

My Family's Grinding Stone: Jewish Cooking in Ahmedabad

Esther David November 22, 2021



The author's family photo with her great-grandfather, great-grandmother, grandfather, grandmother, and others. Courtesy of the author.

As the year ends I light candles to celebrate Hanukkah and feast upon fried samosas and potato cutlets at the Magen Abraham Synagogue of Ahmedabad. I look back and wonder how my large joint family slowly disintegrated,

though we used to live together in an old house in the walled city of Ahmedabad, India. Throughout the years many elders left for their heavenly abode, while others immigrated to Israel, Canada, England, Australia, and the US. In a similar manner, I left Ahmedabad many times but kept returning and became a part of the community of the last few Jews of Ahmedabad, meeting often and breaking bread together at the synagogue. There are one-hundred-forty Jews in Ahmedabad and we celebrate festivals together. We are like one big family.

My ancestors lived in Ahmedabad for almost five generations. Later in my life, I had the responsibility of disposing of their belongings. In this process, I have minimized my own possessions. It pains me to write that when I gave away the last object from my kitchen, it was one of the hardest moments of my life. I had to, as there was no place for it.

It was precious, even if it was a slab of stone. It had the touch of all the women of my family inscribed on it. It was a grinding stone with a pestle, which was always kept on the floor or on the large kitchen platform. All masalas and chutneys were ground on it. The pressure of the human hand on the ingredients was essential to getting the right texture for the paste; ginger, garlic, green chilis or dry red chilis, grated coconut, coriander, cumin seeds, and coriander leaves were ground together so that they could be sauteed with sliced onions and put in a casserole. When black pepper curry was made the ingredients varied and one needed the special skill of grinding roasted and

peeled onions, ginger, garlic, and peppercorns together.

This elaborate process of grinding masala needed hands of steel and a continuous semi-circular movement to prepare a smooth paste. It was an intricate part of cooking curries and making chutneys. This chore was assigned to the cook, or her help, and if the women were not satisfied with the end-result, often they hitched up their saris, sat down on a wooden stool, and ground the paste themselves. As lunch and dinner preparations started mid-morning, it was not uncommon to see the women standing over the maid to check the paste, as she sat hunched on the floor grinding masala.

Our grinding stone was more than a hundred years old and had chisel marks on the surface, so that the ingredients could be ground into a smooth paste. But it was no longer rough, as stone artisans were not easily available to roughen the surface.

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The stone was a precious memento of the past, but I could no longer accommodate it in my apartment. I even tried to use it as a pedestal to keep some of my potted plants on. I was heartbroken and gave it to our old driver, as he said his wife needed a grinding stone. So, it went to their home. Soon after, I bought an electric mixer-grinder to process masalas in a few minutes, but I was never satisfied. I was sure the masala never released the flavors, which it used

to from the grinding stone.

I have a fascination with grinding stones, which remind me of the Stone Age or an Egyptian sculpture of a woman grinding grain. Grinding stones come in all shapes and sizes. Ours was about fourteen inches by ten inches in length and breadth, and the pestle was a piece of cylindrical stone. This size was just right to hold it in both hands and grind the paste.

I become nostalgic about grinding stones, as they remind me of the women of my family, as they made green or red masala paste for a curry; they checked its consistency by rubbing a little paste between their fingers before it was cooked in coconut milk. Sometimes it was mixed with Tamarind extract, or strands of fragrant saffron dissolved in a tiny bowl of water. It had to have the right consistency without a speck of the elements used to make it.

Once, the casserole of curry was put on the stove pieces of chicken, fish, or meat were added and cooked in, as the house was filled with a delicious aroma.

Sometimes, even if I did not cook green, red, or black pepper curry, which were almost always served with coconut rice, their nostalgic fragrances wafted towards me. These smells touched the inner chords of my being and stayed with me.

Below find a recipe for vegetable patties and green coriander chutney. This chutney is often served with patties and

can be made on a grinding stone.

Hanukkah

Candles are lit to celebrate Hanukkah as patties, cutlets, potato pakoras, potato rolls, or samosas are served along with a variety of fried snacks.

Vegetable Patties

Ingredients

6 potatoes

1/2 cup green peas

1/4 teaspoon red chilli powder

1/2 teaspoon cumin powder

1 tablespoon chopped coriander leaves

Salt to taste

Eggs

Breadcrumbs

Refined flour

Oil

Method

Peel potatoes and shell green peas, steam-cook till done; drain, transfer into a bowl, mash; add red chilli powder, cumin powder, finely chopped coriander leaves, salt to taste and mix with oiled palms. Divide this mixture into equal portions and shape into round patties. Take another bowl, break eggs, whisk till frothy, dip each patty in egg mixture, then roll in a platter of breadcrumbs and refined flour and cover on both sides.

Heat oil in a pan; add patties, fry till both sides are golden

brown, drain and serve hot.

Optional – Add 1 small grated carrot to the mixture of mashed potatoes and peas.

Green Coriander Chutney

Ingredients

1 small bouquet fresh coriander

10 leaves fresh mint

1 (medium) green chilli

½ cup coconut (grated)

¼ teaspoon sugar

Salt

Method

Coriander and mint leaves with green chilis are cleaned, washed, finely chopped, and mixed with grated coconut, a little sugar, and salt to taste.

Make a chutney with these ingredients on a grinding stone with very little water. (Or process in a mixer.)

Variation – Add a slice of green mango or a squeeze of lime.

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