimbatore Metro EditionEditor, Pankaja Srinivasan, who published most of these pieces, motivating me to continue writing.

The Hindu team for the "no objection" to use the articles in this publication.

Usha Soolapani and Sridhar Radhakrishnan of Thanal and R Ponnambalam of CREATE, who came up with the idea of compiling these articles into a book

Praveen P for the illustrations

Ananthu S Kumar for designing the book.

Anishida for coordinating the publication

& finally to Ramesh, for everything

ABOUT SAVE OUR RICE CAMPAIGN

The Save Our Rice Campaign aims to build a movement towards achieving food security and sovereignty, reviving our rice culture and sustaining rice eco-systems. The Save Our Rice Campaign attempts to sustain rice by creating linkages between different sectors, building alternative models for sustainable ecological rice cultivation, developing capacities to address issues related to rice, and developing a platform of people with rice culture as a common concern. The Campaign was launched in 2004, the Second International Year of Rice, in Kumbalangi, Kerala. The Campaign is coordinated by Thanal and CREATE. The campaign is active in four states Tamilnadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and West Bengal, and in the last couple of years moved to Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. It is coordinated by partners in these States.

THE MAJOR CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES ARE

..CONSERVING RICE ECOSYSTEMS

..SUSTAINING RICE CULTURE AND DIVERSITY

..PROTECTING TRADITIONAL WISDOM

..PREVENTING GMOS AND TOXICS

..ENSURING SAFE AND NUTRITIOUS FOOD