

JACK of all FRUITS

(1)

It's good to know that my old friend the jackfruit is finally coming into its own. Apparently it is now much in demand in western countries, a fashionable substitute for meat fillings for burgers, sandwiches, pies etc., with one enthusiast even calling it "mutton hanging from a tree".

Here in India we have always appreciated a good jackfruit curry, or even better, a jackfruit pickle. I'm a pickle fiend myself, and among the 20 different pickles on my sideboard there is always a jar full of jackfruit pickle; that's why I call it an old friend. But I had no idea it tasted like mutton. The seed and the pulp have their own individual flavour.

As it grows on a tree we call it fruit, but we cook it as though it were a vegetable. And if, to some, it tastes like mutton, then perhaps some meat-eaters will become vegetarians and some vegetarians might not care for its meaty flavour!

When I was a boy, we had an old jackfruit tree growing beside the side veranda. I spent a lot of time in the trees surrounding my grandmother's bungalow, and this one was easy to climb. The others included several guava and litchi trees, lemons and grape-fruits, and of course a couple of mango trees—but these last were difficult to climb.

"Why do you spend so much time in the trees?" complained my grandmother. "Why not do something useful for a change?"

"The trees are my brothers," I would say, "I like to play with them."

And I still think of them as my brothers, although I can no longer climb trees or play in them.

Just as no two humans are exactly alike (unless they happen to be twins), so no two trees are the same. Like humans they grow from seed. They develop branches as arms and leaves like flowing hair. We give birth to children; they give birth to fruits and flowers. We shelter our young, they shelter small creatures of the forest.

But unlike us, they spring from the soil, from the land—that very land that gives us food and pasture and protection; the land that we so casually take for granted, preferring to build upon it rather than grow upon it. Where will our cattle graze when the last green spaces have gone?

"No problem", says a young friend. "We can always import our milk".

—RUSKIN BOND

(2)

First it was the drumstick, and now the world is discovering the benefits of yet another Indian superfood—the

jackfruit. Once looked down upon as a poor man's food, the fruit, which is now being hailed as the new vegan superfood, is making its way into everything from biryanis to burgers.

From the unripe pods to seeds and the ripe fruits, all forms of bumpy green fruit with a golden heart is making its way to Indian meals. Malayalis use it to make everything from vegetable dishes to payasams, for Bengalis, it is the "gaach patha" or "mutton that grows on the tree". In the West, the chewy pods are fast becoming a substitute for meat while, in India, people are using it to replace carbohydrates.

Jackfruit is high in dietary fibre, is a rich source of vitamin C, a powerful antioxidant, and is packed with phytonutrients, which may reduce the risk of many cancers.

Vitamin C helps in the absorption of iron. The fruit is also a rich source of riboflavin, which helps to heal oral ulcers, and the vitamin A in it prevents macular degeneration of the eye. It is also an important source of magnesium so it further helps in the absorption of calcium, and fights osteoporosis. It is these health benefits that people abroad are discovering. In North India, we have Kathal (jackfruit) ki biryani, as well as kormas, and kebabs made of it.

The fruit is said to be among the top food trends of 2017. This January, at the Fancy Food Show in the US, the star ingredient was jackfruit. It is used as a meat replacer in restaurants in New York and San Francisco. The young fruit is considered a good replacement for pulled pork and is served on burgers along with caramelised onion chutney. An Indian is planning to stock jackfruit chips and jams in Hot Breads stores there.

Entrepreneurs have been quick to spot the marketing potential. A Keralite gave up a flourishing career with Microsoft to launch Jackfruit365 in 2013. "I have always wondered why jackfruit doesn't feature on the menu in five-star hotels," adding that he realised it was because the fruit was 'too sticky, smelly and seasonal'. So he came up with an idea of selling freeze-dried jackfruit.

The ripe fruit can be used to make pies and panna cotta, while the unripe pods can replace meat or tofu. After Jackfruit365 became a 100% diabetic diet company, they sell only unripe fruit online. The dried, sliced jackfruit can also be powdered and the flour added to idli or dosa batter and phulkas. Studies have revealed consumption of unripe jackfruit can help fight high blood sugar level. Ripe pods are not good for diabetics. The ripe fruit has a glycemic index (GI) of 63, while the unripe pods has a GI of only 52.

—PRIYA MENON