

# A SWEET CHRISTMAS

WITH SWEET TREATS ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF CHRISTMAS, HERE IS WHAT YOU CAN LOOK FORWARD TO ENJOYING DURING THE UNIVERSAL FESTIVAL THIS YEAR. BY EDWINA D'SOUZA

One of the best things about growing up in a Catholic household is looking forward to Christmas each year — it's the time for carols and cribs and midnight mass. Streets and markets look bright with Christmas stars and the Santa hats are out. No Indian festival is complete without food — and Christmas is no exception. Preparations begin weeks in advance, and sweet treats are the mainstay.

Indian Christmas sweets have largely been influenced by colonizers — Dutch, Portuguese and British. Like baking which we picked from the West, but the generous use of coconut and jaggery in our sweets is an Indian touch. Making Christmas sweets is a family affair at its least and a community affair at best. In most Catholic households, families and neighbours take turns to visit each

other's house to help in preparing Christmas sweets — baked, steamed and fried. A date is pre-decided for each household. Women and children gather during afternoons to lend a helping hand. Responsibilities are assigned — one will knead the dough, the other will roll and yet another add the filling. Conversations fluctuate from jokes to gossip.

On the day of Christmas, a tray of these sweets covered in a crochet cloth are sent to everyone in the neighbourhood, irrespective of their religion. It's a tradition called Kuswar that has continued for generations, but is on the verge of slowly dying now. The Kuswar trays are never returned empty. As a gesture of gratitude, the receiver typically adds a sweet or some sugar in the tray before sending it back. Catholics who were mourning a death



## FOOD FESTIVALS



NEUREOS

in the family are sent the Kuswar a day before Christmas eve to show their solidarity. I remember making mental notes of the Hindu families in my neighborhood that sent us sweets during Diwali, so we could in return share sweets with them during Christmas.

So what generally consisted in a plate of Kuswar? Traditionally, over 22 items made up this Christmas platter — some popular sweets and many regional ones. Here's a peek into a few of these traditional Indian sweets prepared during Christmas.

### NEUREOS

Neuros is the star of the Indian Christmas sweets platter. This classic pastry puff has been a part of several regional cuisines, albeit each giving their own sweet twist. Maharashtrians call it karanji and in the northern region of India, it is often called gujia. Shaped like a half moon crescent with a filling



KULKUL

of either coconut and jaggery or semolina, the puff is deep fried until crunchy on the outside and soft and flavoursome once you bite into it.

### KULKUL

A sister of shankarpali, kulkuls are hand-rolled sweet dough treats, also known as kidiyo in Konkani due to its worm-like shape. These are prepared with flour, eggs, butter and sugar as the base. Preparing kalkals is a labour of love, as each piece is manually hand-rolled before deep frying until crisp on the outside. They also make for great tea snacks.

### CHRISTMAS CAKE

What's Christmas without cake! Indian Christmas cakes come in many versions. From plum cakes with rum-soaked raisins and dry fruits to dense fruit cakes. My own favourite is the coconut bath which is a Goan speciality — a rich and moist coconut cake with a dash of vanilla essence and rosewater for the fragrance. Preparations for the Christmas cake often begin weeks in advance. In traditional households, the cakes are still sent to the neighbourhood bakeries to bake after neatly labelling the tray.



CHRISTMAS CAKE





PERAD



ROSE COOKIES

#### PERAD

Also called Guava cheese, Perad is a halwa-like sweet made using fresh guavas, sugar, food colour and a hint of chilli in some cases. It's a burst of flavours that melt in your mouth. Perad is a Goan classic recipe that has been passed from one generation to another. Preparation is a time-consuming affair, but good things never come easy.

#### ROSE COOKIES

Rose cookies are a favourite with kids



MARZIPAN

and adults alike. It's sweet but also savoury and crunchy. Mangloreans also call this treat kokkisan and the people of Kerala call it achhapams. These deep fried cookies are prepared from a batter of rice flour, eggs and coconut milk and dunked in hot oil using a special rose cookie mould until golden brown. Some households also sprinkle black sesame seeds on the rose cookies before serving.

#### MARZIPAN

Introduced by the Portuguese to Goa, marzipans are a heavenly concoction of almond or cashew paste with sugar and egg whites. These come in all shapes depending on how creative you feel. Edible food colour is used to give these sweets an artistic look like fruits and flowers. Marzipans are hugely popular during Christmas, with many confectionery shops selling them readymade.

#### DOCE DE GRÃO

Doce de grão or Chana doce is a Portuguese-inspired Goan recipe, where doce means sweet and grao is translated to grain. It is prepared using chickpea, coconut, sugar and cardamom until it becomes a chana dal-like fudge, which is then cut into diamond shapes and served in Christmas sweet platters. ■