

A rustic wooden bowl filled with several tamarind pods, some whole and some partially open, resting on a dark, weathered wooden surface. The pods are light brown and elongated.

A TASTE FOR...

TAMARIND

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A single tamarind pod lies horizontally on the wooden surface. The light-colored, textured husk is partially peeled back, revealing the dark brown, segmented pulp inside. To the right of the pod, there are several pieces of the husk that have been removed, and a small, empty husk shell.

Kavita Favelle enlists the help of Good Things guest editor alumnus Alfred Prasad to sharpen your appreciation of this integral Asian flavour

It was a surprise to learn that the tamarind tree is native to Africa, so strongly is it associated with India, where it has been cultivated for several thousand years; indeed, the word itself comes from the Arabic ‘tamar hindi’ – ‘Indian date’. Today, India is the world’s largest producer of tamarind, much of which is consumed within the subcontinent.

A member of the legume family, this long-lived tree grows well in subtropical and semi-arid climates and its ability to withstand temperature extremes and varying rainfall levels makes it enviably hardy and easy to grow.

Beautiful flowers with red-veined, pale yellow petals germinate to create pod-like fruits that hang from the branches like little sausages. Turning from green when young to beige-brown, the shells change from soft to hard as the fruits mature. Harvested when young, the pulpy flesh inside is creamy white and super-sour – the sugars develop as the fruits ripen, turning the pulp dark brown and providing the characteristic sweet-and-sour tang.

Although the seeds are edible and can be eaten raw or cooked, it’s most commonly the pulp that is harvested and sold fresh or processed and used as an ingredient. Whereas many Asian cuisines use ripe tamarind pulp, the Thais also celebrate the unripe fruit, emphasising its acute acidity by pickling or balancing it out with sugar, salt, shrimp sauce, and chilli.

Although ripe tamarind pods are sold whole, the pulp is often extracted, dried and compressed into blocks, or processed into paste or concentrate. The pulp blocks are the most economical way to buy tamarind but need elbow grease to transform them from a fibrous sticky mass to rich tamarind sauce, which can be reduced over heat to a thick paste.

British-Burmese food writer MiMi Aye speaks of two Burmese dishes in which tamarind is essential – let thok son, a hand-tossed rainbow salad of noodles, potatoes, and rice with dried shrimp, peanuts, and vegetables dressed with tamarind, shrimp, and fish sauce; and na-byan kyaw - tofu and chickpea fritters which are always served with a spicy tamarind dip.

Alfred Prasad, formerly Director of Cuisine for the Tamarind Collection of restaurants and Good Things’ March Guest Editor, loves ‘the truly distinct and delicious taste of tamarind - a wonderful sweet, sour and tangy element that adds an extra dimension’ to both traditional Indian dishes and more modern cooking.

In India, tamarind has historically been used as a souring agent, a preservative and medicinally. Alfred recalls how

ALFRED PRASAD’S RECIPE FOR TAMARIND GRANITA

• **SERVES: 6**

INGREDIENTS

- 250g Demerara sugar
- 750ml water
- 60ml tamarind concentrate (OR 60g block)
- tamarind soaked in 100ml warm water for 15 minutes, mashed and strained, pulp discarded)
- 1 tsp aged balsamic (or 1 tbsp regular balsamic)
- ¼ tsp kala namak (sulphurous black salt, available from Indian grocers), optional

METHOD

Warm sugar and water in a saucepan set over low heat, until the sugar dissolves. Set aside to cool, then add the tamarind, balsamic vinegar and black salt. Mix well and pour into a non-stick metal baking tray. Freeze for 25-30 minutes, or until icy around edges.

Using a fork, stir the icy edges into the middle of the tray. Repeat the freezing and forking process twice (or thrice if required), stirring the edges into the centre each time. When ready to serve, portion into bowls with an ice cream scoop, and serve.

• *Recipe courtesy of Alfred Prasad, chef and Good Things Guest Editor alumnus alfredprasad.com*

his grandmother would apply a poultice of fermented tamarind to his forehead to break a fever; it is also believed to reduce cholesterol and retard kidney stone formation. A microbiological study in 2006 confirmed its antibacterial properties. In an era before refrigeration, home cooks found other ways to make food last. Alfred remembers his grandmother’s fish curry, pungent with tamarind and cooked fairly ‘dry’, would easily keep for a week or more – the fish almost pickled by the sugar and acidity of the tamarind.

In South India, tamarind features in rasam (a spiced soup) and sambar (a lentil and vegetable stew). In the North it is integral to the smooth, ketchup-like imli chutney – sweetened with dates and jaggery and flavoured with spices – that is served with a wide range of snack-like ‘chaat’ dishes such as bhel poori and papri chaat. It’s also wonderful with hot, freshly-fried pakoras or samosas. That same Imli chutney is the inspiration for British favourites, Worcestershire sauce and brown sauce, as well as American steak and Japanese tonkatsu sauce.

Of course, tamarind need not be restricted to traditional Asian recipes. Alfred is enthusiastic about tamarind’s place in the pantry, suggesting that its sweet-sour tang makes it a great substitute for balsamic vinegar – try it in salad dressings with olive oil, salt, and pepper; as a glaze for grilled pork or duck; or toss fried calamari with tamarind, chilli flakes, and garlic. Enjoy a drink of young, fresh tamarind mixed with ginger and raw mango, or relish the sweet-tart flavour in a refreshing granita (*see recipe*). 