

Pudi

By Mary Ann Thomas (she/her)

When Mom fried chicken wings for me and my four brothers, we held each piece in our right hands, raised it to our teeth, and tore into the spicy flesh. Tumeric, garlic powder, Kashmiri chili powder, chicken masala, and salt: a simple recipe that makes my mouth water even as I write it. Sometimes, I asked permission before taking 'just one more wing,' but other times, I'd slip one wing, then another, onto my plate before my brothers caught on. We fought and yelled over each bite and then, when the meat was gone, we fought and yelled for pudi.

Pudi is dust. It's the dust sloughing off fried meat, slightly burnt in oil. It's heat on my tongue spreading all over my mouth. It's the reminder that the food that I grew up with can't be found in Indian restaurants, that the flavors I grew up with weren't modified to please a colonial palate. Pudi is why, at the end of every fried chicken meal, my oldest brother poured our rice back into the pan, where the last of the burnt, oily spice lived. He mixed it all up so us younger kids would quit fighting over a teaspoon of flavor. Pudi is why I have to eat my food with my hands: I mix each grain of rice with dust until it's tenderly coated in gold, red, orange, brown flavors. I adjust how much spice I need on how my tongue feels and taste my food on the tips of my fingers before it even enters my mouth.

Pudi is why I don't talk about my food; maybe it's why I don't write about my food. It's hard to explain what pudi is if you weren't raised with it. It's hard to teach someone how or why to eat their hands. It's hard to convince someone of the value of burnt spice.

But I come from a country where people drink tiny shots of hot chai throughout the day, despite a heat that makes sweat stream from the back of their necks. Where I come from is not easily distilled or explained; my food is not easily digestible; the worlds within my food were never meant to be simple.

Pudi: it's the Malayalam word for dust. It refers to a food, but it's also the name of my last remaining great aunt. She is called Pudi, affectionately named because even small things, for us, are held with great love.

ART: BLUE DELLIQUANTI (THEY/THEM)