

**Wisdom cries out in the streets - 9, 000 miles away**

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Two summers ago, I visited my 85 year-old *paati*, my great grandmother, who lives in a remote village in southern India called Perrumkottaisiruvalliputtur (a mouthful!). I knew I'd have to leave behind hot showers and flush toilets. But I didn't know I'd have to leave behind food. Food, as I knew it, didn't exist in Perrumkottaisiruvalliputtur. No snickers bars, no cocoa puffs, no burgers, fries or coke.

The moment *paati* saw me, she blurted, "you poor thing, you must be sick. What does that granddaughter of mine feed you in America?" To celebrate my visit, *paati* cooked a feast and invited the whole village. Everyone enjoyed the meal. Except me. *Paati* noticed but kept quiet. Only when she caught me munching a snickers bar later, she said, "I'm going to take you to market tomorrow and show you real food."

The village market – a couple of dusty streets - was nothing like the supermarkets in California. No isles of bright boxes, no rows of shiny cans, no columns of colorful candy. Just heaps of fresh plants, leaves, vegetables, fruit, nuts and seeds spread out on beds of hay. I spotted carrots and cauliflowers; but I had to be introduced to countless others: *poosinikkai*, *pavakkai*, *madulampayam*, *annasipayam*... The Tamil names reeled off *Paati's* tongue.

*Paati's* method of shopping was also strange. In Cupertino, my mom zigzags through the supermarket aisles, scrutinizing every label for trans fats and sodium glutamate. She shops as if food is her enemy and eats as if every calorie is a villain.

*Paati*, however, walked around until she came to a mound she liked. Then she started a conversation with the seller, enquired about his kids, advised him about his cow, and finally, after haggling over the price, bought the choicest bits from the mound. When she filled her bag, we went home and cooked everything. A medley of vegetables, wild rice, spiced lentils with a dollop of ghee. For desert, *raagi* cooked in milk sweetened with jaggery. I ate. A little. Mostly to please *paati*.

Two days later, hunger drove me back to the land of snickers bars and cocoa puffs.

Then I read Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food*. The book did what *paati* couldn't. It totally changed how I thought about food. I understood how "culture ceded a large measure of its influence over how we ate and thought about eating to science," and how "the Western diet" of processed foods causes "Western diseases." Who'd have thought that *paati* really knows best? Or that wisdom cries out in the streets of a village market? Or that mom is an orthorexic, misled by American nutritionism?

Things have changed for me now. I've given up snickers bars and cocoa puffs. I eat more vegetables and fruit. I force mother to shop in farmer's markets. I'm even planning to return to that far away village with the ferocious name to learn *paati's* secret recipes.