

Who moved my croutons?

The disappearance of a bag of this crunchy treat stirs memories of an affair that started with humble tomato soup

A conversation about them would have sufficed. But what I got instead was a gift of croutons.

These were not the “deep fried to a stern brown, glistening with fat, creating an oil slick in the soup” variety. But I must admit to loving that kind too, with the wistfulness and retrospective embarrassment of first love.

My first fine-dining experience was as a child. My uncle and aunt took me to a restaurant that was far removed from the Udipi hotel where we used to buy ‘parcels’ when my army of cousins invaded our weekends. This was also unlike the leafy drive-in restaurant that had the brownest dosa and coffee in chipped white cups.

This was a posh, air-conditioned place.

I tasted tomato soup for the first time that evening and the croutons left an indelible, oil-stained impression on me.

My mother soon acquired a recipe to cook tomato soup that was flavourful, nutritious and easy to prepare. However, the croutons were a different story. First, one needed bread that wasn’t too soft and didn’t crumble easily. (It would be a decade before I discovered that stale bread, usually the heel of the loaf, had the perfect texture.) Then, it had to be cut into cubes, deep-fried and placed on a newspaper for the oil to drain. It was telling that I didn’t find these croutons very different from the ones at the restaurant. If anything, the process of making them at home demystified restaurant fare for me.

Years sped by. I was now married, and had travelled abroad, where I graduated to relishing baked croutons. But apart from attempts

at toasting bread and cutting it into cubes, I was not really invested in the art of crouton making.

Then came Ainsley Harriott’s olive oil and rock salt croutons that a visiting cousin brought as a gift. The distinctive note of the oil reminded me of my trips to Spain, of *tostadas* with *aceite de oliva con ajo*, garlic-infused olive oil. It brought to mind the region where one nursed a glass of sherry at noon in the womb-like darkness of a bar, with only Andalusian tiles and vintage posters of flamenco dancers and matadors for company.

As I held the packet of croutons from another land, I dreamed of another self, a parallel life where, in my open kitchen, friends bring in their glasses of wine, and rest against the edge of the clean countertop. A window overlooks the garden where there is no place for frivolous decorative plants. Instead, I grow my own produce — plump tomatoes, voluptuous aubergines, lissome okra and a host of herbs. I rustle up a simple meal, and we dine al fresco on the terrace, speaking of books, music, art, travel and, of course, food. We feast on wine and Greek

salad that makes a delicious deviation from the recipe to include croutons seasoned with basil.

One evening, I was daydreaming about al fresco dining. The next, I mourned the unspeakable gap between day-dream and reality. I returned home from work to discover that my family had been at the croutons. The croutons I had hoarded so carefully became an accompaniment to evening tea. I didn’t stick around to hear any more, in case there was any dunking involved.

Accustomed as they are to mass-produced biscuits, would my family’s palate appreciate the hint of garlic and the base note of olive oil? Did they realise it was called crouton? Could they try rolling the exotic word in their mouth, and savour it as they uttered it, instead of chomping down on it, and dredging up a close-sounding name of a decorative plant?

The leftovers would go the way of the rusk — the biscuit tin, unwittingly left open, softening golden cubes of crunch into a texture not unlike sawdust on an eraser. Eventually, the very idea of croutons would die a miserable death — ashes to ashes, dust to dust, chef-designed croutons mingling with crushed Bourbon biscuits.

A worse fate awaited the packaging that I wanted to save for culinary tips from the chef himself. It was found in the garbage bin with the dregs of two-day-old sambar splashed on the handsome, smiling face of chef Ainsley Harriott.

I reconciled to the yawning gap between fond fantasies and reality. The kitchen is still not my turf. The tropical humidity of my city — along with mosquitoes, the day’s washing hanging overhead and eavesdropping neighbours — is not conducive to al fresco dining. I live out my fantasies on my trips abroad, where I rent homes with outdoor dining spaces, and hit the supermarkets for all the croutons I can eat. Back home, I make do with passable ones — cubes of stale bread tossed with olive oil, salt and dry herbs, and toasted in the microwave until they crisp up.

To my family, I’d like to clarify — once and for all — that croutons are not just pieces of fried bread. Or the decorative plants from your youth.



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