

When it comes to oil check the mill, not the grist

Food & Flavour | **GARAM MASALA** | BY VIKRAM DOCTOR

A fortnight back I wrote on Dr K.T. Achaya's splendid study of traditional oil mills. In that column I looked at Dr Achaya's descriptions of their deep roots in Indian history, and how the essential process of cold-pressed, animal-powered ghanis had not changed since ancient times. But Dr Achaya's book also cleared up another long-standing question I've had — why, with such simple technology and just one ingredient, the oilseed, the flavour of traditional ghani oil can vary so much?

Take sesame/gingelly which is the oldest type of oil produced in India, and the only one with really subcontinentwide use (before groundnuts came from the Americas). I've been collecting ghani pressed sesame oils for a while and they vary a lot. Some are light, almost tasteless, others have a nice nutty bouquet that fades to what I can only describe as the 'cooking oil' taste which prevents sesame oil being entirely edible on its own, then there are the dark, dramatically flavoured oils which the Chinese favour, and a comparable one I picked up at P.B. Murali's weekly organic food market in Chennai.

As Dr Achaya explains it, oil pressing is simple, yet involves so many minute variations in process and equipment that doing it is almost an art. Oddly, water is vital to making oil, being added around four times, and deciding when and how much to add requires real expertise. The first addition is before pressing, to compact the seeds and give the pestle a grip, the last two additions purify the oil, but it is the second which is crucial. "The function of the water added at this stage is to bring about cooking (in partnership with frictional heat), the denaturation and coagulation of protein and the displacement of oil from the cell." This is when the oil suddenly froths up, as it gets pressed out of the oilseeds.

The oilseeds themselves can be processed differently. Very light oil comes from dehusked seeds ground very slowly, to prevent any heating that would add a toasted taste. On the other hand, in parts of India, other substances are added to the seeds, which isn't adulteration since they are accepted local ways to give the oil a certain flavour. For example, jiggery is added in parts of South India, which may account for the dark, caramelly notes in some oils. Dr Achaya also notes how combinations of different mustard seed varieties are used to give the characteristically appetising pungency of mustard oil, while in Kerala a particularly delicate coconut oil was made by boiling fresh coconut scrapings with water.

These examples validate Dr Achaya when he says that, "an overriding historical criterion in the use of edible oils in India was flavour." It was expected that ghani pressed oils would have their own flavours, which would form a part of the taste of a dish, which is why certain types of oil were imperative for a particular cuisine's food, like mustard oil in Bengali. Avadhi food took this one step further by ageing mustard oil in buried earthen pots, to give a mellowed pungency. Yet this is an entire tradition that we are forgetting as we move towards tasteless refined oils.

Traditional ghani oils are now a specialty item, which correctly reflects their worth, but limits their use to those willing to shell out higher prices for them. Health food brands like Conscious Foods,

Navdanya and 24 Letter Mantra can be found in health food shops, but good quality (and usually cheaper) traditional ghani oil can be found in Gandhian centres.

For example, the Gandhi Book Centre at Grant Road in Mumbai sells excellent ghani oil from the Yusuf Meherally Centre in Raigad



district. Gandhi's own consumption of oils varied with his dietary experiments, but he was a strong supporter of traditional ghanis. "We have suffered the village oilman to driven to extinction and we eat adulterated oils," he lamented in 1935, and enthusiastically promoted Jhaverbhai P. Patel's efforts to study different ghani designs, to come up with an optimum one. Patel's final model is called the Wardha ghani after the village industry centre set up near Gandhi's Wardha ashram. With modifications, including the contentious, but to my mind, humane, substitution of electric for animal power, it is still in use today.

My only crib with these traditional Indian oils is that while they are excellent for cooking, they aren't too good to eat on their own. My standard here is not olive oil, hugely overhyped by the olive oil lobby. Really good quality extra virgin olive oil can be good, but it's rarely available, and hardly the only imported oil worth trying. At Le Marche in Delhi I found bottle of Austrian pumpkin seed oil at an excellent price, presumably because people didn't know what it was. Its amazing stuff, green-black in colour and with a nutty flavour so intense it's almost too much.

Even better is macadamia nut oil which has a wonderfully balanced nuttiness, and argan oil from Morocco that has a luxurious, deeply lingering taste. These are not oils for cooking, but eating alone, drizzled on breads for an exquisite combination of taste and texture. I haven't tried all the traditional Indian oils, like mahua, and keep hoping to find one to match. But if not perhaps someone could try growing the right pumpkins for oil, and pressing them in a traditional Indian ghani.

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