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Countries often have flowers associated with them. England has roses, beautiful but stiff and formal. Tulips are the Netherlands, but Turkey too, from where they spread to Europe. Chrysanthemums are Japan, the symbol of its throne. And India is lotuses, but also jasmines, which have the advantage of scent, the sense that links strongest to memory.

In his novel *Night in Bombay*, Louis Bromfield described the scent of India as “compounded odours of spice and wood smoke, of jasmine and marigold and dust and copra and cow-dung smoke.” Mary Gage, an Australian playwright born in Pune, described it as a “hot,

wood-smokey smell mixed with raat-ki-rani, a lovely jasmine perfume combined with the odour of drains.” The link with drains is less strange than it seems because jasmine essence is known in perfumery for containing a compound with an intense, unsettling carnal odour, of human scent and a definite whiff of the drains. “The list of notes associated with jasmine include flowery, warm, animal, spicy, fruity and rich,” writes Celia Lyttelton in *The Scent Trail*, a book about the search for the origins of perfumes. This is why jasmine essence features in many of the best, richest perfumes, including Joy by Patou, voted Scent of the Century in 2000, an almost pure combination of rose and jasmine essences.

Yet the magic of jasmine is that in the low concentrations that occur in nature, this opulent odour is wonderfully fresh and flowery, almost innocent, but not quite. Jasmine’s ability to combine an easy sweetness with a hint of underlying sensuality is what allows it to be both offered to gods and worn by courtesans, used as a decoration for marriage halls, or painstakingly threaded through the hair of brides, yet also worn by girls like the ones I went to school with in Chennai. The flowers might be small, but that simply makes them easier to knot into thick white garlands with a heady, yet not cloying scent.

Jasmines feature across the religions of India. Any South Indian temple will have jasmine garland sellers outside and the great bhakti poet Mahadevi Akka described the Shiva she worshipped as Chenna Mallikarjuna, “my lord white as jasmine”. But the white purity of

jasmines also makes them a symbol of the Virgin Mary, while when Guru Nanak met the Sufis of Multan and was presented with a full cup of milk, to signify their full and pure faith, he simply floated a single jasmine flower on the milk, to show that there was always a spirit above.

In his book *The Culture of Flowers*, anthropologist Jack Goody notes how one way Islam adapted to India was that “rose and jasmine petals entered into the ceremonies associated with the Muslim year, such as the Birth of the Prophet.” He also writes that Jains are ambivalent about flower offerings, recognising that plucking flowers would seem to violate ahimsa, but if done, “the garland cannot be sewn together, since that would involve piercing, but tied with a thread,” which is how jasmine garlands are made. And he quotes C.G.Jung’s description of piles of jasmines poured before the altar to Buddha at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy in Sri Lanka.

Regular readers will be wondering by now why jasmine, for all the beauty of its fragrance, features in a food column. The Chinese use it, of course, to flavour tea, and the Thais make a jasmine ice-cream (it is served at Koh, the restaurant at the Intercontinental Hotel in Mumbai). But the only Indian recipe I had come across using jasmines was a rather unreal sounding curry of jasmine flower stalks in Dharmendar Kanwar’s *Royal Cuisines of India*. Since this called for a kilo of finely sliced jasmine stalks, it was fairly obviously only meant for a royal kitchen which could command vast amounts of labour.

But this changed when my sister gave me a copy of a book for which she had shot several photographs. Madurai Malligai is, as its subtitle explains, a celebration of the intensely scented jasmine variety grown around Madurai. The book has been written by Dr Uma Kannan, who is a scholar of Indian art and culture. Living in Madurai, she became interested in the extensive economic and cultural system surrounding the local jasmine, from the farms it was grown on, the trade that bought just-picked buds to market and the craftsmen and craftswomen who wove them into complex garlands and decorations for use in Madurai's great Meenakshi Amman temple, and other ways in the lives of people of the city.

It is a well-timed book since the Madurai malligai has just received a Geographical Indications tag that recognises its special characteristics, the second variety to get one after the Mysore jasmine. The book explains that the sulphur-rich laterite soils around Madurai are the secret behind the alkaloids that give the flower its fragrance, and the thick petals of this variety help conserve the scent better. But the part that really interested me was a section where she explains that the jasmine can be used for flavouring if one makes a syrup in which the buds can steep and release their aroma.

This was enough to send me off to Dadar's wholesale flower market early in the morning, where I was disappointed to learn that Madurai malligai is hard to get in Mumbai. What was available were buds from Coimbatore (buds are better for flavouring than opened flowers) and

since these smelled lovely I bought half a kilo. Halving the quantities given by Kannan, I mixed two kilos of sugar and a litre and half of water, and put it to boil. As it cooked I added a quarter cup of milk, and later a squeeze of lime, to purify the syrup by coagulating as scum to skim off. When the syrup was the texture of thin honey I switched off the heat, threw in the buds and left them to steep, tight covered, for almost a full day

I couldn't resist trying it after half a day though. At first sip I just got sweetness and slight vegetal taste, but microseconds later, just as I was about to register disappointment, an intense jasmine aroma burst up my palate and through my nose. It was amazing, but also odd, and I realised this was because we are more used to smelling jasmine inhaled through our noses, but here it was coming up through my head. It was a powerful demonstration of how much flavour is also aroma and, once the mental adjustment was made, it was utterly entrancing and addictive. The half day version had a heady freshness, but after a full day it was even more intense and penetrating.

I am still working out how best to use it. Jasmine doesn't take to heat, which is why its essence can't be collected by steam distilling like with roses, so it should only be used cold. Kannan gives recipes for jasmine scented coconut milk custard and another pudding made with sago, in both cases only mixing in the syrup at the end. I tried it in one of Claudia Roden's recipes for Middle Eastern cakes made of almonds and eggs, but replacing it for the orange syrup used to soak the original and

it was delicious, though still needs some working on.

Drinks are probably better. I tried a cocktail of gin, lime, jasmine syrup and soda. It was both fresh, yet alluringly perfumed, like a nice South Indian girl who could also just possibly be a vamp, a Silk Smita of a drink – the Jasmine Janaki maybe, or the Malligai Madam. But the best use is probably the simplest, just using it to sweeten lime in nimbu-pani. The acid of the lime cuts the sweetness of the syrup, but the jasmine gives the regular drink an incredible aromatic lift, that is both stimulating, yet cooling. It is the perfect and natural antidote to the enervating heat of an Indian summer, and with the days already growing warm in Mumbai and a summer ahead that promises to be hard, hot and dry, jasmine syrup might just be the way to survive.
