

6. COOKING POTATOES IN A POT

Jaideep Sen





It is the original Indian mummy's pre-cooked formula that made a stout-hearted home cook out of me. I elaborate my mum's preponderant instructions as follows: take the delicious bag of half-baked paratha rolls carefully out of the fridge. Then plate the bag's contents with utmost care, mouthing soft, repetitive utterances of submissive gratitude, squarely and directly on to the tray of the microwave.

This is the most critical step of the act. Place the container in the microwave, take a step back, and ponder for a moment about pushing the timer for a full minute or less. This, in a nutshell, is the summary of my imagined, accomplished self as a mummy pleasing chef. No big deal.

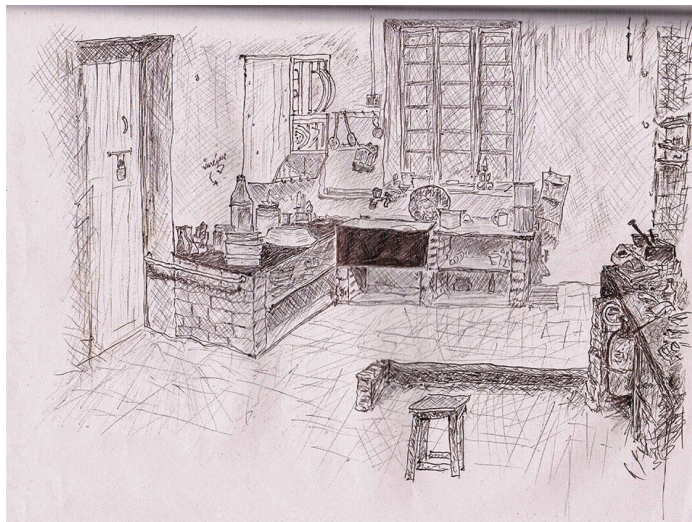
But that also happens to be how the words delicious and bags came together, for me. Basically, with rolls of fried potato, carefully wrapped in foil, and lovingly, firmly twisted at both ends. With a spicy chickpea paste that never sounded any more inventive with every serving. There is a portion of salted onions to go

with it, a staple of my mum's eat-when-you-want, it's-all-in-the-bag food packs.

The suggestion of organic potatoes and onions, meanwhile, means nothing to my mum. She is just as happy with everyday pickings off roadside vendor carts, as she was when she learned how to cook. The supermarkets, for all she cares, can keep their oversized plastic bags.

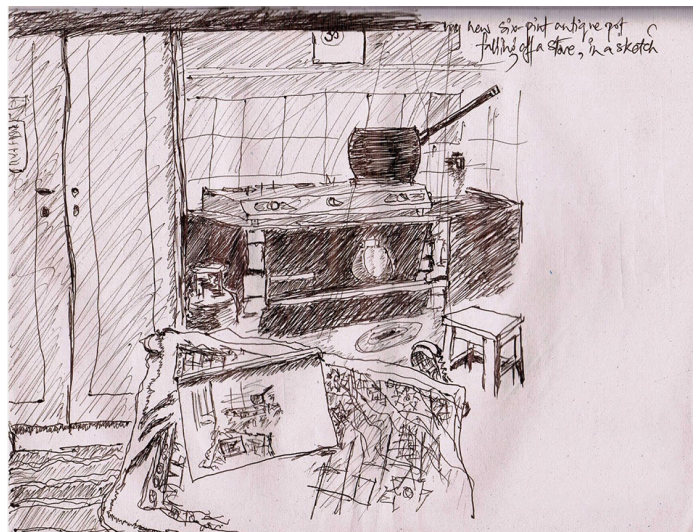
As for the illusion of me playing chef, that keeled over and fell into a pot of boiled potatoes, which I found myself stirring a few weekends ago. The instant noodles and heat-to-serve curries suddenly seemed like a delightful idea, for just that way of making my exalted culinary claims seem off-handed, and effortless.

The business of packaging ought not to have mattered too much, if only I hadn't found myself with a day job in advertising. Suddenly, sous-vide bags seem all the more bland and uninspired, with a reserved prospect of more branding real estate. To try and understand things better, I had obviously



taken to cooking potatoes in a pot, in a snug cottage on the side of a mountain.

