

# Making Rasam by the Eye during Uncertain Times

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Nostalgia and yearning around food are exacerbated in uncertain times and abroad (Ray 2004). Conference calls with family as I cook have become an everyday affair since the onset of the pandemic. “Who will eat what you cook?” my aunt asks, as I call her in Tamil Nadu from New Jersey for a recipe of rasam.

Rasam is a tangy base and lentil stock, simmered with a mix of spices and garnished with seeds splattered in fat. The tangy base is most likely tamarind, an occasional tomato, lemon, or the rare case of tart and cultured buttermilk (which is my grandma’s quick-fix recipe from her working days). The most obvious variation is the level of tang and hot spice, based on how much acid a person can take. You never serve someone with a stomach ulcer hot chili peppers, tamarind, toor, and tomato, but rather go for a gentle lemon or lime with mung stock, ginger, and black peppers. The garnish is important as it balances out the spices. Black mustard or cumin seeds are a staple. Coriander leaves in ghee would calm the rasam for an already acidic stomach. If I were down with a cold, my grandma would punch up the curry leaves and pepper a notch. For my grandpa’s sinusitis, she might even roast the spices before she grinds them up, instead of soaking or sun-drying. Rasam changes by the day and the people.

The secrets are in the recipes. Because recipes are not supposed to be told, they are only given from mothers to daughters, and between sisters. (Kim Thúy in Weiler 2020)

I would be lying if I claimed to give you an authentic recipe for a rasam. What my aunt intends to cook and how she cooks it are always determined by who is to eat it—their feeling, well-being, and context. She would say, “Watch when people eat. Sit by their side and serve them. It will teach you more about how to cook than measurements in recipe books.” Measuring by the eye is not a concept alien to many who cook. When you pack midweek lunches, a quick dash of oil or salt, or a squeeze

of lime, is all you can do. But what does it mean to measure for cooking?

*Kan paarthadha kai seyyanum* (What the eye sees, the hand must make). My aunt hardly remembers being taught to cook for she had grown up cooking, watching, listening, touching, smelling, and learning how the women around her knew the food’s taste, without tasting it before they served others.

Kanthittam is the word in Tamil. Kan means eye, and thittam could mean anything from a measure to a strategy or a scheme. Kanthittam, the way my aunt does it, and what I barely grasp, is very much a strategy of care (Cairns and Johnston 2015). It allows an alignment of knowing, being, and doing.<sup>1</sup>

The tentativeness of recipes shared among the women I grew up with in Tamil Nadu comes from the understanding that the cook receiving the recipe also works by kanthittam. Knowing how to listen to their recipes and enact them needs one to become literate in a discourse of relation—of eyes, taste buds, stomachs, guts, bodies, palms, and measures in numbers that are always with *respect* to each other. Intimately connected with the preparation of the rest of the meal, rasam also depends on the stock of the boiled lentils or the tamarind paste made for a sambar.

The rasam that I speak of is a shapeshifter. It may be sipped like soup, eaten as an appetizer, mashed with soft-steamed grain, used as a pour-over sauce, or even drunk as a tonic. When I am lavish with my meal, I follow my grandpa and dad in cupping a palm to receive the hot rasam and take a few copious sips before I ladle it over rice. Swishing hot slurps of rasam rice from a plate or a banana leaf calls for a trained coordination of eye, palm, and tongue. In my lean meals though, I cook whole lentils into the rasam and sometimes eat it from a bowl while working on-screen.

In the obviously feminized labor of care and domesticity (Cairns and Johnston 2015), rasam is often described as medicine, a way to brew relevant herbs into one’s meal. In the past few months, my social media networks have been peppered with suggestions to include rasam in meals to fight COVID-19. Physicians entered the conversation to clarify

that there is no evidence as yet that the quotidian rasam can cure/prevent COVID-19, noting that any healing or a cautious building of general immunity varies based on the person's body type, preexisting conditions, and a range of other contextual factors (Shakthi 2020).

Some days it is healing or food. Other days it is a gastronomic way of speaking to my body of these uncertain times. Rasam helps stretch rations in the kitchen—spices, lentils, and grains—with water, salt, and warmth.

The Indian grocers I frequent in New Jersey shut on the thirtieth of March. 'Do their employees have enough savings to fund their meals?' I worried as I stocked up on lentils and peppers.

Ethnographic work by scholars writing on South Asia have regularly underscored food as a site of gender, caste, and class dynamics, compounded by contemporary discourses on health and nostalgia toward regional identities. Can you afford meat, ghee, and cold-pressed oil, or do you stick to hydrogenated vegetable oil? Do you roast the garlic? Do you get the hot fresh clear rasam on top or do you eat last the ground bits in the bottom cold? Do you serve or do you get served? Do you work from home through this wave of state emergencies and write about rasam? Marking boundaries of who can enter, touch, and engage with a kitchen, let alone cook, the eye also determines whose tastes and preferences take priority in the cooking decisions

"Who will eat what you cook?" my aunt asks. I often snap back at her: "I! Why can't a woman cook for herself!" Aunt makes many rasams—a few like my grandma, a working woman migrant from Tanjore to Chennai with no domestic help; a few like her aunt-in-law, a homemaker in Tirunelveli with domestic help; a few like her friend from work; and even

a few like her father, who cooked when my grandma fell ill. Every rasam she makes is a calibration of the many possibilities curated to whom it would serve, whom it would not, and for whom it would be left over. I push a few rocks of salt back into the box, slip the remainder into today's rasam, and think of her. This lemon-mung rasam is for her, my aunt with no gallbladder. Day-before-yesterday's garlic rasam was for my grandmother after her oil bath on Saturdays. Yesterday's cumin rasam, for my mother-in-law who relished it that once before she left us for good, and Monday's toasted neem-flower rasam for my grandfather who is not around anymore to taste my version of it. I meet more people through rasams than I would if I went to India. I make one every day now, for myself. 

#### NOTE

1. A frequently taught verse 37 from Nandikeshwara's *Abhinaya Darpana* discusses rasa—taste, flavor, or essence—as arising in an alignment of hand, eye, mind, action, and being. Hannah Arendt's idea of Praxis and this verse remind me of each other—rasa and rasam—a concept, and a thing that embodies it.

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