

Aging with Payesh

By Aditi Biswas

For as long as I can remember, birthdays have always meant eating a bowl of creamy payesh. A small silver bowl holds the payesh, reflecting the direct overhead light of the kitchen yet somehow softening it. My mom even lets me use a special tiny spoon (which is a very rare occasion) that I've had since I first learned how to smile¹, the handle engraved with overlapping triangles and squares.

Payesh itself is fairly straightforward to make², but time consuming. Perhaps that is why it is such a special dish, a true indicator of the devotion of the chef. Typically, to make Bengali payesh, you soak a certain type of rice (always rinse first³) called gobindobhog which is supposed to have a sweet scent and flavor⁴. I remember my mothers excitement when she first found it in a grocery store many years ago, hope rising like a bird at the thought of finally being able to truly taste home. It was quickly shot down however, when she tried to make payesh and the rice immediately lacked the distinct scent of gobindobhog. A shining arrow, beautiful and gleaming, but fake, as many supposedly authentic things in the United States tend to be.

Next comes the milk, which you bring to a boil. It is highly recommended that you use full fat milk in order for the payesh to be creamy and rich. After all, what are birthdays without indulging yourself a little? Throughout all the changes and challenges in my life, the sound of soft bubbling stays a constant, soothing background noise.

¹ Shaw, Gina. 2022. "Baby Development Stages: The First Year." WebMD.

<https://www.webmd.com/parenting/baby/features/stages-of-development>. This is one of the significant developmental changes for 2 month olds, which is how old I was when I was first gifted the spoon.

² Mathur, Neha. 2022. "Bengali Chaler Payesh Recipe + Video - WhiskAffair." WhiskAffair. <https://www.whiskaffair.com/bengali-chaler-payesh/>.

³ This is an inside joke among my friends because we often make fun of people who don't wash their rice before cooking it.

⁴ This is only according to my parents since the last time I had real gobindobhog rice, I was too young to remember the smell.

Finally, after many hours, after combining the milk with the rice along with spices, payesh is ready to be eaten. While I personally prefer the texture once it is chilled and becomes thicker, my patience is usually hammered too thin to wait any longer. The slightly warm mixture is scooped into the bowl and I eagerly take a bite, my now too large fingers carefully gripping the spoon. The familiarity of the different flavors, like the spice from the cardamom or the slight tanginess of the raisins, washes over me like a warm blanket, shielding me from the pains of growing older. The small grains of rice melt away, contrasted by the crunch of the almonds. I feel comforted, as though the pudding itself is reassuring me that it will always stay with me.

Bibliography

“Food & Memory - What Makes Their Connection So Strong?” 2017. Taste Vacations.

<https://www.tastevacations.com/2017/11/food-memory-makes-connection-strong/>.

This article describes how the taste, texture, and smell of food can trigger certain memories of when you've eaten that dish before, as well as the surrounding setting. I can definitely relate to this and there have been multiple times where I've eaten something and instantly remembered my previous experience having that food. I wanted to show this in my lyrical essay through specific sensory details about payesh, like the taste and flavor, to help connect it to different memories.

Mathur, Neha. 2022. “Bengali Chaler Payesh Recipe + Video - Whiskaffair.” WhiskAffair.

<https://www.whiskaffair.com/bengali-chaler-payesh/>.

I used this recipe and own memory of my mother making payesh to create a rough chronological outline of the process of making payesh. I figured most people reading this probably don't know what payesh is, but I wanted to challenge myself to show the reader what it is without directly stating the English equivalent. To accomplish this, I showed the different steps of the recipe to help the reader better visualize the ingredients and final product.

Shaw, Gina. 2022. “Baby Development Stages: The First Year.” WebMD.

<https://www.webmd.com/parenting/baby/features/stages-of-development>.

This article illustrated the different developmental stages an infant experiences in the first year. According to my mother, I got the special spoon mentioned at the beginning of the lyrical essay when I was about 2 months old. I was looking for some way, like a milestone, to indirectly describe how old I was at the time instead of just stating it. I thought saying how it was when I

first learned how to smile would be nice because that builds onto the idea that payesh is connected to a lot of happy memories for me.