

Pomtajer: exploring the potential of an under-utilised specie in domestic cuisine and gastronomy.

Dutch artist and culinary journalist Karin Vaneker researches and explores the potential of Pomtajer (*Xanthosoma spp.*) in domestic cuisine and gastronomy. This venture started in 2003, when someone asked (her) if the highly popular Surinamese oven dish Pom was of Creole or Jewish origin. Pom uses Pomtajer as a major ingredient. The dish has crossed all kinds of social (and cultural) boundaries and is part of the living or intangible cultural heritage of the former Dutch colony Surinam. When, in around 1975, Surinam became independent a large part of the population crossed the Atlantic Ocean and migrated to The Netherlands, taking with them Pom and Pomtajer.



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Mavis Hofwijk & Karin Vaneker, Amsterdam Zuidoost

The research into the roots of Pom has resulted in several articles, recipes and an exhibition. At present Vaneker investigates traditional preparation methods and explores its possibilities in gastronomy and use in the food-industry.

Aroids

Cultivation and consumption of aroids is foremost restricted to ethnicities in and from (sub-) tropical regions. Together with taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) genera of Pomtajer (*Xanthosoma spp.*) are the most widely grown and consumed aroids. Taro originates in South-east Asia while Pomtajer is the only indigenous American aroid that is widely used for food and considered a most important foodcrop. Estimates are that at present between 400 and 500 million people consume aroids.

The nutritional value of Pomtajer is comparable to the potato, while the small size of the starch grains makes it highly hypoallergenic and therefore probably easier to digest. Furthermore, the mineral content is higher than in taro. Due to their world importance as energy foods and especially in recent years, the cultivation and breeding of aroids such as Pomtajer is attaining more and more research attention. Because they remain in traditional cuisine's tropical roots and tubers are often overlooked. Apart from traditional preparation methods relevant literature and cookbooks hardly provide recipes and information. The standard advice is still that roots and tubers are inter-exchangeable.

When thoroughly cooked, not only the corms and cormels but also the stalks, leaves, and even the petioles of Pomtajer are edible. Although in most (sub-) tropical regions not all parts of the plant are used and/or seen fit for human consumption.



2007

Mavis Hofwijk peeling Pomtajer, Amsterdam Zuidoost

Surinam

Also in Surinam, one of South America's smallest countries, neither the stalks, leaves or petioles but only the underground parts of indigenous Pomtajer are used for food preparation. The cormels sometimes end up in soup and the corm is used exclusively for the preparation of Pom.

From 1667 until 1975 Surinam was a Dutch colony, during this period the country became a melting pot of cultures and religions. Surinam's high ethnic diversity is reflected by its cuisine which became a mixture of ingredients and cooking techniques of local Indians, colonial powers, African slaves and Asian immigrants. These include different ethnic and religious groups such as Amerindians, Creoles, Javanese, Dutch, Lebanese, Portuguese, Germans, Chinese, Indian Hindustanis, Jews and French Huguenots. At present, for all Surinamese ethnic groups Pom is a festive dish, traditionally served at birthdays and celebrations. To indicate the popularity of Pom, if a Surinamese is asked to name his or her favourite dish, nine out of ten times the answer will be Pom and "without Pom there is no birthday" is a well-known Surinamese saying. Pom is also prestige. It takes time to prepare, and the amount of meat required means it is costly. When a woman cooks her first Pom, the whole family comes round to try it. As a result many happy memories and emotions but stories and myths are also associated with Pom. Every Surinamese is very proud of the preparation of his/her own slightly different version.



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Cooking Pom

The basic preparation method for Pom is: in a tall metal dish, place sautéed chicken pieces between two layers of raw grated Pomtajer, mixed with citrus juice and a sauce made from oil and/or margarine, onions, celery, tomatoes, salt, pepper and nutmeg. The mixture is then cooked in the oven in a high-sided enamel dish for at least an hour or until the Pom becomes golden brown.

Since every ethnic and religious group has added ingredients to suit their individual tastes and dietary requirements, Pom also reflects the varied social makeup of the Surinamese community. Creoles, for example, use zoutvlees (saltbeef), while Hindustanis avoid beef and add piccalilli instead; Javanese add soy sauce; Chinese often add ginger and/or lychees (*Litchi chinensis*) and lastly, together with chicken Jews use either oil or margarine.

