

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

August 2015 Vol. 6, Issue-4



6th Year of Open Access

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Non Fiction [Humour]

If It's Dinner, It Must Be Dosa

Sathya Ramaganapathy

Her: Amma, what are we having for dinner?

Me (in my best American drawl): Mildly spiced pancakes made from coarsely ground garbanzo beans, pigeon peas and rice. Served with a topping of lightly sautéed shallots and greens. And a huge dollop of butter just for you!

- For the uninitiated, that's adai dosa.

* * *

At a party, I am introduced to Sheila who is visiting her in-laws' home in Bengaluru for the summer holidays. Sheila, a Punjabi from Delhi, is married to a Tamilian and they have a son, about seven years old. I ask her how he is getting along at his grandparents' home, and I am hit with the mother-in-law of all grouses.

“How can you eat dosa every day? How can that be healthy for kids? You know, my mother-in-law, she makes dosa for dinner. Every. Single. Day.”

“For Tamilians, the dosa is like your roti. Don't you eat roti every day?” I ask her.

“Of course not!” she says, offended. “I put in a lot of effort to plan every single meal. I make sure every food group is covered in every meal.”

“Ah, the food pyramid” I say knowledgably.

“No, no. Don't you know they moved from the food pyramid to the food plate? It's now a round plate with portions for carbs, proteins, veggies and fruits and a side helping of dairy. I follow that now.”

“Triangle, circle... soon they'll run out of shapes” I joke, rather lamely.

“You know, I put in so much effort and here my mother-in-law just serves my son dosa” she says, in a huff. “I *never* repeat a meal. Especially not dinner. I bet you are the same. What do you do for dinner?”

“Err, dosa....”

In our house, if it's dinner it must be dosa. Plain dosa, set dosa, ghee roast, podi dosa, onion dosa, masala dosa, adai dosa, muzhu uzundu dosa, appam, rava dosa, kothammali dosa, neer dosa, southekeyi dosa.... Before you go thinking that my house is the veritable Sathya Sagar Darshini restaurant, let me assure you that while the options are endless, my offerings are not always. Ok, I confess. I make three, maybe four of those varieties on a regular basis.

To tell you the truth, the whole conversation at the party bothered me. It's not that I am a dosafanatic. If anything, I have a vivid memory of stating quite haughtily to my then new husband many years ago that I was not your "typical South Indian". How the mighty fall. While I am not likely to wax eloquent about the sublime culinary experience that is the dosa, I do object to others casting aspersions on it. The much maligned dosa is so much more. At the very least, it is a perfectly balanced meal. The dosa batter made from rice and dal covers two food groups – carbohydrates and proteins. Add in the sambar or the chutney – you have an additional portion of protein and the choicest pickings when it comes to the veggies. Ghee on the dosa for the kids? You can tick dairy off the list. And let's not forget the always in stock, freshly imported once every two weeks from my mother's house, mozhaga podi, or gun powder as it is commonly known. Lazy to resort to gun powder, you say? I like to think of it as initiating my kids' palates to complex, mature flavours.

"Those poor kids," you must be thinking. Before you go sympathizing with my certainly not poor or traumatized kids, let me reassure you, I do rustle up the occasional soup and pasta, noodles, idiyappam, pav bhaaji or dhokla for some variety during the week.

But for my kids, nothing can come close to the "good life". Having grown up on a staple diet of Enid Blytons, for them the good life means boarding schools, horses, picnics and tea with buttered scones, marmalade and cake. Not for them the local Kissan mixed fruit jam or the thickly sliced milk bread from the local bakery. On a recent holiday to London we decided to treat the kids to the original buttered scones and marmalade. There was a lot of excitement and much elbowing to get that first bite.

"It's not fair that she should get the first helping just because she is younger."

"So what if she is older? Why should she be the first in everything?"

Just as I settled the bickering by slicing the scone in half, the pushing began again. This time they were pushing the plate back, rushing to offer it to the other. "You have it..." "No you have it..." "No you..."

The marmalade, it seems, was too bitter, the scones too buttery.

My daughter summed it up best when she said, "I would rather have dosa, amma". So much for the good life.

While my older daughter absolutely loves dosa, the younger one is not always quite so enthusiastic. She is even known to register a protest occasionally. I do have a few tricks up my sleeve to deal with just these kind of situations. When she asks me what's for dinner, I put on my best American drawl and say with as much flourish as I can muster:

"Today we have light fluffy crepes, served with your choice of sweet saffron milk or exotic vegetables in delicately spiced coconut curry". That's appam, with sweet milk or vegetable stew.

Or,

"Thick, soft pancakes topped with lightly sautéed shallots. Served with a mélange of softly cooked vegetables simmered in a delicate, savoury, lentil broth". Onion uttappam and sambar.

She is delighted and distracted. And that takes care of dinner.

With dosas on her mind, my older daughter tells me she has picked cuisine for a project at school. Her class is studying the Roman Empire this term and everybody has to research some aspect of the Roman Empire and turn in an assignment.

"But what's the big deal with Roman food? Surely all they ate were cabbage stew and roast boar?" I ask.

"Amma, the Asterix comics are not the gold standard for ancient Roman cuisine" she says.

"But why food?" I ask. Why not pick culture, architecture, attire, even mythology, of which the kid is admittedly a bigger expert than I could ever hope to be, thanks to Rick Riordan.

"The Romans had gastronomic gumption" she states, momentarily delighted with her own ability to alliterate. "I wonder if they had anything like dosas. I think it would be interesting to know what their food was like and what ingredients they used back then. And it would be fun to take samples to school and share it with my friends."

So begins our search for recipes on the internet. There's Cato's Roman Bread. Seems simple enough. Flour, olive oil, salt, water. Oh wait, it needs "spelt flour". I have never heard of spelt flour. Apparently it belongs to the wheat family. Same genus, different species. It's light, nutritious and has a nutty flavor. It used to be cultivated by ancient civilizations around 8000 years ago. It has now made a comeback of sorts in the form of health food, although where I will get it in Bengaluru is anybody's guess.

So here's the question. If I make Roman bread with regular flour and no one hears about it, will it still be Roman bread? Apparently not, according to my daughter.

We move on to the next recipe. This one requires Lovage seeds. Ajwain? We wonder. Alas, no. Wikipedia tells us that Ajwain is often mistaken for Lovage seeds. But Ajwain is, in fact, Carom seeds. I still have no idea what Lovage seeds are. We move on to the next recipe. This one requires Rue. We learn it is the national herb of Lithuania, but that's neither here nor there. Even if we do manage to get it in some organic store, this recipe calls for Fish sauce. Anywhere else in

the world, fish would probably be considered vegetarian food. But we know better, don't we? So that's the end of that recipe.

By now we are tired and hungry, and we decide it is probably a good idea to table this project for now.

"Shall we eat?" I ask her. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Today I feel like having some comfort food amma."

"What would you like to have?"

"Can you give me some crispy crepes served with a topping of lightly sautéed shallots?" she asks.

I look at her blankly.

"Amma, I'm just asking for onion dosa" she says with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "If it's dinner, it must be dosa, right?"

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