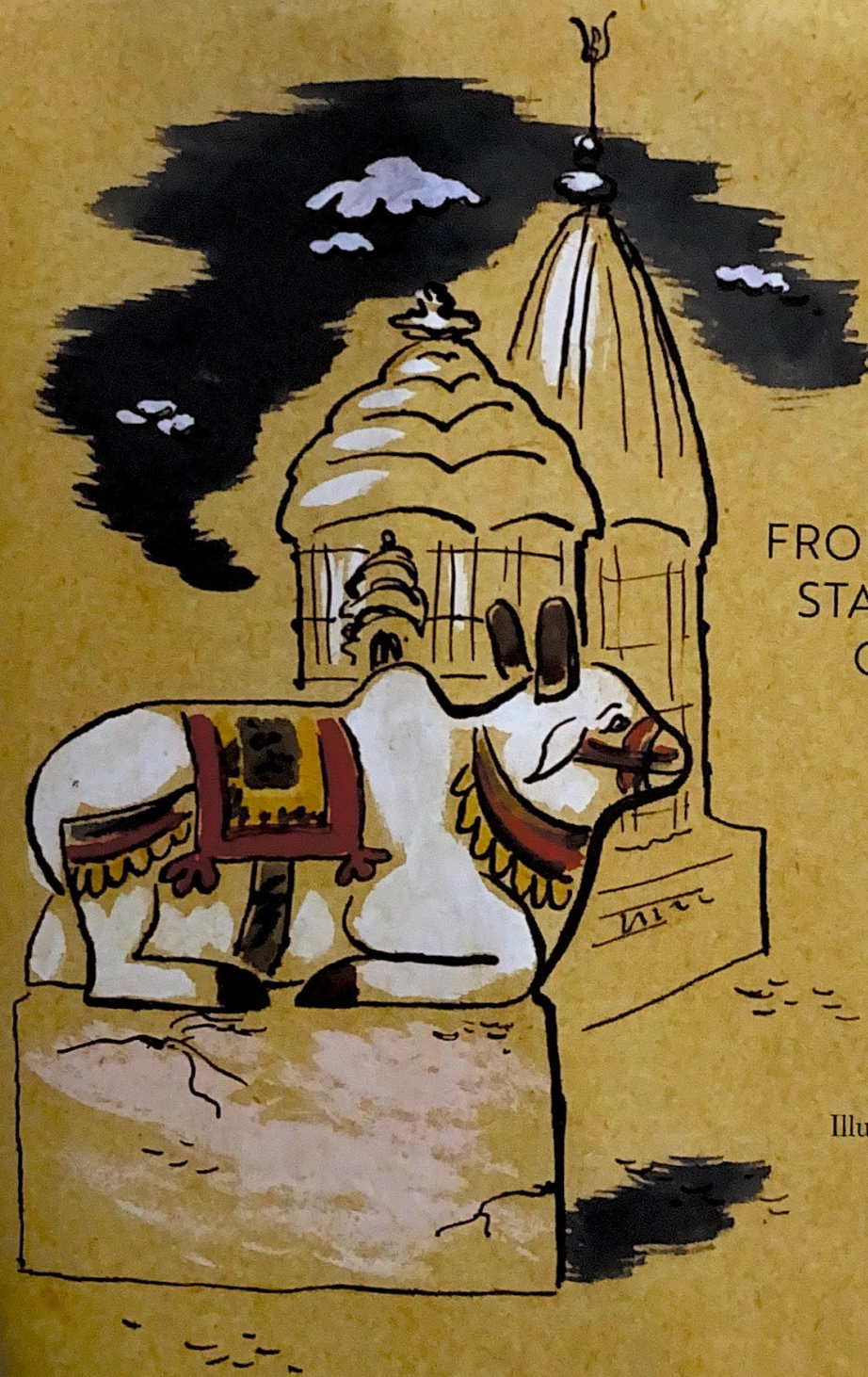


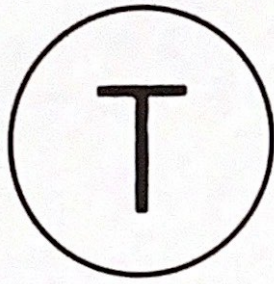
O.M.GHEE



FROM SOUTH ASIAN
STAPLE TO GOOP'S
GOLDEN LIQUID

BY CHRISTABEL LOBO

Illustrations by John G. Hanlen,
c. 1941-1944

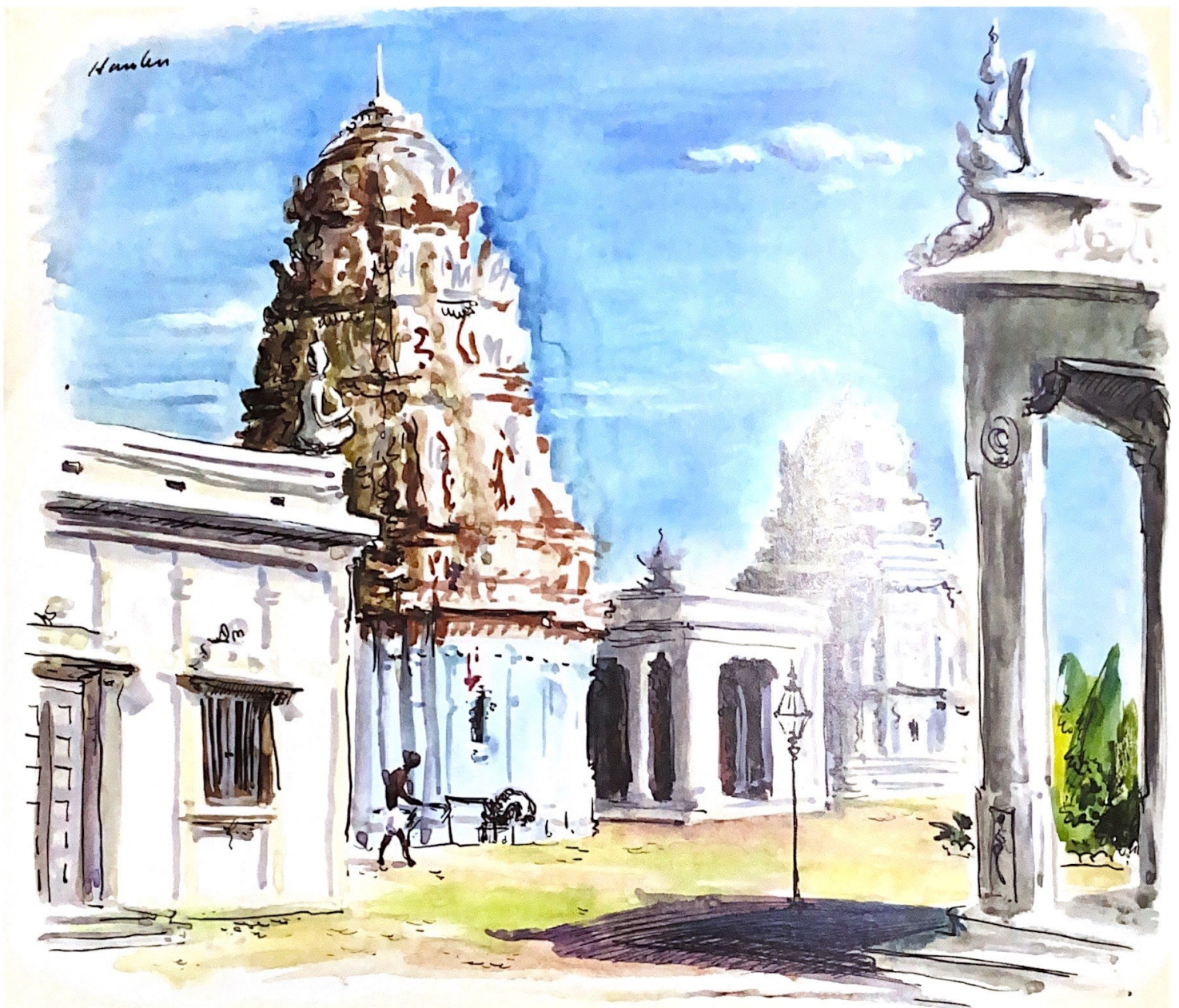


here is something innately holy about ghee. Made by first churning milk and then heating the resulting butter under a slow flame until the water content evaporates and the milk solids can be removed, its entire production is a purification of sorts. It makes both metaphorical and physical sense then that Indian cuisine's long love affair with ghee can be traced through centuries of Hindu mythology and Vedic scriptures.

