

SHOBA NARAYAN

DOSA DO AND DOSA DON'T

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The worst *dosa* I ever ate was at the Hampton Chutney Company in Amagansett, on Long Island, some 15 years ago. I was arguing with my best friend, Jennifer, and I'd like to think it was about something important like nuclear nonproliferation, but it was probably over a totally mundane matter like where we would go for dinner. Jennifer stopped listening by the time we reached the Amagansett Square mall. Guessing correctly that hunger pangs were at least partly responsible for my shrillness, she stalked off in search of sustenance. I lay down on the cool grass and stretched. "Here, have a *dosa*," said Jennifer, handing me a wrap. As peacemaking gestures go, this was right on. Jennifer knew I loved *dosas*. It is hard for anyone who grew up in India not to. I nodded in acknowledgment, bit into the *dosa*, and gagged on an assault by roasted butternut squash, roasted beets, and goat cheese, delivered in rapid succession. Now, there are many places where roasted butternut squash would taste sublime, but inside a *dosa* is not one of them. I tried Jennifer's *dosa*. Inside was an equally weird combination of grilled portobello mushrooms, roasted onions, spinach, and goat cheese. These weren't *dosas*.

Dosas are commonly described as South Indian crepes, but the description doesn't do them justice. It is true that they are round like crepes, but *dosas* are savory. The batter is different. In South India, where I come from, *dosas* are almost a religion. We have them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Most households prepare and store a big pot of *dosa* batter as insurance against unexpected guests. When all else fails, the sentiment goes, there is always the *dosa*. The nice thing about *dosas* as opposed to their cousin, *idli* (steamed dumplings), is that the batter is fairly foolproof and easy to prepare. The traditional recipe calls for one part *urad dal* (white lentils) to two parts rice. You soak the *dal* and rice separately for a few hours before grinding them together along with salt. The idea of adding things like tuna and spinach to a *dosa* probably grew out of the *masala dosa*, which originated in the nearby princely town of Mysore. But even these prodigal *dosas* allow only two other ingredients: potato and onion or, for a true Mysore *masala dosa*, potato and a smear of red sauce, which imparts a distinctive fiery taste. There is also a *benne masala dosa* (or butter roast), served with only a dollop of butter on top—pure comfort food when you don't want to go spicy. To add to the confusion, *rava dosa* is another variety, made with semolina instead of lentils. As a student in America, my dorm room always had two things: a bag of rice flour and a box of farina (or cream of wheat). Whenever hunger pangs hit me at midnight, I would mix equal quantities of both with a pinch of salt and just enough water to make *dosas* in my tiny skillet. If I had onions or green chiles, I would throw them in. A good *dosa* has to be thin and even: golden brown and crisp on the outside and soft inside. The skillet has to be coated with sesame oil to impart its slightly nutty flavor to the *dosa*. Mostly, I cooked the *dosas* with olive oil since sesame oil was hard to get in South Hadley, Massachusetts, in the late '80s.

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