



Deepavali sweets; photo courtesy of Gisella Harrold

Deepavali

By Rachel Khanna

Indian cuisine is as vast and varied as India itself. The cuisine reflects the blending of many different ethnic groups and religions. According to one author, "Indian food could indeed be equated with a grain of rice. On the surface it may seem homogeneous, all chilli and heat, but closer examination reveals a remarkable assemblage of many different ingredients, culinary techniques, and traditions." (Julie Sahni, *Savoring India*)

For instance, North Indian foods are influenced by Mughal cuisine and are made with meat, cream, nuts, raisins, onions and garlic. In contrast, South Indian cuisine uses primarily fish, coconut milk and rice or rice flour. Indian food has taken on the aspects of the different religions co-existing in the country, as well as the different groups of people who travelled through the country and thus represents a melding of many different culinary traditions.

Deepavali (also, known as Diwali) – the Indian festival of lights – is one of the main Hindu festivals celebrated in India. Deepavali means 'row of lights' in Sanskrit and commemorates the return of Rama to the Kingdom of Ayodhya after an exile of 14 years and his defeat of Ravana, the ten-headed demon king. The night of Deepavali, people also celebrate the Goddesses Lakshmi and Kali, and Lord Ganesh. More significantly, the festival represents the victory of good over evil, or the victory of light over darkness.

Deepavali takes place during the 14th lunar day of the month of Kartik (October/November). During the festival, people light candles inside and outside their homes in order to light the way for Rama's return home. They also put intricate floral designs made out of coloured rice flour, known as *rangolis*, outside their homes, and children light firecrackers. It is traditional to exchange sweets with friends and loved ones to wish them good luck.

Special sweets exchanged during Deepavali are: *gulab jamun*, *gajar ka halwa*, *ladoos*, *rasgullas* and *jalebis*. *Gulab jamun* are milk dumplings soaked in a rich saffron syrup; *gajar ka halwa* is a carrot pudding cooked in milk and spiced with cardamom; *ladoos* are sweet balls; *rasgullas* are cheese balls soaked in a creamy, spiced milk sauce; and *jalebis* are coils of dough fried and soaked in a warm saffron syrup.

In parts of northern India, it is also customary to offer food to the god Krishna. One hundred and eight different types of foods on a pyramid of steps are offered to Krishna. This pyramid recalls Krishna's defeat of the Narakasura, an evil demon who had stolen the earrings of the mother of the Gods, another example of the victory of good over evil.

Sweets in India represent good omens and are given on most joyful occasions. In India there is a saying that this is to 'sweeten the taste.' The sweets offered during Deepavali are all made with foods that are considered special and 'rich', such as pistachios, cashew nuts, almonds, sugar, or milk. These symbolise wealth and represent the wish for wealth and prosperity in the year ahead. In Ayurveda, the sweet taste "increases the vital essence of life...promoting the growth of plasma, blood, muscles, fat, bones, marrow and reproductive fluids. Proper use gives strength and longevity." (Vasant Lad, *Ayurvedic Cooking for Self-Healing*) Thus, sweets are a symbol of growth, prosperity and vitality.

Deepavali also marks the end of the harvest season in India. Thus, similar to Thanksgiving in the United States, it is a time to give thanks, celebrate with loved ones and indulge in special foods.

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