

In a Pickle

Author - Sunita Rao, Published on - 9.2.2018

The best part of pickling a fruit or vegetable is that you can enjoy it even when it is out of season.

All of us have our favourite pickles. What's yours? Mango, lemon, mixed vegetable or something more exotic? And more importantly, how many times have you found yourself "in a pickle", which means a sticky situation where you are getting cooked!

Pickles have been around for eons and pickling is a good way of preserving fruit and vegetables to savour through the year. Each eco-region offers its own diversity of edible flora and fauna that in turn can be turned into delectable pickles. Certain kinds (especially lemons) even get medicinal properties over the years when made the right way with the correct mix of spices.

The forests of the Malnad region in the Western Ghats offer a plethora of pickling possibilities. A signature pickle is the Jeerige Appay Middi . This is made from tiny, tender young mangoes that are usually found growing on the banks of rivers and streams. The mango itself has a faint flavour of jeera (cumin) and is relished locally and outside. With forests getting denuded, this mango variety is threatened. Many homes have their own trees, grafts of which ensure that the vital taste, texture and flavour get passed on and saved.

Preserved

At a recent biodiversity festival (Malnad Mela) held annually each year in Sirsi town in Karnataka, there was a pickle competition. Over 80 entries were displayed. Forest dwellers, farmers and gardeners proudly carried in their creations. Beautifully displayed, each entry was visually appealing and made one's taste buds sing. The judges picked for this event were the envy of all since they got to taste everything. Hot, sweet, sour, bitter, astringent, salty — you name it and it was there.

Of course, mango was a prominent player as were lemon, citron and other fruits of which special local varieties figured. The citron (kanchikai and dadlikai) of this area is famed for its tanginess and taste. Other forest and garden denizens which were pickle stars that awed all the visitors were amla (wild and cultivated gooseberry), star gooseberry, hog plum (amtekai), kokam , ginger, tomato, pineapple, star fruit (carambola), bamboo shoot, pepper, tamarind, kowlikai (a forest fruit), mango ginger, brinjal, monkey jack (vatay), ivy gourd (thonde kai) and more. The pickles had no additives like chemical preservatives, colours or other artificial materials. Young and old reached out to get a taste and the place resonated with sounds of appreciation!

Apart from the sheer enjoyment, one of the core purposes of having this pickle parade was to celebrate the unique local food culture (ethno culinary tradition) of the area. It was also to stress how important it is to conserve our forests and home gardens that provide refuge to so many species and varieties of rare plants that are our friends and saviours. A powerful way to communicate the message of conservation is through taste. This year, pickles and the women pickle makers came to the rescue!

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