

An aroma of nostalgia



Golden yellow and fragrant, *ghee* from Rasipuram has held many in thrall for decades and continues to do so



Golden delight
The best way to enjoy the ghee is probably on a ghee dosa or a rich Mysore Pak • NAHLA NAINAR AND ISTOCK PHOTO/GETTY IMAGES



A kilogram of unsalted butter typically yields 700-825 grams of *ghee* when melted and is sold for approximately ₹450 per kilogram. The rate is fixed by an association of *ghee* traders.

"Farmers are usually in a hurry to collect their *ghee* and go to the market, because they feel that even a slight cooling down will affect its value," says Sivagamasundari, Thangavel's wife, who once used to oversee the butter clarification process over six firewood stoves when business was booming.

"Firewood smoke and earthenware give a special flavour to the *ghee*, but our customers don't want to wait too long, especially during rainy days, so we have switched to gas stoves and aluminium vessels," she adds.

For bulk orders, the *ghee* mak-

ers buy their base ingredient from the local *vennai mandi* (butter mart).

When done in small batches, the entire process of making *ghee* takes just a few minutes on a medium gas flame. But it requires skill to keep the butter from overburning. The fried *moringa* leaves and browned milk solids (called *kasadu*) are removed with a strainer before the *ghee* is sold. The leaves and *kasadu* can be eaten separately with hot rice or sugar.

While *ghee* made from buffalo milk butter is usually used in temple oil lamps, that made from cow's milk butter is used to cook and in herbal medicines. "Deepavali and the temple pilgrimage seasons are busy periods for all the four *ghee* making families in Rasipuram," says Thangavel.

Mechanised production

Rasi Gold Agmark Ghee is the more commercially viable face of Rasipuram's *ghee* industry, that once sustained over 20 family-owned operations at its peak.

Proprietor Nanda Kumar, a mechanical engineer and third-generation member of a *ghee*-making family, started the semi-mechanised factory in 2002, as an ancillary to a business in agricultural chemicals and equipment. "I wanted a loss-free business, and since we were already making *ghee* from my grandfather's time, I thought this would be an ideal choice," he says.

Today, the business averages a sale of 300-500 kilograms of *ghee* per day. Rasi Gold's butter is sourced from local suppliers, and orders per week run to one or

two tonnes. "There's always been a demand for *ghee*, because we still use it in our diet, folk medicine and religious rituals," says Nanda Kumar, whose factory uses a machine that can produce 500 kilograms of *ghee* per cycle.

Once melted, the *ghee* is filtered through a cloth strainer and stored in 15-kilogram tins in an air-conditioned hall for a day to allow the contents to settle. The cooled-down *ghee*'s golden yellow colour indicates that it is ready for packing.

"Our most regular customers are the local restaurants and sweet shops. Besides this, we have individual customers throughout the State who order *ghee* for their personal use," says Nanda Kumar.

Old is gold

Perhaps the best way to enjoy Rasipuram *ghee* is to head over to Sri Lakshmi Vilas, at the Old Bus Stand, where the 91-year-old eatery serves its famous *nei dosai* and *Mysore pak*, among other traditional South Indian preparations.

While admitting that Rasipuram's *ghee* industry may be a spent force, Prakash Subramaniam, the co-owner of the restaurant with his brother Murali, says that the family has preferred to use the local product in all its dishes. "We have got letters of appreciation from poets and scholars about our preparations, like the *nei dosai*," says Subramaniam.

Sri Lakshmi Vilas cooks *Mysore pak* the old way, with a judicious amount of Rasipuram *ghee*, that makes the sweet crumbly, granular and extremely moreish.

ding feasts, because of its taste and affordability.

Though commercially packaged *ghee* has become more popular in recent years, long-time users still say that Rasipuram's semi-solid 'gold' is unmatched in quality.

A reluctant transformation

But artisanal *ghee* has been forced to modernise as well, says

Traditional Rasipuram *ghee* has a nutty flavour that gives an added depth to dishes

Thangavel. "Earlier, the cattle in our rural belt were fed corn chaff and other natural fodder, which made their milk taste better. But these days, farmers are shifting to

cheaper feed. This has affected not just the taste, but also the shelf life of the *ghee*," he says.

Traditionally melted Rasipuram *ghee*, that would once keep for up to a year, now lasts for only three months, says Thangavel.

Butter production itself has undergone a sea change, with many mass producers using fresh cream from raw milk rather than yoghurt.

Tuesday is a busy day in Rasipuram, the town in Namakkal district that has been known for its distinctive type of *ghee* (clarified butter) for several decades.

For it is on Tuesday that farmers from nearby villages, like Vadugam, Kailasapalayam, Pattanam, Puthupalayam, Poimankaradu and Attayapatti among others, travel to Rasipuram's weekly *sandhai* (market) with their containers of home-churned butter, along with fresh produce and livestock.

In the form of *ghee*, this butter (stored in water baths rather than refrigerators) becomes valuable for farmers who are looking to do some shopping of their own.

"Most of the farmers raise cash for their *sandhai* purchases by selling the *ghee* that we melt for them. They usually bring a kilo or two of butter that they have collected by churning yoghurt at home for a week," says N Thangavel, a fourth-generation *ghee* trader in Rasipuram.

With his brother Ardhanari, Thangavel's family is one of only four such clans in Rasipuram still making *ghee* in the traditional manner. "In my grandfather's time, we used to supply at least 20 tins (of 15 kilograms each) of *ghee* per day. Now, it has come down to around two tins per month," says Thangavel, who operates from his 128-year-old home in Chinna Kadai Veethi.

Traditional method

Ghee is the fat left after water and milk solids are removed by heating butter, and has long been a staple cooking medium of South Asian and Arab cuisine.

Traditional Rasipuram *ghee* has a nutty flavour that gives an added depth to dishes. The ever-green vegetation (now getting depleted due to urbanisation) of the nearby Kolli Hills, which serve as grazing grounds for the cattle in Namakkal district, is also thought to be an important contributor to the richness of the milk that farmers use to make their butter.

Melted *ghee* is first seasoned with a pinch of rock salt to remove the acidity of the leftover buttermilk, and then further tempered with moringa leaves, which is said to act as a preservative.

In its heyday, Rasipuram *ghee* used to be a staple requirement for mass catering, especially wed-