

Lo Mein to Laksa

by Shulie Madnick



Photo credit: Shulie Madnick

The Malida Ceremony

The Core of the Bene Israel Tradition

The Malida Ceremony is at the core of the Bene Israel Jewish Indian community's life cycle rituals and identity. The dish of sweetened, moistened, parched and flattened rice (Poha/Pohe in Hindi/Marathi*), prayed over and served at the ceremony, is also coincidentally called Malida. The sweetened and flattened rice, mixed with coconut flakes, flavored and scented with cardamom, and garnished with almonds and pistachios is served on a large Thali (large round Indian stainless steel dish) and adorned with five fruits. Traditionally, the fruits are a banana, an orange, an apple, a date, and a pear, although it could be any other in season fruit. Some use seven fruits. The heaping thali is then decorated with roses or rose petals and depending on the lifecycle and the day of the week, it might be decorated with cloves (besamim/aromatic spices) and served at the ceremony. A handful of Malida along with sliced fruit and a date are then disbursed to all guests after the blessings.

The Bene Israel Indian Jews, called Shanwar Teli, which means oil pressers, are one of five distinct Indian Jewish

communities (Cochini, Bene Israel, Baghdadi, Bnei Menashe and Bene Ephraim). Today there are approximately 60,000 Bene Israel living in Israel and a few thousand still living in India. The Malida ceremony is also called the Eliyahu HaNavi ceremony as the prophet Elijah is considered the guardian prophet of the Bene Israel community. Legend has it that he rescued the handful of Jews who escaped after the destruction of the Second Temple (70CE) in Jerusalem and were shipwrecked and washed ashore on the Konkan Coast in the State of Maharashtra, just south of Mumbai (Bombay). The Eliyahu Hanavi melody is sung from a transliterated siddur (Hebrew words written in Hindi/Marathi characters) and blessings over the fruit from the tree (HaEtz) and from the earth (HaAretz) are recited during the ceremony.

There are few accounts on the origin of the Malida dish and custom. Some say the custom predates to the time of the First Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The Israelites would bring parched and flattened wheat grains as an offering to God at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Malida is an adaptation with a local

ingredient, the Poha, parched and flattened rice.

Many in India are familiar with widespread savory versions of Poha. Versions of this sweet (poha) Malida, mixed with wheat and semolina and made into bread, are popular in Southern India. The Bene Israel's neighboring Muslims served it at weddings, engagement parties, ceremonies and feasts. Unlike their neighbors, the Bene Israel's version is more of a flaky cereal without wheat and semolina, and they do not add milk or ghee (clarified butter) to this dish. This keeps it parve, as after the Malida ceremony, a non-vegetarian Indian meal is served of chicken or Mutton, out of respect to their Hindu neighbors and the sanctity of the cow. The Malida is served and celebrated during many happy occasions such as wedding henna ceremonies, engagement parties, housewarming parties and when blessings for bon voyage, safety or good health are wished upon. The Malida offering might have further similarities to the Hindu tradition of bringing offering to their deities at their temples as the Jews brought offerings during the time of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. ▶

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Malida – Sweetened Poha

Ingredients:

- 4 cups Poha
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup unsweetened coconut flakes
- 5-10 cardamom pods, shelled and ground
- Handful golden raisins (optional)
- 5 of each: apples, bananas, oranges, dates and pears

Garnish:

- Handful raw almonds, blanched, peeled and sliced (optional).
- Handful raw pistachios, shelled, blanched, peeled and sliced (optional)
- Or handful each of crushed roasted almonds and crushed roasted pistachios
- Rose petals

Note:

I make the dish at home and serve it at tastings, without nuts, and everyone loves it. I have Malida for breakfast or as a lightly sweetened dessert along my afternoon tea. Also keep in mind these are suggested measurements. If you like it sweeter, add sugar. Feel free to adjust measurements to your taste.

Directions:

1. Immerse Poha in cold water for four minutes until softens. Keep in mind some like it al dente, crunchy, I don't! Be sure not to over soak them as they will turn mushy and the flakes will lose their silhouette.
2. Run through a sieve to drain all water out and press on top lightly to rid of excess water.
3. In a large bowl, add the drained Poha and sugar, and flake with a fork or your fingers to fluff the mixture.
4. **Important:** Add the sugar immediately so it will blend in smoothly and not remain grainy.
5. Add the cardamom and coconut and raisins (raisins are optional) and mix well.
6. **Note:** I only use my hands or a fork to keep the integrity of the shape of the flake and mix lightly.
7. Garnish with nuts.
8. Keep refrigerated until serving. Can keep in refrigerator for a few days.

Shulie Madnick is an Israeli born Bene Israeli Indian recipe developer, food and cultural writer and a food photographer. She had her recipes and photos published at *The Washington Post*, *Fine Cooking Magazine*, *Washington Jewish Week*, *Whisk Magazine*, among other publications. You can contact her through her site www.foodwanderings.blogspot.com.