

# A 'Khat'ta' above the rest

● FAREEDA KANGA

Indian cuisine would be bereft of a soul, if not for the numerous souring agents that add body and depth to most dishes. We scour the kitchens of India in a quest to uncover some of these magic morsels that shape the foodscape of our country.

## SOUR SEEKERS

I'm standing in a lush forest, so dense that the vegetation forms a blanket masking out the intense rays of sunlight.

Faced with an unusual task on hand — I'm hunting for a peculiar looking plant called the Thekera flower, indigenous to Assam.

Traipsing across the length and breadth of India, my mission is to uncover the secret souring agents, that form the backbone of Indian cuisine, but have hitherto been over shadowed by the 'masala dabba', which is conventionally the star of the Indian larder.

"Unlike a spice mix that generates heat and fire, souring agents add complex flavours to curries, vegetables and meats. They are as integral an ingredient as any masala or herb," suggests culinary expert, Karen Anand.

Sourness is one of the primary tastes on the palate and is caused by acidity. It can provide lightness and interest to food that would otherwise be heavy or bland. We can experience the subtle difference a drop of lemon juice makes to a soup or a piece of fried fish.

Just as different masalas are used in different parts of the country — souring agents are regional in their usage.

Goans have a proclivity to kokum whilst in a Punjabi household amchur powder dominates.

## A REGIONAL ROULETTE

First stop Guwahati—The gateway to the North East in all its splendence.

Food habits are dramatically different from the rest of the country with pork, pigeon, fish, rice and seasonal greens cooked in a light broth or fermented to perfection.

Turn to page 34

THE WRITER HAS TRAVELLED THROUGH THE LENGTH AND BREATH OF INDIA IN SEARCH OF SOUR FOODS



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KAREN ANAND, *culinary expert seen here with Chef Rego*

Karen Anand with Chef Rego



## COMMON SOURING AGENTS IN INDIAN CUISINE

Souring agents provide zest and tang to our table and add a very significant component to create balance and drive taste. There are plenty of souring agents in Indian cuisine and the common ones are as below:

● **Tamarind:** Ubiquitous, grown throughout the country providing colour and sourness to most of the basic dishes.

● **Yogurt/Dahi:** Commonly used for meat marinade and acts as a tenderiser and provides creaminess and sourness to the food. Often it is paired as a sour drink to the food and makes the base of popular north Indian dishes like *Kadhi* when combined with gram flour (*besan* and *cooked*).

● **Vinegar/Sirkar:** probably imported to Indian cuisine with influence of Portuguese and used in Kerala and Goan cuisine in most dishes. *Pachai* brews a dark, rich aromatic vinegar in *Alivari* that is used liberally in their cuisine.

● **Thesirai/Asid:** Taps the tart on usage as souring agent. The sourness is an extract from the fruit once it is tendered after soaking in water. It creates the base of condiments like *South Chutney* (also known as *chutney*), *lentils* like *Sambhar* and *Rasam*.

● **Lemon/Nimbu:** Mostly used in chutneys (*dips*) and meat marinades.

● **Cocum/Kokum:** Found native to Southern coastal areas. The flesh of the fruit is used as a souring agent in the gravies and curries. Famous dishes are from Goa and *Shendil besan* curry. Also used as base for the drinks and creation of *lemon-ades* using *Kokum* water.

● **Raw mango powder/Amchur:** Mangoes slices are dried and made into a powder. It is commonly used for fillings of *samosas*, *dips*, *chutneys* and also in marinade for grilled meats.

● **Dry Pomegranate seeds:** Pomegranate seeds are dried and roasted to form the powder, which is used for *relishes*, *chutneys*, and *dips*.

COURTESY Nishant Bhatia, Chef (Business Development, VKL Seasoning Pvt Ltd)

of your choice. Here we sample the tarting sourness of the *cambridge* especially loved on a portion of *fried paneer* folk — a tangy repertoire of flavours complementing the freshness of the seafood.

In Coorg, the same *Garcinia* *gammigaita* or *cambridge* adopts a new persona when it is strained and the juice extracted to create a lustrous purple puree called *Kachanpali vinegar* - drawing its name from the boiling process the fruit undergoes.