Mentions of ghee dot the entirety collection of the *Vedas*, a collection of ancient Indian oral traditions jotted down sometime in the first millennium AD and widely considered an invaluable guide to the tastes of ancient Indian deities and people. Ghee was always the oil of choice used to slowly fry honey-sweetened desserts called *apupa*, the likely ancestor of the small sugar-soaked and deep-fried pancakes called *malpua*, variations of which can be seen throughout the subcontinent.

Practically speaking, the slow heating of butter not only produces nutty flavors and more golden hues but also extends shelf life, allowing ghee to withstand swelteringly hot Indian summers. But as historian Colleen Taylor Sen explains in *Feasts and Fasts: A History of Food in India*, ghee's status as an essential Indian condiment is also linked to the fact that it is one of the five *pancha-gavya*, substances thought to possess purifying properties. Along with milk, yogurt, urine, and dung, this clarified butter is produced by cows, sacred in the Hindu religion, and therefore makes an ideal offering for use in rituals. Offerings of food such as husked rice, black chickpeas, or over two hundred sweet dishes, are always cooked in generous amounts of ghee. This makes it an expensive offering often on par with gold or jewels to be given to Hindu deities in daily prayer ceremonies before being shared as *prasad* amongst devotees and their families. This intense spiritual connection with the gods using ghee is also seen in both Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, where ghee is viewed as a pure substance thought to provide good health,





In an “Ode to Ghee,” one of the thousand hymns that make up the *Rig Veda*, the fire god Agni's love for one of his favorite food offerings, ghee, is described:

They pour over the fire, smiling,
Like beautiful women on their way to a festival.
The streams of butter caress the logs,
And Agni, taking
pleasure in them, pays them court.

I watch them eagerly; they are like girls,
Painting themselves to go the wedding
There where the *soma* juice is pressed,
where sacrifice is made,
The streams of butter run down to be clarified.

intelligence and longevity, all qualities of the divine.

In the kitchen, ghee has long served a more delicious but equally important purpose: to sauté vegetables, cook meats, and enhance the flavor of rice, curries, rotis, and biryanis. Its high smoke point, which ranges from 375 to 485 degrees Fahrenheit depending on purity, makes it the perfect oil for baking or frying.

And in terms of its health benefits, ghee also has a few millennia of official approval to warrant its widespread use. In *Charaka Samhita* (2nd century BC), the oldest text available on the ancient medical science of Ayurveda, the use of ghee is pervasive. It can serve as a cure for numerous ailments, including bad vision, poor memory, weak digestion, and can even increase one's life expectancy. In Ayurvedic cooking, ghee is classified as *swastahita*, a group of foods that do not cause harm if consumed regularly and are therapeutic not just to the mind but to the body as well.

All these facts and traditions explain why ghee has long remained a staple in Indian pantries, but how it came to be embraced as a health food in the West is another story entirely. The early 20th century ushered in a new wave of South Asian ascetics to the United States, who not only brought with them spiritual teachings from the East, but the various physical practices of yoga, with which the Ayurvedic traditions of eating were closely intertwined. Although the practice of eating ghee was not widely adopted amongst the American eating public, the substance warranted enough interest that in 1898 *The New York Times* published its first short piece on Indian ghee. Syndicated from the popular British magazine *Blackwood's*, the piece discussed clarified butter's distinct flavor and long-term storage qualities.

This migration of ascetics was just a fraction of the much larger numbers of South Asians who made their way to the United States at this time. Some, like K. Yaman Kira, were more culinary-inclined. His restaurant, Ceylon India Inn, was one of the first to open in New

York City in 1915 and served not just as an eatery but as a community gathering place for new South Asian immigrants in Manhattan. By the 1920s, a sizeable Indian population—most of who sought jobs in farms, lumberyards and on the railroads—brought with them a rich repertoire of spices, religious traditions and of course, their love for ghee. “An Indian restaurant was discovered on Eight Avenue near Forty-second Street,” exclaimed journalist Helen Bullitt Lowry in 1921. “Six short weeks—and already the restaurant is half full of tourists, eagerly peering at each other for turbans and local color.”