Pomtajer in The Netherlands

Before and after its independence in 1975, many Surinamese migrated to the Netherlands and currently around 335,779 Surinamese are living there (compared to 475,996 people in Suriname). Upon arrival they started to replicate their traditional food patterns for which they needed special ingredients. Especially towards the end of the 20th century, the commercial production and distribution of grated and frozen Pomtajer facilitated its export from Suriname to the Surinamese Dutch community.

Although Surinamese cuisine is a domestic cuisine and Pom is mostly prepared at home, the dish has gained some popularity outside the Dutch Surinamese community. This is especially the case in areas with large Surinamese communities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Almere. In Amsterdam for example there are around 70.000 Surinamese and 120 plus Surinam eateries and lunchrooms. Most serve either Pom or 'broodje Pom' (sandwich Pom), which is a derivation of the national dish that has gained popularity outside the Surinamese Dutch community. Meanwhile both can even be ordered in Dutch 'take-aways' and ordered for home-delivery. The popular Dutch singer Gordon is on record as saying that 'broodje Pom' is his favourite food. The gaining popularity of Pom is being supported by the many recipes that have, in recent years, appeared in several Surinamese and Dutch cookbooks, newspapers and on Internetsites.



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Zoubida eats Pom



Thorvald de Winter, Nelleke & Mavis



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Exploring Pomtajer's gastronomic potential

Apart from recipes for Pom which appear foremost in the Dutch language, modern English language cookbooks rarely include recipes for pomtajer. Because the prevailing advice is that roots and tubers are inter-exchangeable, as an experiment and part of the 2007 exhibition 'Pom op het Menu' in ImagineIC in Amsterdam, Michelinstarred chefs, (food) artists and a fooddesigner were invited to create new dishes with pomtajer. In order to inspire the participants, the well-known Amsterdam-based Surinamese caterer Mavis Hofwijk (born in Paramaribo, 1939) demonstrated 'cooking Pom' The result was a Pomclafoutis, created by Thorvald de Winter of restaurant Apicius, at present the only dish in which Pomtajer is served in a restaurant at a two star Michelin level.

Soenil Bahadoer is the only Michelin-starred chef in the Netherlands of Surinamese (Hindu) origin. By modernising his wife's family recipe, the one star Michelin chef put his gastronomic version of Pom on the menu in his restaurant De Lindehof



Soenil Bahadoer

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Inspired by Dutch snack food culture, food designer Katja Gruijters presented Pom de Friet (French fries made with Pomtajer) and the Pom de Krokot (croquette).

Pom de Friet by Katja Gruijters

As a reference to his own half-German and the multi-ethnic background of the Surinamese population, foodperformer/artist Freddie Beckmans served Pomtajer pancakes with Chinese chickenfeet.



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Freddie Beckmans @ Pom de Krokot



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American-born artist Debra Solomon used her own and Pom's Jewish origin to prepare Latkes with Pomtajer and bitter (wild) herbs.



According to artist Oumar Mbengue Atakosso, boulettes are a traditional preparation method in his home country Senegal and he therefore created boulettes de Pom.

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Oumar Mbengue Atakosso Boulettes de Pom

The result was professionally photographed by Pieter Ouddeken. Furthermore and inspired by the exhibition and experiment, patissier Carl Douglas created a pomdessert and Pay-Uun Hiu, of the Dutch newspaper De Volkskrant, published a recipe for a vegetarian pomcurry.

The success of the experiment confirmed the inter-exchangeability of roots and tubers. But when compared to the potato, for which numerous recipes and preparation techniques exist, the potential of pomtajer both in domestic cuisine and gastronomy has yet to be explored. To address this gap, Vaneker investigates traditional preparation methods and recipes and explores its possibilities in gastronomy and use in the food-industry.

Karin Vaneker
Oostzaan, July 2008

For more information see

www.Pomophetmenu.nl or <http://www.imagineic.nl/english/>
Mavis Hofwijk: www.surinaamsbuffet.nl
Thorvald de Winter: www.restaurantapicius.com
Soenil Bahadoer: <http://www.restaurant-delindehof.nl/>
Katja Gruijters: www.katjagruijters.nl
Debra Solomon: www.culiblog.org
Fredie Beckmans: www.worstclub.nl
Oumar Mbengue Atakosso: www.oumarmbengue.com