Turn to page 35

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Continued from page 33

"Souring agents form a chunk of the Assamese cooking traditions. Assam being an extremely warm states these souring agents either in curry forms or as traditional drinks like *tuai* to soothe the body during summer months. Assamese cuisine is characterised by very little use of spices but strong flavours mainly due to the use of endemic exotic herbs, fruits and vegetables and one of the most popular dishes from Assam, the *Tenga*, is an indispensable part of a proper meal," suggests Chef Anirban Dasgupta, Executive Chef — Vivanta by Taj — Guwahati, Assam.

At Seven — the all day diner at this property that specialises in showcasing North Eastern food with a twist, we sample the signature Assamese fish of *Masor Tenga* or sweet and sour fish.

The famous *Thekera* flower that we procured earlier is used to prepare this tangy dish — its flavour similar to *kokum*.

Several ingredients bring out the sourness quotient in the *maso* and many more dishes in Assam. *Bilahi* (tomato), *Jagori* (*Zizyphus* *Jujuba*), *Thekera* (*Garcinia* *pedunculata*), *outarum* (elephant apple), *koroi* (starfruit) are the most important souring agents used in Assamese food both in fresh and

dry forms.

Elephant apples are hugely popular and found primarily in this region as well.

The trek from the North East to the 'Spice Coast' of Kerala is an arduous journey but well worth the effort. The markets here are an inspiration for any chef brimming with curiosities, nutmeg, peppers and assorted spices.

But my quest for *cambridge* or *kodampuli* — a souring agent specific to Malayali fish dishes leads me to a corner of the spice market.

Before reaching the market the fruit is cut open, its pulp contents expelled and discarded and the outer skin or petals are sundried to an even black colour. *Cambridge* is stored in airtight containers away from sunlight and soaked in water before use.

Although very similar to *kokum* in taste, *cambridge* (*Garcinia* *gammigaita*) adds a unique sourness to dishes such as *sadim* (chicken *moor kari* (country-style *prawn* *curry*)).

In Kochi at the famous Chinese fishing nets, we are advised to drop in to *Jude Allen Steven's* stall *Little Maxims*.

This former Taj chef runs a seafood stall that literally cooks the freshly caught fish a few meters away on a grill in *dry* style

## MASOR BELAHI TENGA

Assamese soured fish

Serves 4

- 1kg bekti
- 1kg tomato
- 200 gms potato
- 50 ml mustard oil
- 50 gms salt
- 10 gms panchphoran
- 30 gms turmeric powder
- 20 gms chilli powder
- 10 gms jeera powder
- 10 gms coriander leaf
- 10 gms onion
- 10 gms hurum
- 5 gms kasundi (mustard)
- 2 gms manimuni leaf

● Clean and marinate the fish with salt, lemon and turmeric powder and deep fry in mustard oil. Boil and mash the potato and keep it aside. Put the panchphoran and red chillies in hot oil. Add the sliced onion, saute till just golden, add sliced tomatoes add salt, turmeric powder, cook till tomato melts.

● Puree the tomato back to the pan, simmer the fried fish in the same

● Prepare *allo pitika* separately with sliced onion, slit green chillies and mustard oil adding to the mashed potato, season well

● Prepare the *hurum* crust with chopped and dried onion, tomato and coriander.

● Apply *Kasundi* mustard on the pan-fried fish and then add the crust. Arrange mashed potato in a plate then place fish on top of it. Then pour seasoned tomato (*tenga*) gravy to the plate. Garnish with fresh manimuni leaf.

TURN TO PAGE 3 FOR MORE

## MAMIDIKAYA PULIHORA

Andhra style mango rice

Serves 4 to 6

A basic South Indian style tangy mango rice made with raw mango used in pickles. Similar to *loushi* rice it has a sour aftertaste because the mango is cooked in oil.

- 1 raw mango — washed, peeled and grated or mashed
- 1.5 tbsp oil
- 2 cups rice cooked and cooled
- 2 tbsp peanuts remove shells
- 1 tsp chana and urad dal
- 1 tsp mustard seeds
- Pow broken red chillies
- Few curry leaves

- 1 tsp chopped ginger
- Pinch of hing and turmeric

● Heat about 1.5 tbs oil in a pan. Fry peanuts until half done.

