



NEW YORK PRESS

JEFFREY STANLEY is
addicted to what may
arguably be India's
most disgusting export

CONFESSIONS OF A WHITE, MIDDLE-AGED PAAN EATER

CONFESSIONS OF A WHITE, MIDDLE-AGED PAAN EATER

I pull my hat low as I pound the rain-slicked sidewalks of Curry Hill around noon on a frigid November weekday. I look about furtively as I walk up Lexington, stopping outside of a DVD shop before I dart inside. There I meet my sugar man, a Punjabi who only goes by the *nom de commerce* Arora. By now I know his real name, but he likes to go by the one-word moniker. I'm happy to comply because the transaction feels more illicit that way—and I want to protect his identity.

Sure, Arora looks like an ordinary video store clerk, but to those suffering from betelmania—like me—all of these movie posters, Bollywood DVDs and Zakir Hussein tabla CDs are just a front for the *meeta paan*. I move to the prep area at the end of the counter: a dull green, square mat bordered with small Plexiglas condiment bins containing a variety of seeds, dried fruits and spices. My eye lingers on these mouthwatering treats while Arora finishes up with a legit video customer at the cash register. As soon as we're alone, he sidles my way and transforms from video clerk to Kolkata curbside *paan walla* right before my eyes.

I'm a professor, and I've got a stack of college student scripts waiting to be read at home. Because it's going to be a long week, I order a dozen pieces. Arora sets to work, methodically laying out 12 fresh, heart-shaped, big-as-your-hand betel leaves in three neat rows like a casino poker dealer.

Next, he uses a pestle to dab each leaf with a pale yellow paste of lime (that's caustic calcium hydroxide, not the citrus fruit). Then comes a slathering of light brown *catechu* (a paste made from acacia), followed by pinches of shredded coconut, cardamom, plain fennel seeds, candied fennel seeds, a sprinkle of rosewater and a glob of *gulkand* (a thick preserve made from sugar and rose petals).

If one wishes—and I oh-so-dearly wish—Arora will top it all off with a sprinkle of crushed areca nuts, more commonly called betel nuts. Finally, he expertly folds each leaf into a tidy triangular pocket of joy, then wraps each one in aluminum foil and bags them all up for the ride home.

On the sidewalk again, I don't make it far before I must stop in a darkened doorway to unwrap one of these green, organic cluster bombs. The *meeta paan* is moist from the *gulkand*, lime, *catechu* and rose water seeping out and mixing with the bright red juice starting to ooze from the betel nuts. I shove the whole thing into my cheek and wait three seconds for the lime paste to dilate the pores in my mucous membranes, for the betel nut juice to seep into my bloodstream and for the whole concoction to press my happy button, mildly stimulating my mind. I suck the sticky residue off my fingers, drop the foil wrapper into the nearest trashcan and continue on my way with a new spring in my step. Over the next 10 minutes, I'll suck on it and slowly chew, regularly swallowing the sweet mélange of flavors. Eventually I'll



JEFFREY STANLEY is addicted to what may arguably be India's most disgusting export

swallow the tattered remnants of the betel leaf, still lightly energized.

The Curry Hill section of Murray Hill has for years featured a preponderance of Desi mercantile culture—Indian and Pakistani restaurants, sari shops and supermarkets—but lately two newer Desi imports seem to be gaining ground in the

city. One is the kati roll, a succulent Indian street food similar to a burrito or falafel. The bromidically named Kathi Rolls opened last year near the corner of East 27th Street and Lexington, and a kati roll truck is now regularly parked weekdays on nearby Fifth Avenue to serve a lunchtime crowd. To New York's Desi community

(the word comes from an old Sanskrit root meaning country or homeland, and refers generally to the South Asian diaspora), kati rolls are nothing new, but for the rest of us curious foodies, they have become a tasty new dining option in our ever-growing spectrum of international comfort cuisines.

South Asia's other "new" import—which has actually been in use for many centuries—was the reason for my trip here today, and it's called *meeta paan*. *Meeta*, or sweet, *paan* is not to be confused with *tambaku* or tobacco *paan*, a savory and more powerful version that includes chewing tobacco. *Tambaku paan* chewers in India spit—they don't swallow—defiling street corners and stairwells with an indelible red spittle from the betel nuts. The lime component is so caustic that the spit from 50,000 pedestrians crossing Kolkata's Howrah Bridge every day is corroding the 67-year-old steel girders, fomenting a serious structural crisis that Indian authorities are struggling to remedy.

