

Of Math and the Monkey God

CENTUM IS LATIN FOR HUNDRED. I don't know if Italians use the word anymore, but some people in India still do. To them, centum is what a smart kid would score on a math test. In the middle-class neighborhood where I grew up, many adults seemed to believe that math scores were a perfectly good indicator—indeed, the only indicator—of a child's IQ, the equivalent of a Mensa rating. Alas, my scores in arithmetic could never be rounded off to that three-digit number. But my mother, the incurable optimist, hoped that someday I would bring back a report card with one hundred marks in her favorite subject. To this end, she enlisted the help of the deity Hanuman, the monkey god, promising him a garland of savory, deep-fried snacks called *vadais* if I ever got that perfect score. Not 100 *vadais*, but 108, because multiples of twelve are considered auspicious.

Making a food offering to the gods on the fulfillment of a wish is an old Hindu tradition. In a pantheon where powerful deities generously share space with minor gods, it is hard to pick just the right candidate to honor. The most obvious choice would have been Saraswathi, Goddess of Learning, but she appears serene, distant, and, frankly, immune to blandishments. Another would be Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, because academic excellence must translate into a well-paying job—at least that is the fond hope—but few want to appear openly materialistic. Picking the monkey god was a masterstroke on my mother's part, because he held special emotional appeal for kids. (In his first memoir President Obama recalls being fascinated by tales of Hanuman during his childhood in Indonesia.)

In our neighborhood temple a small sanctum by the cannonball tree housed the icon of Hanuman. Chanting sacred mantras, the priest would emerge from this dimly lit room to set an antique crown on the gathered devotees' heads one by one. When it was my turn, I bowed deeply and held out my right palm for sprigs of holy basil. This coronation was brief but unrushed; I chewed on the leaves with gusto. For Hanuman, I would work harder at anything. Besides the basil, there was also the possibility of being

handed a crisp *vadai* if a devotee had commissioned an offering that day. (Whoever decided that Hanuman likes this *vadai* better than any other food is a question for culinary historians.)

There are different kinds of *vadais*, depending on the *dal*—the lentils—used to make them. No feast in my home was complete without some kind of *vadai* as a side dish. The simplest, *medhu vadai*, is made from ivory-colored *urad dal*; it emerges from the oil donut-shaped and fluffy. When dunked in a piquant lentil-based sauce, *medhu vadai* transforms into *sambar vadai* for an evening snack; and a day-old batch immersed in beaten yogurt turns into *thayir vadai*. By contrast, *masala vadai*, made from a blend of various lentils, is inherently complex. When the variegated batter is patted into round cushions and slid gently into bubbling oil, the resultant snack needs no help from sauces or chutneys. Literally meaning “spice,” *masala* also refers to anything used to spice things up, to add variety. Apart from the prescribed curry leaves, cooks add chopped spinach, shredded cabbage, or marinated shrimp to the mix. “These days, anything goes,” purists say disparagingly.

The classical *vadai* offered to Hanuman seems austere in comparison. It has no accompanying dip. This crisp, pared-down lentil donut, flecked with bits of black pepper, doesn't even have a name, but it cannot be mistaken for any other. The task of making these offerings is entrusted to the temple kitchen. With two days' advance notice, the priest can have a batch of these savory donuts ready for the ritual, strung on cotton twine (they are always made to order). During the brief ceremony one or more garlands of specially ordered *vadais* adorn the idol. At our temple the idol of Hanuman is of average size, so fifty-one, seventy-one, or 108 *vadais* (auspicious numbers all) are strung on each garland. At larger temples, with larger idols, the *vadais* can number in the hundreds, and a stepladder must be used to array them. After the ceremony the donor distributes some of the *vadais* to the devotees gathered by the sanctum; the rest are brought home. Because of their low moisture



content, these *vadais* stay fresh for up to a week—ample time to visit friends, neighbors, and relatives to give them a share of the blessed offering. Typically, those whose prayers have been answered by Hanuman are a generous lot.

As a child, I partook of a fair number of these *vadais*, exulting in the unexpected treat each time. At school, subjects other than mathematics and the allied sciences were treated like fillers in the curriculum. I moved from algebra to advanced calculus, putting in extra effort to compensate for my lack of natural talent. Long after everyone in the household had gone to bed I would sit up working on problems. But the centum continued to elude me. Most schoolchildren in India work hard to ace math tests, which

Above: A garland of vadais in offering to Hanuman.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAYBEE © 2009

could explain the abundance of programmers, engineers, and accountants in the country's crowded cities. Growing up in that geek-worshipping society, it was hard for me to accept that I wouldn't be part of that feted group. Yet, when I got the chance to go abroad at age twenty-one, away from family and all the well-meaning adults I knew, I dithered. "At least you won't be guilty of contributing to the brain drain if you leave," my brother pointed out helpfully.

In America, my new home, I am free to identify my scholarly passions and pursue them without seeking societal

validation. Because my mother wanted me to practice math instead of helping her in the kitchen, I remain a limited cook, as some culinary techniques can't be picked up even from the best of cookbooks. Immigration, then, has a small downside for me. Like others from distant lands, I am now cut off from the food of my ancestors that has been perfected over centuries. Few Indian restaurants in the United States feature any kind of *vadai* on their menus, and the peppery version offered to Hanuman is unheard of here.

Such gustatory trifles seem hardly worth mentioning in view of the freedom I have gained—just knowing that I don't have to disclose my test scores, or explain life choices, to every passing acquaintance is liberating. But sometimes I am overtaken by culinary nostalgia, and I recall the tastes and textures of certain foods with fondness. During one such flashback I realized that the classic *vadai*

offered to Hanuman could hold its own anywhere on sheer gastronomic merit. Sturdier than any tortilla or pita chip, it can be nicely paired with a simple dip to enhance its complexity. The idea of adapting this traditional offering into an appetizer grabbed hold of my imagination. On a future trip to my hometown, Chennai, perhaps I could retrieve the authentic recipe from the dark interior of the temple kitchen and re-create the excellent lentil donuts here in America.

But that reverie soon passes. Who am I kidding? To me, this delicacy will always be redolent of centums not scored, expectations not met. I am glad I don't have to bite into one anymore. 🍷