



SHOBA NARAYAN

GRAINS OF TRADITION

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In India, where I grew up, rice gains mystical—even mythological—proportions. It is the first food that we Indians eat and often our last. My grandfather passed away after swallowing a spool full of rice gruel, or *kanji*, as we call it. I honor my ancestors by offering rice balls speckled with black sesame seeds to crows (who are believed to carry the souls of the deceased). Rice coated with turmeric is sprinkled on newlyweds as a confetti-like blessing; cooked rice with a dollop of ghee is offered to gods as *prasad* before a meal. In my house, rice was a healing potion, used to cure everything from an upset stomach to a fever.

Pongal is a popular South Indian dish; it is also the spring harvest festival. A brimming terracotta pot of just-cooked rice is decorated with fresh turmeric and sugarcane stalks, betel leaves, and dandelion flowers. Traditionally, two kinds of *pongali*—sweet and savory—are served. These simple, nutritious one-pot meals are often the first recipe taught to Indian girls. My mother, fearing that I would ruin our family's reputation by starving my husband, taught me to make *pongali* on the eve of my wedding.

Few things are as meditative as cooking a bubbling pot of rice. As a child, I watched my grandmother wake up at dawn and soak some rice before going for her bath. It was only after her post-bath purification that she would light the ghee-lamp and begin cooking.

My family cooked rice in a large brass pot using a method that was more akin to cooking pasta than rice. The rice was completely submerged in water and then cooked on a slow flame. My grandmother used to constantly stir it and occasionally added more water if it started sticking to the bottom of the pan. When the grains were fully bloomed (soft, not *al dente*), she would strain out the water using a muslin cloth. This rice *kanji* was used as the base for soups or diluted in water to starch cotton sarees before ironing them into crisp elegance. One trick my grandmother taught me to make the rice separate was to pour chilled water into the pot just before straining it to “surprise the grains into separating.”

TO MAKE PONGAL:

The typical ratio for *pongali* is one part yellow *moong* to two parts rice. The type of rice you use is important, as you'll want the *pongali* to have a gooey, oatmeal-like texture. (Try jasmine rice, but any Japanese or Chinese sticky-rice varieties will work.)

Dry-roast the *moong dal* in a pan for a few minutes, then mix (by hand) the *moong dal* with rice in a pressure cooker. Add water generously. Rice typically requires a 1:2 ratio of rice to water, whereas *pongali* requires a 1:3 ratio of ingredients to water. I suggest starting with five cups of water. Add salt to taste, and cook until *pongali* is soft and glutinous. Add the remaining cup of water if necessary, and stir until thick.

While *pongali* is cooking, fry a handful of broken cashews in a dollop of ghee. Using a mortar and pestle, coarsely pound about ten black peppercorns. In a small pan, add a dollop of ghee and wait until hot. Then add cumin seeds, ground peppercorns and cashews. Add mixture to rice. (In Northern India, many families add grated carrots, beans, potatoes, cabbage and other vegetables as well.)

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