That leads me to the kitchen of an organic farm tucked away in a valley of Kodaikanal, in southern India, one that I cannot name. It is a completely different story that the global



demand for organic foods has taken a nosedive, supposedly, over the last year or so. And that is exactly where my worldly wise host, an old-hand farming wizard rolled into a modern-day spiritual guru, was getting his belly laughs,

chomping over a daily morning-fresh tenderloin cut of steak. The laughs directed towards our discontented meat-hungry friends up north were duly held up, and toasted.

My host has been cultivating organic vegetables for a few

decades now, all the while keeping himself far removed from the media ballyhoo about healthy, green power-approved nutrient-loaded food. The fact is that most cultivators in the region have long-established chemical-free and holistic



farming methods in place - the demand for organic produce, for many of them, like my host, is a complete joke.

To put things in perspective, the organic food idea means as little to my host, as it does for my mother. Neither of them could be any less bothered about packaging, or the lifestyle entailments and politics surrounding organic produce. The crop is grown, harvested and prepared the way it is meant to be; clean and simple, with no unnecessary frills. Everyone else might do well fretting over and adjudicating about the choice of brands.

Every Sunday, Kodaikanal's farmers lay out their week's best produce on a main street at the central Seven Roads Junction. None of them appear to care outwardly about the organic concept, far less know enough to try and cash in. The produce is doubtlessly among the world's most prized.

For all my host could care about, the sales and marketing folk back in the city can eat their hearts out, coaxing persuasive catchphrases out of their PR machinery. In a sense, what allows him to sigh deep is a large-hearted, personal manner

of taking pride in being self-sustained. Never mind the dreams of truckloads of cash. For the perfectly unworried farming community of Kodaikanal, the zero-dependency factor blows everything else out of the water, comfortably settled in a mind-your-own-business sort of way.

If the packets and product logos need to be churned out, retaining design integrity towards Kodaikanal's all-natural reputation, we are likely to be surrounded by wispy clouds and pretty farmhouse clipart on our bottles, TetraPaks, tubes, crates and shipping containers.

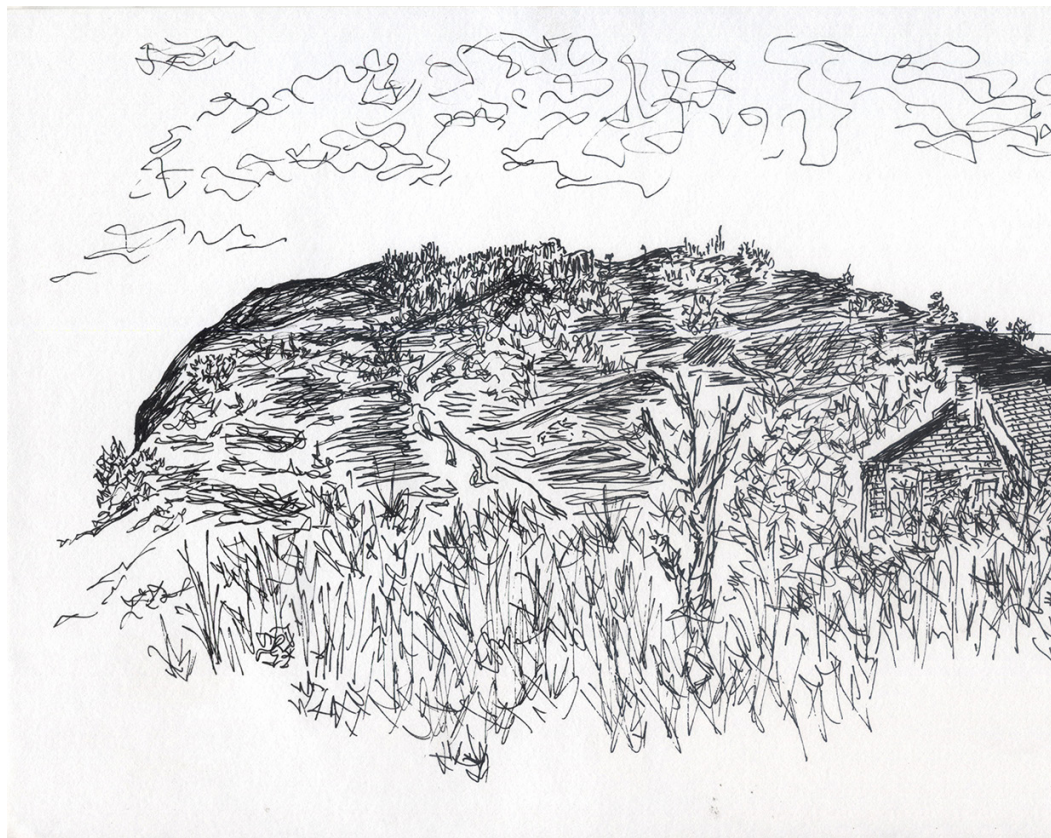
A piece of news tells me about choice packs of food, manufactured with breakthrough "ready-to-eat technology" from the Defence Food Research Laboratory (DFRL) in Mysuru in south India, being sent into outer space, and also specially delivered to the Indian Army soldiers stationed at the Siachen Glacier, in Kashmir. The packaging is designed to withstand hostile environments, says the report. The accompanying literature details various studies, conducted by the DFRL and the Central Food Technological Research Institute, about the

