

SECRET INGREDIENTS

# A TAMARIND TREE'S SWEET AND SOUR INHERITANCE

*My ancestor was gifted a huge orchard just outside Delhi. The fruits it produced were the taste of my childhood.*

**By Madhur Jaffrey**

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Illustration by Giacomo Bagnara



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**G**ifts from ancestors take the darndest forms. Mine included a tamarind tree, the tallest and most magnificent in our yard. My grandfather's grandfather—

a tall, corpulent Indian, prone to indulging in fine wines, fine poetry, and fine art—lived in Delhi and worked for the British. This was 1857, a time when Indians were gearing up to fight the British. The conflict that ensued would later be called India's First War of Independence. The British would call it the Indian Mutiny.

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The British put down the rebellion and my ancestor, whom Indians today might call a toady, helped. “We have eaten their salt,” he said, by which he meant that since he had been paid a salary by the British, he was honor-bound to support them. For this, the British gifted him and his family a huge orchard just north of Old Delhi's city walls, on the banks of the Yamuna River.

On a bluff that eventually became his, my grandfather built a large house for his children and grandchildren. The back porch faced the sunrise and the river. A west-facing veranda in the front looked out onto the orchard. Sunset was often a flaming red, with seemingly a million green parrots with red beaks silhouetted against it, squawking their last for the day before disappearing into the dark of the fruit trees, which included mangoes, mulberries, apricots, *falsas* (Indian sherbet berries), jujubes, and one lone, mighty tamarind.



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It was in this orchard, and the grassy lawns within it, that we, the grandchildren, toddled, played cricket, slept during the summers in mosquito-netted outdoor beds, fell in love, and married in rented tents, all the while eating the seasonal fruit offered by the trees. For us youngsters of the female persuasion, the orchard was our only inheritance, and a very temporary one, as privileged Hindu girls like us were not allowed to inherit land or bricks and mortar.

Our tamarind tree must have been seventy feet tall, though I can only guess its height since we could not see the top from even the highest roof around. Tamarind may have originated in tropical Africa, but it came into the Indian subcontinent so early on, and was used so extensively to add hints of its unique sourness, that even ancient Arab travellers referred to it as *tamar-i-hind*—the dates of India.

The fruit of the tamarind is contained within curving, slightly flattened pods, each about as long as a large man's finger, and each containing several flattened seeds. The pods are indented after each seed, demarking convenient areas where they can be broken off and shared by marauding children. Around early winter, the fruit is green and screechingly sour, but by late spring or early summer it turns into a sticky, jammy, sweet-and-sour brown pulp covered loosely by a hard, brown shell.

We children devoured the tamarind in all its forms. Sometimes the pods just fell to the ground as nature's gift. But most of the time we had to summon help to shake things up. This was nearly always Masoom Ali, our grandfather's fez-wearing driver. The garages in his charge were on the northernmost part of the property and near our beloved tamarind tree. It was Ali who seated all my brothers and male

cousins in his lap and taught them how to drive, and it was he who drove the women of the house to their parties, so loaded on their foreheads, ears, necks, arms, wrists, ankles and toes with ancient Mughal jewelry that they could be easy targets for brigands. When he was with us, we all felt safe.

The ripe tamarind, when collected in large quantities, was sent to the kitchen, where it was peeled, packed into a large sticky lump, and ensconced in a wide-mouthed ceramic jar. Whenever some paste was needed, a handful would be pulled away, soaked and strained. Dollops of this liquid amber went into dishes of eggplants or lentils or goat meat to lend them their uniquely tamarindy sourness. A much larger amount was needed to make the family's beloved Wedding Tamarind Chutney with Bananas. Lots of sugar was added, followed by roasted and ground cumin seeds, salt, chili powder, and, sometimes, even mint. At the last minute, the bananas were sliced in. We ate the chutney with everything, licking the tamarind off our fingers as we went.

I have always thought of tamarind as personally mine, my own tiny inheritance. In every spoonful, I taste an ancestral love of literature and the arts, balanced with a necessary undertow of bitterness for the self-serving ancestor who secured for us such a fruitful future. Tamarind reminds me of the sense of security and warmth that my family was lucky to be afforded, the delight of growing up with dozens of cousins, and the sense of belonging that only a large family living in an orchard can provide. ♦

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