● Add *chana dal* and urad dal. When they turn lightly golden, add mustard seeds. Allow them to splutter.

● Add thinly sliced ginger (optional), broken red chillies and curry leaves. For more heat, you can add the chopped green chillies along with peanuts.

● Sauté everything until the curry leaves turn crisp. Add *hing*. Transfer to a plate.

● To the same pan add raw mango, turmeric and salt.

● Lower the flame completely and cook covered. Stir in between. Mango must be cooked completely and must turn soft. It must also begin to leave the sides of the pan. If your mango is very dry with no moisture to cook, you may sprinkle a tbs of water. Stir and cook covered.

● Returns the seasoning to the pan and mix thoroughly. Keep covered for 2 mins.

● Add this into by *mix* to the cooled rice. You may need to add more oil and salt. Do not use less oil, the rice will turn out very dry. Mix gently and serve with *pickled* and *curd*.

● Wash, drain and shell prawns.

● Place all ingredients except *curry* in a bowl and mix well. Add 1/2 cup water and cook over low heat. 10 prawns are cooked and *gravy* thickens.

● Mix in *curry* leaves and oil and remove from heat.

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## KAIRIWALA BHINDI

Chef ASHISH BHASIN, executive chef, Trident BKC shares his secret recipe for this tangy treat

Serves 2

- 300 gms okra (small pieces)
- 30 gms strips of semi ripe mangoes
- 20 ml mustard Oil
- 10 gms cumin seeds
- 4 tsp. lemon juice
- 10 gms roasted cumin powder
- 10 gms red chilli powder
- 10 gms chat masala
- 10 gms raw mango powder
- Salt to taste
- 5 gms ginger juliennes
- 10 gms chopped green chillies
- 10 gms onion sliced

- Slice the okra and stuff it with a mixture of chat masala, salt, red chilli powder, roasted cumin powder, raw mango powder and mustard oil
- Heat the remaining oil and add cumin to it till it crackles and add the chopped ginger and green chillies and add the sliced onions
- Sauté the above mix for 2 minutes, add the stuffed okra and cook it on high heat for a minute
- Then add all the remaining powdered spices, mix well and

- cover the pan with a lid and cook on low flame with occasional stirring
- Finally, add the mango and ginger juliennes and stir by on a high flame. Garnish with lemon juice, little sugar and the mango strip



# 'Khat'ta'

Continued from page 34

Most of the classic Coorg dishes from *panidi* curry to chicken fry use this vinegar.

This dense, tart vinegar, which has been made in the region for generations, is indispensable in many preparations. Indeed every Coorg kitchen has a couple of vinegar bottles, on its shelf.

Award-winning chef Manu Chandra takes us on a culinary journey of his favourites at the quirky, non-conformist gastro-pub, Monkey Bar — his latest venture.

Inspired by souring agents he says, "I like complexity. I like layering—adding Bengali *panch phoron* or the *Kudava Kachampuli* or even fresh *ajwain* leaves to an unexpected dish."

Meanwhile on the west coast, I chat with *Soups* Chef, Edridge Vir of Park Hyatt, Goa's specialty restaurant Casa Sante.

Growing up on a diet of Goa fish curry that familiar taste of *kokum* (part of the mangrove family) assails the senses but I learn that other souring agents such as *tamarind*, *tobdy* *vinegar*, fresh raw mangoes, dried raw mangoes, lime and *himbi* (*curry* *worrel*) are equally popular. *Kokum* and *tamarind* are sea-



## NADAN CHEMEEN KARI

Country-style Kerala Prawn Curry

Serves 2

- 500 gms medium-sized prawns
- 1 tsp. red chilli powder
- 1 tsp. coriander powder
- 3 green chillies, split
- 8 shallots, chopped
- 1 potato, cubed (Kodampuli, kept into pieces)
- 3 onion, chopped
- 1.75 tsp. turmeric powder
- 1/4 medium-sized fresh coconut, grated
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 tbs. curry leaves
- 1 1/4 tbs oil

● Wash, drain and shell prawns.

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