

Going nuts over coconut

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TOPICS

lifestyle and leisure

food and dining
(general)

The Americans have discovered coconut oil. Indians are going gaga over olive oil. What is going on? In a topsy-turvy universe the North American laces cornflakes with coconut oil while the Malayali seasons avial with olive oil. I can't bear it. The absurdity is killing me. Ayyayyo, why did you stope using cockinet oayil, saarey? Put on head, cooling effect, put in ishtu, taste perfect. Forget choleste-role-and-ole. Simb-ly enjoy.

Going nuts, I am. I plead temporary insanity caused by exposure to cyber-babble. Coconut oil checks Alzheimer's! Coconut oil cures diabetes! Coconut oil can prevent cancer! Have you been listening to the online hosannas sung in adoration of this holy seed? For the last couple of years the Net worth of coconut oil has been going up. The key word in the discourse is ketones, which retards the progress of degenerative brain diseases. I saw a recent You-Tube video clip of a TV anchor on a US channel announcing that she eats coconut oil every day. Eats? No doubt the oil solidifies in their temperature-controlled homes. Wonder how long this worship will last. In gastronomic terrain, all it takes is a trickle of preliminary research to attract a gush of devotees. But 'scientifically proven facts' have a way of flipping over like a chapathi on the tawa — a double-fried egg would be a more apt simile since the egg has been alternately vilified and deified. Research has played the 'vilify deify' game with practically every edible ingredient we love until we don't know who or what to believe anymore.

Take coconut oil, the darling of the Malayali masses. It is an acquired taste; the standard complaint about Kerala's cuisine from non-natives has always been "But you put coconut oil in everything." When the rate of cardiac ailments in Kerala began to escalate, nobody stopped to think, "Hmm, could it have something to do with a change in diet and lifestyle?" Instead they pounced on innocent 'cockinet oayil', accusing it of harbouring the terrorist cholesterol. It turned out that cholesterol came in two packages: good and bad. Nevertheless our traditional cooking medium was judged guilty and started serving a life sentence close to three decades ago. There was a wholesale shift to vegetable oils. Of late, expensive imported olive oil has been invading Indian kitchens, while the west — irony of ironies — is lapping up coconut oil. Its numerous medical benefits, listed on a US-based site, included this one, which made me gasp: "Coconut oil prevents heart diseases!"

It makes sound sense to stick to what your ancestors have been eating for centuries instead of snapping up every fad caught in the web of social media. Last week a Bengali friend told me that some of her fellow natives were substituting olive oil for mustard oil in macher jhol. Before long we might hear that Punjabis have given up roti because "gluten bad for health-ji". The 'healthy eating' mania is getting completely out of hand. I fervently wish I could take every buzzword — Omega 3, Omega 6, anti-oxidants, gluten-free, low-carb, the whole jing-bang lot — and dump them in one of Bengaluru's toxic lakes where they'd suffocate to death in an instant. Oil, any oil, is a dirty word today. The latest trend is oil-free cooking, using something called an air-fryer. Now, the word 'fry' means 'to cook in oil', so how can you fry sans oil? To fry in air sounds nonsensical. Rather call it an air-drier. Except that the thought of eating dried chicken or dried potato may not get your juices flowing.

Although I am an adventurous eater-outer, when it comes to eating in I inevitably revert to the naati/naadan/native mode. The current publicity for coconut oil puts me in a reminiscent mood. Remember those primary school lessons on 'useful' flora and fauna, how everything in our environment was viewed from a utilitarian angle? The cow is a useful animal, it gives us milk and meat, we get leather from its skin, glue from its horns and hooves, fertiliser from dung, and so on. But I suspect that "The coconut palm is a useful tree" figured exclusively in Kerala textbooks. Many of its uses would puzzle the modern young reader. Its trunk was used as pillars when building houses, its fronds as thatch for roof and walls. The spine of its leaves yielded broomsticks; husk, coir; shell, fuel; flowers, toddy — oops, that last item wasn't taught in school.

Kerala, the land of coconuts, teashops, red boiled rice — and nenthra, source of banana chips. On a train journey years ago I shared the compartment with a contingent of Bangalore schoolchildren headed for a sports meet. They were chaperoned by three female teachers and a 'Sir' who was obviously their coach. PT-Sir hailed from the land of P.T. Usha because he had what one of my university juniors memorably called a "palm-fringed accent". At one point he announced in ringing tones — and I quote — "At six o'clock we can haav bo-yild ben-ana." I'm convinced that nenthra pazham was the singular item on which he pinned all his hopes of victory for his team. And why not? We Mallus swear by it. We steam it, we shallow-fry it, we coat it in batter and dunk it in hot oil. Hot coconut oil, of course.

(Send your feedback to ckmeena@gmail.com)