A sweet History of Brazil

Alexandre Menegale *

From the sugar cane plantations, sugar mills and slave quarters: the trajectory of Brazilian sweets practically begins when the country is born.

Like the characters John and Mary who left small pieces of bread along the way so as not to get lost in the forest, if we sprinkle our history with chunks of quindins, jellies, compotes or crystallized fruits we will certainly be left with a faithful chronological panorama that goes from the origins of our people to the most recent manifestations of the most refined national confections. The Emperor D. Pedro II would rather have some fig compote straight from the pan than perform his courtly duties. Rui Barbosa melted for some tablespoons full of potato compote. And how about João Goulart and Jorge Amado who were so much in love with coconut sweets? Never mind Juscelino Kubitschek, who could never refuse some babade-moça, or composers Roberto Carlos and Chico Buarque, who may have derived their inspiration from generous portions of pumpkin preserves.

But where did this strong gastronomic evidence of our miscegenation come from? Historians say that sugar, obtained from the evaporation of sugar cane juice, was discovered in India somewhere around the III century. But it was probably the Arabs that introduced it in a broad scale, creating candied nuts and almonds as well as fig and orange compotes. Upon conquering the Iberic Peninsula in the XV century, the Arabs took with them sugar cane seedlings to ensure the future production of their sweets. From Portugal and Spain sugar cane went on to America by the hands of the explorers. This resulted in the sweetest invasion of Brazilian history, a culture that would extend itself through the centuries ahead.

More than simply describing consecrated recipes, remembering tastes that inundate our memories or trying to determine

*The author is a journalist who has a column in Jornal da Comunidade, Brasilia, DF, and in the website www.interlistabsb.com.br.
the origin of a certain culinary specialty, I decided to turn over the pages caramelized by time and found myself surprised by the anthropologic/gastronomic communion of tastes. Even before we had an emperor we had already surrendered to compotes, cakes and sweets that gained local shape and flavor when the Portuguese disembarked in our coast.

It is a fact that many sweets that we currently consider Brazilian have a Portuguese origin. The use of egg whites to starch and iron the nuns garments in Portuguese convents, for example, is a tasty one. What were they to do with the enormous amount of yolks that was left over? Being quite creative, the nuns began to make all kinds of sweets with this blessed abundance of ingredients, among them: quindim, bom-bocado, papo-de-anjo, custards and puddings. Many generations have gone by and we still delight in these same treats while believing ourselves to be pioneers in the sweet art of preparing confections.

Without going into other European invasions that would later contribute to enrich our confections, let us focus on the communion between Portuguese tradition and Brazilian fruits. A fundamental link surfaces in this productive chain: the Negro quituteiras or sweet makers that went from the slave quarters straight to the kitchens of their mistresses taking with them manioc flour, corn flour, pumpkin and yams to make their treats. Particularly in the geographic region that encompasses Pernambuco, Alagoas and the São Paulo countryside.

We know that fruits have formed the base of desserts for centuries from the far corners of Babylon to the French and Italian courts. We know that fruits have formed the base of desserts for centuries from the far corners of Babylon to the French and Italian courts.

Think of ambrosia, pumpkin compote, banana and orange preserves, coconut candy, meringue, tapioca and so many other treasures.

Still in colonial times, cashew and guava gained noble contours being considered the two great exponents of the plantation houses. It was also at this time that the smell of baked or fried bananas sprinkled with cinnamon invaded the properties and that sugar, the so-called mel de engenho or honey of the sugar mills, was mixed with manioc flour.

In the sugar plantations of Pernambuco, Paraíba, Alagoas and Maranhão and in the big houses of Recife, São Luiz and Maceió, Negro cooks were true alchemists in the creation of a regional cuisine. Not to mention Bahia, a state where white tradition is barely noticeable in the salty stews, subdued as it was by the overpowering heat of the African spices of Negro cooks.

Once the prestige of the combination of sugar with such allies as manioc flour, yams and breadfruit was established, the traditional rice pudding gained national inflections with the addition of coconut milk. At the same time tapioca arose mightily among patriarchal tea tables, alone or accompanied by pamonha, beiju, cuscus or coconut sweets. This is also when the traditional pé-de-moleque (made with cashew nuts) and corn-based canjica and cakes arose.

But if the origin of most sweets is easily identified, some recipes such as that of the Souza Leão Cake that prevails in Pernambuco are claimed by many.

Speaking of cakes: wedding cakes and the pyramids of sweets that form the center of noble
The Taste of Brazil

Cakes, pies, cookies, jams, compotes, mousses, ice-creams and gelatins permeate our hungry imagination.

Wedding tables have their origin in Portugal. Here begins the art of ornamentation, with the confection of letters of designs made with cinnamon as well as the creation of embroidered tablecloths and napkins and decorated boxes and cut papers. During colonial times in Brazil it was common in religious processions for people to carry trays of sweets that were offered for free to those who represented biblical characters. There is even a story that tells of how during one of these processions a man would have distributed sweets that represented Jews, resulting in his denunciation to the Inquisition.

Years later one of the most enchanting allies of cuisine and why not of modern civilization was born: ice. From then on Brazilian fruits, present in compotes, jellies and puddings that were served hot gained new contours and were transformed into ice-cream. Being viewed as creams for warm days, they pleased both the eye and the mouth. Soon they crossed the boundaries of the large properties and plantations and became staples of sweet shops in the large cities of Brazil. Ice-cream almost became a landmark for the disappearance of the classic patriarchal hot deserts and of the lack of prestige of tea parties with country cheese and toast. According to historians, newspapers of the first half of the XIX century depict ice-cream with a sinful note: sweet shops thus far restricted to men start to receive the first damsels.

As years went by the arrival of other European immigrants spread throughout the country the genes of British, French and German confectionary traditions among others, resulting in Brazilian versions of their most famous treats. Today the most consumed sugar is refined white sugar, but for the confection of sweets and compotes unrefined crystal sugar is broadly used. In addition, certain traditional recipes demand the use of brown sugar or rapadura. The dichotomy between pleasure and guilt is one of the dogmas that surround us. Cakes, pies, cookies, jams, compotes, mousses, ice-creams and gelatins permeate our hungry imagination.

We treasure memories, images and tastes. Who doesn’t get lost in thought upon smearing his fingers with candied guava, finds himself the happiest of kings upon unabashedly biting a luxurious cream puff or is filled with overwhelming pride after indulging in sweets made with Brazilian fruits? Be it as it may, the truth is that the origin of Brazilian sweets is above all anthropological, historical and elucidative. Once you have read these pages do not hesitate: close your eyes and bring to mind your most poignant memory and be sure that what you will see will be a Brazilian sweet.