By and large, the market for ghee in the United States remained relatively small up into the 1950s, at which point the American dairy industry found itself overwhelmed by 260 million pounds of excess butter. In ghee, the government saw a way. Consular and trade reports by the U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor dating as far back to 1909 indicated that if ghee were to be made in the United States, it would find a ready market in India. “Ghee—clarified butter—is more a part of everyday life in India than

the sandwich is in America,” reiterated marketing specialist Louis H. Burgwald, who the United States Department of Agriculture sent off to India, Pakistan, and Egypt in 1955 to study their methods of manufacturing this clarified butter. Not only did the two kinds of American-ghee he carried along with him satisfy most Indian palates as well as those of members of the Ghee Merchants Association, he also discovered the sheer variety of Indian ghee that existed. Residents of Calcutta and Madras preferred their ghee to be made from cow’s milk cooked at high heat, while Bombayites enjoyed consumption of low-heat buffalo ghee. According to Burgwald, making ghee seemed to be an excellent potential product for the U.S.’s surplus stock of butter, especially during India’s season of short supply, which ran from April through October. Even though India ultimately never ended up importing any ghee from the United States, a March 1955 trade report indicated that both Pakistan and Iran did, purchasing over four million pounds of American-made ghee. All this fuss about butter, like the tremendous fascination with the ascetics



of half a century before, certainly piqued the public's curiosity yet again. That same year *The New York Times* published "Ghee Is for 'Good'" by R. K. Narayan, a prolific literary Indian writer who explained not just how to pronounce this unfamiliar oil ("Gee!") but its uses as well. The tone of the article was undoubtedly celebratory: "If I were asked to mention any single achievement of our country, I'd say it is the discovery of the process of changing butter into ghee, in which state this product may be

preserved for months, without any elaborate cold-storing or hermetic sealing."

The popularity of ghee began to snowball, rapidly becoming the healthy fat of choice in the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s that embraced the Ayurvedic diet and yogic wellness philosophies. Along with the practice of yoga itself, which was seen as a better alternative to dealing with society and politics than drugs, Ayurvedic practices were gradually purveyed into the main-



INDIAN VILLAGE .

John Haulen

stream. By the early 1980s, two renowned yogis, Yogi Bhañan and Swami Satchidananda, had the foresight to use the principles of yoga and Ayurveda to market their brands, Yogi Tea and Peace Cereal. Sandeep Agarwal, who hails from a family of ghee producers in the northern Indian state of Haryana, has been producing Pure Indian Foods, a range of best-selling organic ghees, in New Jersey for close to a decade now and was responsible for getting the paleo diet to endorse this clarified butter. By recommending adding a dollop of ghee into dieter's morning coffee, this rich, nutty oil has effectively achieved mainstream status. Reports of improved mental clarity and overall energy levels have put ghee at the top of food lists recommended by nutritionists and consumed by professional athletes.

And celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow and her New Age wellness brand Goop have only further propelled ghee into the spotlight. Their use of this clarified butter is a far cry from the ancient hymns of the *Rig Veda* and its original use as an important offering in Hindu,

Buddhist and Zoroastrian religious ceremonies. A quick search shows ghee being touted as a recommended oil in numerous recipes on the Goop, including Thanksgiving turkey and their very own Sex Bark, an energy booster and aphrodisiac of sorts. In need of a mental health boost? Goop recommends considering ghee, a wholesome dietary fat that nourishes the body's vital energy called *prana* and can help brain development.

The ending of Narayan's 1955 *New York Times* article, the popular ancient Indian saying "the soul thrives on love as the growing body thrives on ghee," is almost prophetic six decades later. With the repeated use of this healthy, shelf-stable fat in the *longue durée* of Ayurvedic cuisine as well as flashes of fad diets like the paleo, it's clear that this Indian staple is perhaps soon to be an American one, too. ■

CHRISTABEL LOBO

is a food and travel writer based between Washington, D.C. and Mysore, India.