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STERLING PALAVELLI GODAVARI

Andhra's delicate dessert art

A trip to Atreyapuram village in East Godavari to see first-hand how 'pootharekulu' is made

Prachi Joshi

Emerald fields, small towns, large temples—the three-hour drive from Vijayawada airport to Yelamanchili Lanka village in West Godavari passes in a blur as I doze off and on. Every time I open my eyes, I see lush paddy fields fringed by swaying palms. Fed by the Godavari, the Konaseema region of Andhra Pradesh is a rich, fertile land, and I'm excited to explore this pastoral corner far removed from bustling cities. I arrive at Sterling Palavelli Godavari, a resort set on a coconut plantation, and check in for a weekend of rest and relaxation. Being a bit hungry, I immediately raid the welcome basket in my room. A cane box contains gossamer-thin rice paper rolls stuffed with a *ghee*-drenched mixture of dry fruits and jaggery. The accompanying note tells me that the sweet is called *pootharekulu*.

In Telugu, *pootha* means coating and *reku* (*rekulu*, plural) translates to sheets, an apt description of *pootharekulu*. This is one of the most popular sweets in Andhra Pradesh and is always a part of festivals, weddings and other special occasions. So, I'm surprised to learn that *pootharekulu* is almost exclusively made in the tiny village of Atreyapuram in the East Godavari district. Since the village is just 50km from the hotel, I'm keen to see first-hand how the sweet is made. I hop into a car with a guide and we head north.

Andhra Pradesh grows many rice varieties, of which the Jaya rice is used to make *pootharekulu*. But how this rice transforms into sheets that encase the sweet is the real work of art. In Atreyapuram, my guide brings me to a shed where Varalakshmi is hunched beside an upturned pot with a plate of thin rice batter in front of her. "The rice is soaked for about an hour then pounded into a watery slurry. The seasoned clay pot is heated from below with dried twigs or fronds of coconut trees," explains my guide. I watch fascinated as Varalakshmi dips a thin cloth in the rice batter and slaps it on to the pot, all in one fluid motion. The batter forms a sheet-like layer on the pot, and in less than a minute, it turns into a crisp, paper-thin sheet that she deftly removes and places in the growing pile on hand.

The making of *pootharekulu* is a thriving cottage industry in Atreyapuram in which some 400 families and several women's self-help groups are involved. A rice paper sheet is drizzled with *ghee* and chopped nuts like cashew, almond and pistachio are added. The sheet is folded over, more *ghee* is spooned on it, followed by a generous sprinkling of powdered jaggery. It is then tightly rolled up and placed in a box, ready to be packaged. *Pootharekulu* has been produced in Atreyapuram for nearly three centuries, and in June 2023, it received the Geographical Indication (GI) tag. Apart from the traditional dry fruit and jaggery combination, it also comes in honey and date variations as well as in new-fangled ones like Horlicks, Boost, and even Oreo.

I return to my hotel to an elaborate Konaseema *thali* dishd up by the kitchen. After feasting on local delicacies like *gummadiakaya dappalam* (sweet and sour pumpkin stew) and *gongura* rice, the chef brings out dessert. In a glass bowl, the "paper sweet" rests next to a serving of *gajar halwa*, a decidedly odd combination in my opinion. Ignoring the *halwa*, I bite into the *pootharekulu* and it practically melts in my mouth. I returned home with two boxes of this unique wispy sweet, and no, I did not share.

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