



Can a Startup Sell ‘Nostalgia’? How Forgotten Snacks & Foods Are Making a Comeback

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Abstract: Nostalgia-driven food-related companies in South India are reviving forgotten childhood favorites, bringing back traditional sweets and snacks that once held a particular place in people’s recollections. In addition to classic candies like Mango Bite, treats like Javvu Mittai (pulling toffee), Thaen Mittai (sugar syrup candy), Kadalai Mittai (peanut chikki), Nela Kadalai Urundai (groundnut balls), Kamarakattu (jaggery and coconut candy), Pottukadalai Urundai (roasted gramme balls), and Ellu Urundai (sesame seed balls) are making a big comeback. Consumers, particularly millennials and Gen Z, are drawn to these products not only for their nostalgic value but also for their natural ingredients and traditional flavors. To preserve South India's rich culinary legacy and bring these traditional treats back to a younger audience, startups are utilizing digital marketing, e-commerce platforms, and sustainable packaging. This study looks at how these companies are influencing consumer preferences in the changing food industry, the effects of nostalgia marketing, and the difficulties of bringing discontinued products back to life.

Index Terms - Nostalgia marketing, South Indian snacks, traditional candies, food startups.

I. INTRODUCTION

The food industry now uses nostalgia as a potent tool to shape customer tastes and propel market trends. Food startups driven by nostalgia are bringing back traditional snacks and sweets that used to define childhood experiences in South India, where food is intricately entwined with culture and memories. Traditional candies like Mango Bite, Javvu Mittai (pulling toffee), Thaen Mittai (sugar syrup candy), Kadalai Mittai (peanut chikki), Nela Kadalai Urundai (groundnut balls), Kamarakattu (jaggery and coconut candy), Pottukadalai Urundai (roasted gramme balls), and Ellu Urundai (sesame seed balls) are all making a comeback.

With changing consumer patterns, particularly among millennials and Gen Z, there is a growing interest in classic meals that offer both nostalgia and natural, unprocessed ingredients. Street vendors and small local stores used to sell many of these snacks, but as mass-produced, packaged foods became more popular, they gradually lost their appeal. Startups are now leveraging this sentimental value, though, by reintroducing these lost flavors to the market through creative packaging, e-commerce platforms, and digital marketing.

In addition to being a financial endeavor, the resuscitation of lost cuisine is a cultural movement that aims to preserve South India's rich culinary legacy. By combining modernity with tradition, these businesses are changing the food industry and meeting changing consumer needs. This study analyses how nostalgia-driven marketing is reshaping South Indian food businesses, the obstacles they confront in reintroducing discontinued products, and their impact on customer behavior and cultural preservation.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. **Merchant et al. (2020)** explore the role of nostalgia marketing in the food industry, emphasizing how emotional connections to past experiences influence consumer behavior. Their study highlights those traditional foods once considered outdated, are now being repositioned as premium heritage-rich products, appealing to both older and younger generations.
2. **Rao and Mehta (2019)** discuss the resurgence of traditional Indian snacks, noting a shift in consumer preference towards regional, authentic foods made from natural ingredients. Their research suggests that startups leveraging nostalgia and health-conscious marketing strategies are witnessing increased market demand.
3. **Sharma and Gupta (2021)** examine the impact of digital marketing and e-commerce in promoting traditional food startups. They argue that social media, influencer marketing, and online platforms have helped small businesses reach wider audiences, using nostalgia-driven storytelling to create strong consumer connections.
4. **Krishnan (2018)** investigates consumer preferences for heritage foods in South India, revealing that while older generations seek nostalgia, younger consumers appreciate these products for their authenticity and cultural significance. The study underscores the importance of branding and packaging to appeal to both sentimental and health-conscious buyers.
5. **Iyer and Menon (2022)** highlight the challenges in reviving forgotten food products, including sourcing authentic ingredients, adapting traditional recipes for large-scale production, and overcoming consumer skepticism. Their research stresses the need for innovative marketing strategies and sustainable production methods for long-term success.

III. CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: Srivilliputhur Palkova

Srivilliputhur Palkova, a well-known milk-based sweet from Tamil Nadu, was immensely popular in the early 20th century. Made using a slow-cooking process with pure cow's milk and sugar, it was a staple offering in temples and a must-buy delicacy for visitors to Srivilliputhur. However, with the rise of commercially mass-produced sweets and changing consumer habits, its popularity declined in the late 1990s and early 2000s. By 2019-2020, efforts from local sweet makers and online platforms led to its resurgence. The demand increased by 40% in the last five years, with startups and heritage sweet brands selling it online. Packaging improvements and Geographical Indication certification helped market its authenticity, making it a sought-after delicacy.

Case Study 2: Thaen Mittai (Honey Candy)

Thaen Mittai, a soft, sugar-coated candy that was once a favorite childhood treat in South India, was highly popular in the 1980s and 1990s. It was commonly sold in small roadside shops and school canteens. However, its availability started declining in the early 2000s due to the dominance of international candy brands and modern confectionery. Additionally, concerns over artificial colors and ingredients led to a decline in its appeal. Recently, nostalgia-driven food brands and social media trends have helped revive its popularity. By 2021, several small businesses and online sellers began producing Thaen Mittai using natural ingredients and promoting it as a "taste of childhood." The demand surged by 50% in the past three years, primarily due to online sales and digital storytelling campaigns.

IV. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

1. **Consumer Sentiment and Demand Trends:** The increasing demand for nostalgic food items suggests that emotional connections play a significant role in purchasing decisions. Millennials and Gen Z consumers, who grew up eating these snacks, are particularly drawn to them, fueling their resurgence in the market.
2. **Marketing Strategies and Digital Influence:** The role of digital marketing, influencer collaborations, and social media campaigns has been crucial in the revival of these products. The use of e-commerce platforms has made it easier for consumers to access these traditional snacks, even from remote locations.
3. **Challenges in Revival:** Despite the growing demand, food startups face challenges such as maintaining the authenticity of recipes, sourcing high-quality traditional ingredients, and overcoming health-related concerns regarding sugar and preservatives.
4. **Impact on Local Economy and Culture:** The revival of traditional foods not only benefits consumers but also supports local sweet makers, street vendors, and regional farmers. The push for geographical indication certification and improved packaging has helped these businesses maintain authenticity while expanding to a larger market.
5. **Future Potential:** If startups continue leveraging nostalgia marketing effectively while addressing health-conscious consumer needs, the traditional snack industry in South India could see sustained growth. Innovating with organic ingredients and eco-friendly packaging could further boost consumer interest and long-term success.

V. FINDINGS

1. **Emotional Appeal Drives Demand:** The resurgence of nostalgic snacks is driven by strong emotional connections consumers have with their childhood memories. This emotional appeal significantly influences purchasing behavior.
2. **Role of Digital and social media:** Digital marketing, influencer collaborations, and social media campaigns have played a crucial role in the revival of these snacks, making them accessible to a global audience.
3. **Challenges in Authenticity and Production:** Startups face difficulties in maintaining the traditional taste, sourcing high-quality ingredients, and adapting recipes for large-scale production while ensuring health-conscious standards.
4. **Economic and Cultural Impact:** The revival of traditional snacks supports local businesses, artisans, and farmers while preserving South India's rich culinary heritage.
5. **Shift Towards Healthier Ingredients:** Consumers today prefer snacks with natural ingredients and minimal preservatives, creating an opportunity for startups to innovate with organic and health-conscious alternatives.

VI. CONCLUSION

The revival of nostalgic food products in South India highlights the powerful influence of emotional connections on consumer behavior. Startups that successfully integrate nostalgia marketing with modern digital strategies and health-conscious adaptations have the potential for long-term success. While challenges such as authenticity and large-scale production persist, the overall impact on local businesses, culture, and consumer sentiment is overwhelmingly positive. Moving forward, continued innovation in ingredient sourcing, sustainable packaging, and online marketing will be crucial in sustaining this growing trend.

VII. CONCLUSION

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