

local flavours  
*Goan mangoes*

In Goa, even the universally loved *hapoos* plays second fiddle to the Mankurad, an indigenous treasure that is fiercely guarded by locals

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“Like a drop of honey,  
Soft as a bride’s lips,  
Our pride, our wealth,  
Is the Goan mango.”  
- Manoharrai Sardesai, Konkani laureate

Even as the rest of the country drives itself into frenzies at the arrival of the Ratnagiri *hapoos*’Alphonso, Goa remains unmoved, its collective tastebuds readied for entirely different varieties of mangoes, including the Mankurad (from Malcurado), and its smaller but equally delicious cousin, the Hilario (also known as Mang’ilar) from Siolim. These remain unknown to the rest of the country because they’re devoured in toto in-state.

India’s smallest state comprises a tiny fingernail of territory between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea, but it possesses an outsized appetite for mangoes. Colonial records name 106 different varietals of *Mangifera Indica* in Goa alone, the cumulative result of enthusiastic experimentation encouraged by the European Jesuits who dominated Goa’s administration after its conquest by Alfonso de Albuquerque in 1510.

The colonialists brought the most modern grafting techniques to Goa with them, and by the end of the 16th Century itself, the Portuguese *Estado da India*’s (the Portuguese name for the empire’s Indian possessions) economy was already significantly buttressed by mango exports. Goan mangoes were marvelled over at court in Lisbon, and then began to be grown on a large scale in Brazil and the Caribbean, becoming an entirely different and more fibrous fruit in the process.

An important fact about the most prized mangoes, including the Mankurad, the Hilario, the Goan Alphonso and Ratnagiri *hapoos*, is that they are all the result of painstaking grafting techniques. They do not grow directly from a seed but from a sprouting twig cut out from the mother plant and spliced onto a sturdier local varietal. This sapling is gently tended to for at least four years — transferred from a bag to a tin can to

an earthenware pot — before being carefully planted in the soil. Even the most scientific mango farms lose at least half their grafts in the process. If the tree survives planting, it will take another five years to start producing good, marketable fruit. By contrast, *gaunti* or the non-grafted mangoes of Goa (and everywhere else) are smaller and tend to be very fibrous.

Mangoes became an essential diplomatic tool for the Portuguese: the annual arrival of ceremoniously dispatched Goan mangoes became a

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hotly anticipated event at the Mughal court, and the Poona durbar looked forward to its own share so keenly that the *Estado*’s merchants were forbidden to export fruit to Maratha territory lest the Portuguese gift to the Peshwas become devalued.

But mangoes were already integrally ingrained in Indian myth, legend, culture and history thousands of years before the Jesuits undertook their promulgatory frenzy.

Though the fruit’s earliest origins probably lie in the northeast borderlands of what is now Myanmar — where wild varieties still grow — mangoes were already well known by the time of the earliest Indian texts. They are mentioned in both the Rig Veda and the Upanishads, and every ancient visitor’s account of India — from Ibn Battuta to Hiuen Tsang — unflinchingly goes into raptures about the fruit. Jourdain de Séverac, a 14th Century French visitor to the country, is believed to have said that the fruit is “so sweet and delicious as it is impossible to utter in words.”

But just a couple of centuries after these travellers reached India, everyone across the subcontinent agreed on the superior qualities of the fruit emerging from Portuguese India. In 1653, the

wide-ranging Italian traveller Niccolao Manucci wrote, “The best mangoes grow in Goa. These are again divided into varieties with special colour, scent and flavour. I have eaten many that had the taste of peaches, plums, pears and apples of Europe...however many you eat, with or without bread, you still desire to eat more and they do you no harm.” By this point in history, one familiar hybrid Goan mango (named after the first Portuguese conqueror) was already famous throughout the subcontinent.

This consensus was voiced succinctly by

the British soldier-historian John Seely: “There is no fruit in the world equal to the Alphonso mango.”

That sentiment still echoes loudly in every fruit market of every city across India, but very few people realise that the mango it refers to has become unrecognisable after decades of selective breeding and cultivation in the Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts of Maharashtra, and Valsad and Navsari districts in Gujarat, which together grow the entirety of what is commercially still known as the Alphonso.

Original Alphonsons are still grown in Goa, and are quite different. This highly marketable *hapoos* varietal is distinguished by two unique features: a terrifically enticing aroma, and a considerable shelf life that has made it viable for export not just across the breadth of India, but also to the Middle East, Europe and the US as well.

Despite these desirable characteristics, Alphonso mangoes sell very little in Goa. Instead, the king of the Goan summer is the Mankurad, with several other local varieties highly prized for different qualities.

