

winter 2023

kitchen work

The Vegetable Issue

&

Introducing the Kitchen Work Foundation

Number 8

Bitter Melon

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Part 1: Karela

In the beauty pageant of farmers market produce, the bitter melon will not win any awards. Looking at it, I try to decode the prehistoric secrets of its bumpy, uneven skin. The wavy ridges and pebble-like warts are close-textured and rounded, smooth against my fingertips. With an oblong shape and green pallor, it looks more like a sea creature than a member of the squash family.

The bitter melon in my hand is one of many varieties cultivated in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. It is consumed for a range of health benefits, if not for its potent flavor. Also known as bitter gourd, bitter apple, bitter cucumber, or balsam pear, I know it by its Indian moniker, karela. My mother, who is from a South Asian diaspora in Guyana, South America, sought out karela from the local Asian markets in New Jersey where we lived. When my grandfather came to stay with us in the 1980s, he and my mother planted bitter melon in the garden alongside okra, Chinese long beans, and Malabar spinach. Leafy vines climbed the backyard's wooden fence, and by midsummer, they bloomed with bright yellow

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14 flowers. Some years, the harvest was so abundant, my mother gave some away to my aunts, who lived nearby.

In the kitchen, she cut the bitter melons into half moons and sautéed them in a scarred iron pot with onions, garlic, turmeric, cumin, garam masala, and tomatoes. She served the dish with dal, rice, or roti to neutralize the sting. She and my grandfather loved it, but no amount of spice or starch could make karela palatable for my sisters and me. It was one of the few items in my mother's repertoire from "back home" that we unilaterally refused to eat. Our Americanized taste buds weren't calibrated for that level of bitterness.

When I asked my mother when she started eating karela, and if she enjoyed it, she paused. She was one of nine children, and individual preferences were not encouraged. She conceded that she didn't actually enjoy karela until she was in her teens and tried a dish they called *kalownji*, or stuffed karela. An internet search yielded a page of North Indian recipes that fit my mother's description. The bitter melon was first cut lengthwise, and the seeds and pith were scooped out. The shells were steamed, and the seeds peeled. The karela innards were curried with spices and vegetables, and stuffed back into the shells. Each precarious, kayak-like creation was wrapped and tied with string, then deep-fried until crisp and golden. The multi-step process was time consuming, but worthwhile to make the bitter melon palatable. Apparently, one of my aunts missed *kalownji* so much, relatives visiting from Guyana would bring it for her, defying customs regulations in favor of her nostalgia.

15 At work, I polled my few Caribbean coworkers about karela, which had them reminiscing at the water cooler. They all had memories of eating *kalownji* back home, though only one of them still made it regularly. I was impressed to learn that this coworker, a fellow Guyanese who came to the US as a teenager and was one of the company's first employees, made stuffed karela every week. He mixed the filling with shrimp, which I imagined helped with both flavor and texture, though this wouldn't have been an option for my vegetarian mother. In the conversation, my coworker told me how his wife, whose ancestors are from Madras, in Southern India, made karela with coconut milk. From the pictures on the internet, the dish resembled a Thai curry, with karela slices floating in a rich yellow broth.

I was skeptical, but I gave *kalownji* a chance when my mother's Punjabi friend kindly sent some for me. In the clear plastic container, the karela was slumped and brown with charred edges, topped with a tangle of red string. I tried to make it less soggy by reheating it on a pan. As the karela sizzled back to life, my mouth began to water. It had been so many years since I'd tried bitter melon. Part of me hoped that my forty-year-old taste buds would find delicious what my younger self had rejected. I was older and wiser, and certain this time would be different.

On my first bite, I tasted the full bloom of the spices, the ginger, and the mustard seeds. This wasn't so bad, I thought. But by the second bite, bitterness had wrapped itself around my tongue, Medusa-like, and wouldn't let go. I tried to ignore it, but the aftertaste smothered my tastebuds. Displeasure gave way to

16 pure disgust. After my third bite, I was done, officially unconverted. I drank several glasses of lemon water, but it took at least thirty minutes for the awful flavor to dissipate, for my mouth to feel like itself again.

Part 2: Cerasee

Karela was never going to be a part of my weekly dinner rotation, but I did believe in cerasee, the tea made from the leaves of the bitter melon plant. The Latin name for the plant is *Momordica charantia*; “*Momordica*” means “to bite,” and refers to the jagged edges of the leaves, which look like they’ve been bitten.

I first tried the tea on a dare on one of my first trips to Nassau, Bahamas, where my husband is from and where his whole family still lives. My brothers-in-law-to-be laughed as my face twisted in disgust. Giving me cerasee was a hazing ritual of sorts, but compared to the vegetable, the tea was much more tolerable. There was no texture, no chewing. Cerasee tea was just as bitter as karela, but it could be cooled and chugged as fast as possible. Moreover, cerasee wasn’t meant to be delicious; it was a medicine used to lower blood sugar and cholesterol, and to ward off a cold.

In the Caribbean, bitter melon tea was used as a kind of “bush medicine.” This local cure-all wasn’t prescribed by a doctor, but every Bahamian I’d ever met, young or old, knew it as preventive medicine. In that lush landscape, bitter melon didn’t have to be specially cultivated. The vine grew wild, and the star-shaped leaves could be found all over the islands. My father-in-law recalled having

17 his first taste of cerasee at four or five years old, and my mother-in-law told me how she and her twelve brothers and sisters lined up once a week for a mandatory dose.

When I asked my husband about the bitter melon itself, he recalled a prickly red fruit that he ate off the vine as a child. Fully ripened, karela was actually sweet, which was difficult for me to imagine. In the Bahamas, they didn’t eat the green bitter melons like they did in South Asian cultures. Conversely, the Guyanese folks I spoke to were aware of bitter melon tea, but unfamiliar with the name cerasee. Bitter melon held its own place in each culture.

Recently, I learned that when my grandfather was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2002, my mother’s cousin FedEx-ed a box of bitter melon leaves from her garden in Florida. It was spring in New Jersey, and my mother’s karela plants weren’t yet in bloom. I was in college at the time, and didn’t bear witness to much of the last period of my grandfather’s life. It was only in my research for this essay that I learned how my mother boiled the karela leaves in her biggest pot, and stored the brackish brown tea in a Mason jar in the refrigerator, along with a host of other homeopathic remedies. I imagined my mother sitting in my grandfather’s room next to his bed, slipping spoonfuls of bitter melon tea between his dry lips, both of them weary but hopeful.

As I write, karela seedlings from my mother’s old house are growing in the small garden she tends with my husband at our home in New York City. I don’t have a passion for gardening, but I enjoy the environment they’ve created. While my kids sink their

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fingers into the soil, giggling, I study the bitter melon plants in their wooden box. Through the concentric rings of the metal cage, the vines curl skyward, and their jagged leaves shiver in the wind. ♡