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Tangy tamarind just makes you drool

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YOU can't beat the taste of food at festivities, especially weddings, if the food absorbs the joys of merrymaking!

Cooking at any Indian event is done with great fanfare. Relatives and neighbours all come together and are delegated their roles.

As kids, we used to carry the puri from the women who were rolling to the men doing the frying. There were always male cooks who had that special hand for curries, palau and all the heavy slogging near the open, wood-fired stoves put together from bricks and adjusted to suit the pot sizes.

However that special condiment that makes any feast heavenly is cooked a few days before the event by the women of the house. Tangy delicious tamarind chutney is a must-have with curries, palau or just plain with puri. And any left over from an event matures in taste and sometimes kept for days and even up to a year.

Chutneys and pickles adorn every Indian kitchen to provide additional flavours to daily simple foods. Each seasonal fruit is harnessed and preserved with herbs and spices for health and taste in every home. Pickles have longer shelf life as limes, lemons, mango, ambarella and other such fruits are dried before home roasted and ground spices are mixed with quality mustard oil. The ranges of pickle not only give taste as an accompaniment to Indian dishes but are great addition in grills and sandwiches.

Among chutneys, tamarind probably has one of the longest shelf life and retains its flavours well.

Not your regular fruit, tamarind is for those with a taste for sour fruit. Its tantalising taste is hard to resist.

After school, we used to enjoy the tangy taste of freshly picked tamarind fruits growing in the wild. There is always that popular mix of tamarind, salt and chilli that makes anyone drool!

Each season, women harvest the fruits from those resilient leguminous nitrogen-fixing trees growing in the wild. Often someone, would climb the tree to shake the fruit into mats made from nylon bags joined together. The fruits were gathered and women sat in collectives to peel the pods, seed and sun-dry it before making it into balls for easy storage and usage.

To spice up curries and dhals, a small portion is soaked into water, softened and added to taste. Tamarind is a great marinade for meats and fish as it not only tenderises but infuses its tangy flavour for great taste.

Known for its health properties, mothers will mix tamarind water and cook with spices to make rasam, a spicy drink that helps you break into sweat and provides relief from aches, pains and fevers.

Most women of Indian origin can't imagine their kitchen without this wonder taste and ensure they stock up on it. The tamarind shelf life exceeds two years as it gently changes colour from brown to black. It's a perfect raw material as an additive and preservative-free marinade and flavour in your food.

Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development (FRIEND), a home-grown sustainable livelihood organisation was set up to assist families and communities generate income from their skills and resources.

When looking for livelihood options for rural women 15 years ago, tamarind chutney was the safest trial product.

We looked for those special hands that cooked tamarind chutneys at weddings and events and found Saras Wati in Ba.

She used to be called to cook at special events in and around town. Saras submitted a recipe that was a hit from the start. After trial runs and lab tests, we were ready to launch this as an income generation initiative.

Launched on International Women's Day on March 8, 2003 the product still is the fastest seller among all our chutneys and pickles.

Saras buys tamarind from suppliers around Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

From her regular income, has been able to save to help renovate her home, send her children to university and also use some for her daughter's wedding.

She also has bought items she used to dream off while still churning out ever-delicious chutneys each day at FRIEND's production facility at Tuvu, Lautoka.

The much in demand tamarind chutney exudes taste of home as it is cooked in traditional style on low heat and topped with freshly roasted and grounded spices for that delicious aroma. Hand pressed pure virgin coconut oil used in the preparation gives it a nice coconutty flavour.

Rural women have great skills in preserves and this has slowly become the strength of women who prepare a range of traditional pickles and chutneys now available under FRIEND's Fiji Style brand and distributed to outlets and hotels by Motibhai & Co Ltd.

We received samples of many other recipes.

Sweet mango, chilli and ambrella chutneys also adorn the supermarket shelves now. Seasonal mango chutney and ambrella chutney both mild in spice are great for sandwiches and super-hot chili chutney is a favourite sauce and marinade mix. Mango, lime and chili pickles are also fast moving favourites.

There is no artificial additives or preservatives added in either cooking or packaging any of the products.

The popular tamarind chutney is used by many chefs as marinades and Tukuni chefs love to marinate ika tavu in this tangy taste.

New Zealand chef Robert Oliver loves using tamarind chutney to prepare pork ribs. Tamarind chutney is not only served with Indian food but now has become a popular addition to grills and sandwiches.

Having versatile tamarind chutney at home acts as great sauce, marinade, dip or an ingredient to making super-hot rasam as a health drink!



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