The solution won't just lie in passing anti-spitting ordinances, but in changing many centuries of tradition. Aside from making you feel peppy for a few minutes, *paan* is also used as a *digestif* and breath freshener. The betel leaves also have symbolic value in Hindu religious ceremonies. During the portion of an Indian wedding in which the bride and groom in an arranged marriage traditionally see each other for the first time (a moment known as *shubho drishti*, or "first look"), the bride is carried out holding a pair of betel leaves coyly over her face. *Shubho drishti* continues today as tradition, even when the couple have already met and fallen madly in love. My wife Pia and I are a case in point: She's Indian-American, and we were married in Kolkata in a full Bengali ceremony earlier this year.

Pia knew from experience that most Westerners find chewing *paan* to be a backward and unfortunate folk habit. Naturally, she suspected that I would be an exception because I am, after all, a Southerner. My grandmother Orelia was out picking tobacco at the age of 4 and had an 8th-grade education. Half of my family are chain-smokers. I went to high school in the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains surrounded by chewers, dippers and spitters. Two years ago, while grocery shopping together in Curry Hill, Pia's jaw dropped when we passed a *paan* shop, a bona fide *paan walla* right here in Manhattan. She wanted to prove her theory that I was already pre-habituated to *paan*, so she pulled me inside. Her hunch turned out to be right, and my love affair with *meeta paan* soon began in earnest.

By the time I set foot in India for our wedding and a three-week honeymoon

traveling around the country, I had already made a plan to be a *paan* tourist, sampling different varieties of it along the way. The fact that I had arrived a somewhat seasoned chewer also gave me an unexpected cultural advantage. Pia's aunts had been nervous about meeting me, an American, for the first time. When they

discovered I liked paan, the nervousness abated. We quickly bonded because, as any Desi will tell you, any respectable Indian wife owns a household paan kit.

I left India so thoroughly tuned in and turned on to the joys of the mild betel nut buzz that my next walk through Curry Hill was like a religious awakening. That first paan shop was only the tip of the iceberg. Paan now beckoned to me from every quarter, and had been there all along waiting patiently for me to notice it. A green and white FRESH PAAN sign swings in the breeze over one store entrance with a giant betel leaf painted on the wall just inside the doorway. A halal butcher shop features a small WE SELL FRESH PAAN sign in the window. An Indian grocery boasts my favorite of these advertisements: a shiny, new fluorescent sign proclaiming LUCKY PAAN and featuring personified, happy betel leaves waiting to take me away.

Still, I stick with my main man, Arora. He's the one I've chosen as my go-to dealer because his paan tastes freshest, and it's the least expensive in the neighborhood. He wasn't surprised that I hadn't noticed all of the paan signs before my enlightenment. "Mostly it's Hindu people and Bangladeshi people who know it," he explains. "Americans don't know what it is, so the signs mean nothing."

I wonder whether there are any other *sahebs* like me trolling the mean streets of Curry Hill looking for a score. "White guys? A few guys. Not much," he says. "They come back from India and they look for it."

Ouch. Arora has me pegged, and I'm a little disappointed to be so quickly pigeonholed. I defensively explain to him that I wasn't just a tourist in India. I got married there in a traditional two-day ceremony. I have become part of an Indian family. I'm even learning the language, dammit. He thinks for a moment as he continues assembling my latest order, then shrugs.

"You got married in India? Then you're an Indian now." If Arora has learned nothing else during his 12 years in the States, it's that the customer is always right—even when the customer is laughably wrong.

According to him, he gets mostly Indian customers ranging in age from 15 to 80. They come for the meeta paan, or his prepackaged cans of *paan masala*, a mix of betel nuts, catechu and cardamom. Is he a meeta paan chewer himself? "Yes. It used to be five to ten every day." I'm astonished by the number, but then he qualifies it. "Now I have a problem with my teeth, so it's only two or three a day." He insists that his dental problems are unrelated to his habit, but given the sugars, coupled with the lime's corrosive powers, I can't help but wonder if he might be wrong. Is he aware of the dangers? "I think the nuts are bad," is all he'll concede.

I poll another paan walla in the neighborhood and get a similar answer. "Dangerous? No, it's all-natural. It's only bad if you put tobacco."

Let's face facts: Even without tobacco, even without lime paste, the betel nut is

addictive and carcinogenic. The areca nut, commonly misidentified as a betel nut because of its association with the betel leaf, has been indisputably linked with oral cancer—so much for new-age medicine's oft-repeated myth that cancer is a purely manmade disease that didn't exist before the industrial revolution. South Asians have been chewing betel nuts for thousands of years.

