



A sweet melange of *STAPLES*

Payasam, in several variants, is a creamy rice pudding with milk, jaggery and lentils, and a delicacy that no meal in South India is complete without.

Words: MINI RIBEIRO

The word payasam, is derived from Peeyusham, meaning nectar or ambrosia. Many also believe it emanates from the Sanskrit word, 'payas' or milk. Payasam has several variants across the southern states, albeit with minor variations and is generally served on festivals and weddings, as part of the meal. Payasam is usually eaten after the rasam rice course, while rice with buttermilk forms the last item of the meal. Rice, lentils, sugar or jaggery and milk or coconut milk, are the key ingredients.

Rice in Various Forms

Rice being the staple in southern states, is extensively used in payasams too. In fact, payasams with rice are the most popular.

Payasam or Pradhaman forms an integral part of the Kerala feast (sadya), where it is served and relished from the banana leaf directly, instead of cups. According to Chef Ramesh Kukreti, Head Chef, Courtyard by Marriott, Kochi, "Payasam is a popular dessert and an integral part of the Sadya. Milk, nuts, fruits and aromatic spices like saffron, kewra, cardamom and tulsi are combined to prepare different varieties. Payasam is also distributed as Prasadam in many temples."

Ada pradhaman in Kerala, is made of flat ground rice, coconut milk and jaggery. Pradhaman is a more elaborate variant of the payasam with a few more ingredients. Ada pradhaman is usually prepared for the festivals of Vishu and Onam.

Traditionally for making ada or rice flakes, a dough is made of rice flour and coconut oil, or soaked rice is ground to a paste. This is then flattened on a banana leaf and steamed. It is then cooled and cut into small pieces. The ada is then cooked with coconut milk and jaggery in an uruli or copper vessel, till thick.

Palada payasam is another common dessert here, made with milk and rice flakes where the milk is condensed slowly through fire and evaporation. The proportion of rice to milk has to be perfect. There should be enough rice for volume, but it must not overpower the milk.

Red aval or flattened rice is combined with milk and sugar to make the Aval payasam for Krishna Janmasthami and is considered healthier.



Above: Parippu Payasam; Below: Rice pudding

Jaggery or molasses is the most common sweetening ingredient, although sugar too is used at times. Nei paysam, or the cloyingly sweet payasam with copious amounts of ghee is also prepared on feasts like Vishu. But unlike the Ada Payasam, this payasam does not make use of milk at all.

Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka too, payasam is prepared on special occasions, festivals and weddings, but perhaps the varieties are not as many as in Kerala.



PAYASAM IS MOSTLY SERVED TO TASTE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MEAL AND AT THE END, POURED DIRECTLY OVER THE BANANA LEAF OR IN A CUP

In Karnataka, sannakki, a type of tiny rice grains are used for payasam. Sarnyada Adya is a special payasam made with rice paste pearls or boondi, in North Karnataka.

The Arisi Thengai Payasam is a traditional payasam of Tamil Nadu, served in a Virundhu Sappadu or a festival meal on a banana leaf. Poondu Payasam made with garlic pods, milk, sugar, saffron strands and roasted

semolina, is a healthy payasam, generally given to women after delivery to keep them warm and strengthen their immunity.

Executive Chef Sujan Mukherjee, Taj Coromandel, Chennai, explains, "Payasam is mostly served to taste at the beginning of the meal and at the end of the meal poured directly over the banana leaf or in a cup. Crushing the poppadum and mixing the payasam with a ripe banana is a delicacy being relished for ages in Tamil Nadu."

Annam Payasam or Paramannam, is a legendary offering to the Gods in Andhra Pradesh, prepared in almost every home on festivals. After God partakes of the offering, the naivedyam (offering) becomes prasadam and is distributed.

Paravannam is a simple rice pudding or payasam also from Andhra Pradesh, where

QUICK BITES



Khas Khas or poppy seeds payasam is usually made in summer as the poppy seeds act as a coolant and protect the body from heat.



Palm jaggery is extremely beneficial for health. Rich in minerals and nutrients, it cleanses the system, boosts energy and more.

a lot of rice is used and the milk is not reduced. One can make this with jaggery too and the payasam is then called Bellam Paramannam.

Pal Payasam on the other hand, has very little rice and a lot of milk which is boiled till it is reduced.

Lentils in Payasam

Interestingly, lentils too, form the base of several payasams in South India. Moong dal and Bengal gram or chana dal are the most commonly preferred ones. Only in the Kadala Payasam, the black gram dal is used.

Executive Chef, Sujan Mukherjee of Taj Coromandel Chennai, informs, "Hesarubele payasa and kadla bele payasa are jaggery and milk based payasams, made with green gram and Bengal gram."

Kadalai parippu or the Bengal gram (chana dal) payasam with jaggery and coconut milk is Kerala's speciality. Sometimes, instead of rice, sabudana or sago is combined with the chana dal to make a payasam. In Tamil Nadu, Senaga Pappu Gasagasala Payasam is made using chana dal.

Split yellow moong dal, or cheru parippu in Kerala and Pasi parippu in Tamil Nadu, is one of the most popular lentils used in payasams. Pasi parippu payasam, the jaggery-based payasam, made with lentils and milk, is usually prepared as a sweet dish for festivals in Tamil Nadu, especially during Navratri. Since jaggery is used in this payasam, it is lighter than the ones made with rice and sugar.



Topmost: Vermicelli payasam; Above: Kheer made with lentils

Did You Know?

Kewra is an extract distilled from the flower of the Pandanus plant. It is mainly used to flavour certain dishes in the Indian subcontinent, be it sweet or savoury.





Above: Gouthambu Payasam at Courtyard by Marriott, Kochi

Other Variations

Different types of starch such as vermicelli, sago or tapioca, often replace the rice in some payasams to lend the requisite thickness and form the base.

According to Chef Mukherjee, Godhi huggi made with broken or cracked wheat and jaggery from the north of Karnataka and Gasagase payasa made with poppy seeds, are two unique payasams.

There are different ways of making Gasagase Payasa. The rice and poppy seeds can be soaked or can be roasted and powdered.

Goduma Ravva payasam, made with cracked wheat and jaggery, is a typical dish eaten when fasting, while Shavige payasa or vermicelli payasam is equally popular in Karnataka during festivals.

Fruits too are extensively used in these sweet dishes. In Kerala, there are several different kinds of payasam that are prepared from a wide variety of local fruits. Chakka pradhama payasam is made of jackfruit pulp, Elaneer payasam, from tender

coconut and apart from that, bananas, apples and pineapples are typical choices for payasams. Dates too are often used to enrich the flavours.

Mildly flavoured, brimming with fruits and milk, Pazhap Payasam is made on festivals in the Chettinad region of Tamil Nadu, as is the Chettinad Puri Paysam, where puris made with wheat flour and turmeric dough are soaked in a semolina, milk and sugar payasam.

Most payasams can be served chilled or warm according to one's personal preference. No matter how it is consumed, a payasam can never be omitted from a meal in South India. ¹⁷

DIFFERENT TYPES OF STARCH SUCH AS VERMICELLI, SAGO OR TAPIOCA OFTEN REPLACE THE RICE TO LEND THE REQUISITE THICKNESS & FORM THE BASE