"very strong connection between food and mental well-being".

I couldn't have worded that last bit any better, even if the aspect of how exactly that "very strong connection" relates to food parcelling technology does beg pointed enquiry. The matter of personal taste, for some of us, has not deviated too far from the promise of mum's home-cooking. The convenience of having that option in a plastic bag at the farthest reaches of the universe, or in the heat of battle on the coldest, highest reaches of the Himalayas, is

what it's all about. The rest of it amounts to undue advertising endorsing modest, unpretentious cooking.

Our discussion boiled down to the point of natural flavours, as my host introduced me to Kodaikanal's newest offering - organic jelly candy. Practically homemade, from the hands of a few homemakers in a village named Chinnapalam, the jellies are sprouting in colourful clusters at the town's confectionary stores, and they are inexplicably addictive. The packaging is basic: clear





polythene wrappers, and paper boxes. No branding, no fanfare, no eco-friendly claims, no health clauses, nothing.

My host mulled over the larger forces at play, controlling the growth of the market, and the distribution networks, which ultimately generate minimal returns for the farmers. If anything, the whole organic foods explosion should have made these farmers richer, but that

is far from the truth. Talk about new-age techniques, alternative fertilisers and innovative agricultural processes inadvertently has my host doubling up in laughter.

Hunched over plates of the fresh Kodaikanal produce, the suggestion of ready-to-eat breakfast cereals is met with instant disdain. I find myself squirming over unverifiable marketing claims, such as of "beneficial nutrients" and purported "health benefits". The surveys and tests, both government-approved and privately conducted, can never be seen entirely in isolation of marketing intentions - a fact that I had to concede to.

Take, for instance, the sugar content in most ready-to-eat cereals - a detail that is frequently glossed over, pointed out my host. The skew in publicised material about "ideal daily nutrient intake" quantities and of "recommended fibre intake" volumes possibly works wonders in the west, enticing buyers to make seemingly well-considered decisions. Back home, however, such marketing only serves to show up a degree of ignorance among consumers.

Rampant misinformation and policy loopholes were primary factors that led many of his kind to their current situation of working entirely independently, removed from market dictates, explained my host. As he put it, they grow what they want, the way they want to, in the best way that they have known, given the benefit of centuries-old hand-me-down methods.

The submission to, and compliance with regulations, for so-called commercial appeal, often takes the life out of local cultivators. Hence, the majority of them rely on their own resources and know-how, rather than try and make their produce fit in with new industry



standards. In other words,
there's no tempting this lot with
ingratiatory price guarantees,
subsidies and tariffs.

On the ground, the conflict is not
so much about beneficial hormones
for increased output, or about
contestations between scientists,
nutritionists and self-appointed
health-food impresarios. The
controversies about the inherent
value of packaged foods and
healthful diets amount to
nothing. When it comes down to
it, it's common sense. Naturally
grown food, prepared the way
our grandmas did, trumps organic
proclamations any hour of the
day.

Getting back to my boiled
potatoes, I realised that they
didn't need any peeling. It's
one of those things about his
genuinely organically grown
potatoes, said my host, with a
broad grin; the skin is so thin,
you can cook them unpeeled. Of
course, the mash turned out
better than anything I've ever
tasted.

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Kodaikanal.

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Jaideep Sen is a writer and artist based in Bengaluru,
India, with a personal interest in soul food, hand-me-
down recipes and native methods of cooking.