I seek guidance from my new mother-



Aluminum foil-wrapped meeta-paan ready for chewing.

I shove the whole thing into my cheek and wait three seconds for the lime paste to dilate the pores in my mucous membranes, for the betel nut juice to seep into my bloodstream and for the whole concoction to press my happy button, mildly stimulating my mind.

in-law Rathna on the Desi point of view. She's a self-proclaimed former betel-nut addict who migrated to the U.S. in 1974 with her husband Shibu. She was never particularly interested in paan, just the betel nuts, or paan masala. "I started at a young age, 10 or 12," she tells me. "My maternal grandmother used to chew paan, and she would ask her sons every two days to go to the store and bring her betel nuts. She used to offer them to me. She knew I liked them, so she took a small container and filled it and gave it to me to chew whenever I liked."

Given what we now know about betel nuts, this seems as remarkably irresponsible as getting a kid hooked on chewing tobacco. Did her grandmother understand the dangers? "At that time, people were not aware," Rathna says. By the time she was a teenager, her mom and dad urged her to stop chewing it but for superficial reasons, telling her that red-stained teeth weren't ladylike. "It's almost like they're telling me it looks bad, not that it's dangerous." She says she didn't hear about its health risks until college.

Undaunted, she went right on chewing betel nuts after settling in eastern Massachusetts. She was a conservative

Hindu housewife, yes, but she was also a twentysomething with a bit of a rebellious streak. Even after a paan-chewing aunt back in India developed oral cancer, she went right on chewing. "I was kind of addicted," she admits. "I used to chew it all the time."

Back then, there was only one Indian spice shop in the area, and whenever her husband brought home a can of paan masala, she'd kill it within a week. She

we've been looking at," Stitch warns. "The FDA had an import order on betel nuts during the 1990s into the early 2000s based on the fact that it's a well-known carcinogen. However, the restriction was lifted." According to Stitch, the FDA decided it wasn't sure whether the betel nut is actually a food. Stitch is clearly rankled by the vagary. "Our position is, if chewing gum meets the definition of food—and it does—then so would paan," Stitch says. "So if we found someone who was making paan, we would seize the betel nuts."

Holy cow! You would take away my meeta paan? Stitch sounds like a reasonable guy, so I try to reason with him: Couldn't the wallas just hang some signs warning of the dangers of betel nuts, I ask, similar to the warnings on tobacco products? Stitch assures me that this is precisely all that he would like to see happen, and that his number one concern is the protection of minors, not the banning of betel nuts for use by adults.

"Alcohol is legal; caffeine is legal; tobacco is legal. But there should be precautions to keep children from using it," he says. *Whew.* For now, betel nuts seem to remain in a blessed gray area, so snatch 'em up while you can, grownups.

Chewing tobacco has also become a popular product in India, just as it remains in fashion in some parts of the U.S. How do betel nuts and tobacco compare? A 1994 study by the American Health Foundation in Valhalla, N.Y., concluded that betel nuts contain the same class of carcinogenic compounds as tobacco and that both plants produced tumors in mice. Sadly, a tobacco and betel nut combo known as *gutka* that packs a double buzz and a carcinogenic double whammy is also now available, sold in colorful foil packets that seem particularly geared toward young people. Disfiguring oral cancers are on the rise among South Asia's teen population, and politicians there are urging stricter laws about *gutka's* sale to minors.

Indeed, paan is not without its dark side. Fortunately, it's easily remedied. All one needs to do is tell one's paan walla to hold the lime accelerant and the addictive, cancer-causing betel nuts. That leaves a host of other perfectly safe ingredients to explode across one's taste buds. And the delightful betel leaf wrapper remains a safe, tasty (and healthy) stimulant, antibacterial agent and *digestif*. In fact, a 1989 study by the Cancer Research Institute at Tata Memorial Centre in Mumbai, India, concluded that natural compounds in betel leaves reduce cell damage caused by carcinogens in tobacco and betel nuts, and that consuming betel leaves increases levels of vitamins A and C, both powerful antioxidants.

Problem solved? Surely the good compounds in the betel leaf cancel out the carcinogens in the betel nuts, making meeta paan the perfect pick-me-up. All right, all right, that's an absurd rationalization only a desperate paan addict would hazard to make. But maybe...

ScOtt Dexter via flickr