

Curry and Clove beans: Cooking, eating, and forgotten foods in early 19th century Madras

Nathalie Cooke and Akash Muralidharan
Moderator : Victoria Dickenson



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9:00AM (EDT)

To register for this virtual event, please visit:
<https://tinyurl.com/y2r3mm9j>

The Gwillim Project, which centres around the unpublished correspondence and artwork of two sisters who lived in Madras at the beginning of the nineteenth century, brings together an international network of scholars from diverse fields in order to explore the collections from multiple perspectives. In this panel, moderated by Victoria Dickenson, Nathalie Cooke traces Elizabeth Gwillim's encounters with the foods and foodways of Madras. Akash Muralidharan explores culinary shifts over time, tracing now forgotten elements of Tamil Nadu's cuisine.

Nathalie Cooke is Professor and Associate Dean of ROAAR (Rare & Special Collections, Osler, Art and Archives), where the Gwillim drawings are held. Cooke's publications focus on the shaping of literary and culinary taste in Canada, England and the United States. Her current project scrutinizes the relationship between food and cryptic communication practices, including riddle dinners, conundrum suppers and enigmatical bills of fare. She was born in Madras and spent childhood years in Kerala.

Akash Muralidharan is an Architect and Food designer from Chennai, India. Currently, he works with The Center for Genomic Gastronomy as a Researcher and Designer. He loves food and is keen on understanding its impact on culture. Akash aims to explore Food, Architecture, and its cultural background as a creative process and come up with innovative solutions for future scenarios.

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Nathalie Cooke "There are as many sorts of mango as of apples": Culinary Adaptation in Madras, 1801-1807

Through exploration of letters of Elizabeth Gwillim and her sister Mary to friends and relatives in England, Cooke will trace three stages of culinary adaptation emerging from seven years of contact with the foods and food customs of Madras. Their letters are expansive and provide a remarkably granular snapshot of life in Madras 1801-7 in a household that includes multiple servants, documenting new foods (such as the wondrous mango), as well as those particularly difficult to obtain (walnuts, vinegar) and prized (sweetmeats). That Elizabeth and Judge Gwillim are adventurous eaters, and especially in the earlier years, attending various feasts and celebrations, means that her letters contain rich information about the foodways and ceremonial practices of different cultural communities. Elizabeth is attuned to and carefully documents many nuances of class distinction that impact food selection and sharing. She also understands that India's strict codes of propriety also extend to her. Despite her repeated requests, for example, her servants flatly refuse to prepare a 'country hare' for a supper with guests, offering eventually to provide the much more expensive rabbit, more befitting their memsahib's station.

Akash Muralidharan, Forgotten vegetables and dishes of south India

Akash began the "Cook and See" 100 days challenge on Instagram as an investigation process attempting to trace the origin and usage of vegetables that have gone missing from the kitchens of the South Indian region. He took this forward by preparing dishes with underused traditional vegetables for 100 days to learn more about them and gain insight on how to bring them back to our plates. 'Samaithu Paar' written by S. Meenakshi Ammal, was one of his biggest sources to find such vegetables and recipes that have been forgotten in recent times. The book was first published in 1951, about 60 years ago, and is a very important document not just for safeguarding recipes but to also understand the culinary scene of Tamil Nadu during the 1950s. Far before cookbooks, the letters written by the Gwillim sisters serve as further proof to the existence and usage of these vegetables through their efforts in documenting the cooking practices that they encountered here, the native vegetables and their tastes, the vegetables that the British brought with them and more. In one of the letters written by Betty to her mother, she lists all her favorite native vegetables including yams, breadfruit, broad beans, and others. Along with Samaithu Par, the letters between the sisters and their family help us understand the culinary landscape of Madras in the past, and this is integral to the story of why these vegetables have gone missing from our diets