The positive attributes of these sought-after Goan mangoes are mentioned at considerable length in

*A Mangueira*, a 1902 monograph by the Goan botanist Joao de Mello de Sampayo who took pains to list, qualify and compare mangoes from all over the world, from Sumatra to Mauritius to Bahia in Brazil.

Distinctly first in the rankings in *A Mangueira* comes the Malcurado (“badly coloured” in Portuguese, from which the Konkani name Mankurad is derived), which is loved — somewhat ironically — for its consistently glowing golden colour, for its unusually complete lack of fibrosity, and especially for extraordinary *sabor delicioso*, that typically delicious and complex Mankurad taste of honey and caramel tempered with hints of allspice and cinnamon.

*A Mangueira* reserves a different kind of praise for the Goan Alphonso, which it notes has achieved immense marketability in all the markets of British India, and then goes on to describe scores of different varietals of mango endemic to Goa: the pulpy Xavier, the immense, watermelon-sized Bispo, the Ferrao, the Costa, the Burbate, the Bombio, the Mogry, the Doirada, the Salgada and its diminutive relative the Salgadinha, the Papel, the Timud, the Bola, the Dom Filipe and the Dom Bernardo, the Secretina and the Tanque and the Fernandinha, and on and on for several pages. Most of these varieties are still available today, but in small quantities that rarely make it to the markets. While Mankurad occupies the topmost end of the price spectrum (a dozen Mankurads can cost up to ₹ 1,500), the lesser-known Goan varieties are generally much cheaper.

Interestingly, the other Goan marketplace favourite that supplants the Mankurad when its season ends in May isn’t mentioned in *A Mangueira*. This is the Hilario mango, Mang’ilar, a smaller, close relative of the Mankurad with a pale, almost-white flesh, which features a slightly higher sugar quotient, making it a favourite with children. The Hilario comes into markets at the very end of May or early June. It has been grown in Goa on an increasingly large scale after grafts were taken

from a single tree growing in Hilario Fernandes’s garden in Siolim in the 1960s, and has become increasingly popular every year since.

Though more than 100 varieties of mangoes have been catalogued in Goa, each one has its specific use and purpose, and locals will not exchange one for the other. Rosy-hued Monsarrate mangoes are reserved for making the brilliantly intense mango jam called *mangada*. Fingerling *ambli* (these are *gaunti*, or ungrafted) are used for *chepnim*, the beloved ‘water pickle’ made with local sea salt, fenugreek and asafoetida and eaten all through the monsoon with rice and salt fish. Bulbous little green Carreira mangoes — the first mangoes of summer — are used exclusively as the main ingredient in *miskut*, the piquant stuffed mango pickle that is made to a slightly different recipe in each household across the state.

The Mankurad is different. Carefully selected, precisely half-ripe fruit is sometimes used for *uddamethi*, the classic Goan mango curry made with black gram and fenugreek, or occasionally to add its distinctive flavour to a prawn curry.

But for most Goans, these are peak-experience mangoes meant to be savoured perfectly ripe on their own, each drop of juice like precious nectar, as the culinary highlight of the hot months. In summer, the trees known to reliably yield the best Mankurad are beloved neighbourhood characters in their own right, eagerly watched by everyone in the vicinity, as mangoes take over from football as the most passionately discussed topic in the Goan countryside.

The bounty of harvest has its own rituals, an annual event as keenly looked forward to as any religious festival. One room in each old Goan house is the *muddeachem kudd* (ripening room) reserved for the ripening process, with each individual mango lovingly inverted into perfectly dry straw, then layered with more straw.

The aroma that emerges from these ripening rooms is intense, and

lingers long after the last mango has been extracted and savoured. Each hoard is guarded like the crown jewels. Inevitably, this is when in-laws and distant cousins come calling, and the children in the family launch elaborate mango heists at siesta time.

And so comes the time of year when those unlucky Goans who do not own a fruiting tree — or have generous relatives who do — really start to feel the loss of not being able to lay their hands on the state’s favourite mango.

Now the bargaining in the local marketplaces becomes as heated as the mid-May sun. Just as it remains a fundamental Goan right to have hot, fresh-baked *pao* delivered daily to the doorstep in the early morning and again before suppertime, no local, no *niz Goenkar* (true-blue Goan) can enjoy a summer without ensuring his or her fair share of the sublime Mankurad.

And that is why those who live in the other Indian states have no chance of realising what a yawning chasm of flavour separates the Mankurad from every other kind. It’s because supply doesn’t even come close to demand, and each fruit is quickly bought up in Goa by locals who are willing to pay any price for them. But make the pilgrimage in mango season yourself, and just one Mankurad will be enough to irrevocably convert you. Goan mangoes are that good — they really have to be tasted to be believed.

