

CRISPY FOR OVER A CENTURY

AMBIKA APPALAM DEPOT



No matter what the occasion, and how big the meal, the humble appalam occupies pride of place and nearly half the space on the banana leaf at a traditional Tamil Nadu meal. And the word “appalam” is synonymous with none other than Ambika appalam.

If you think that the appalam just goes by different names across India, and is really just the same “stuff”, think again. Better still, go across to the nearest Ambika Appalam Depot and find an entire aisle

devoted to appalam, in numerous flavours and sizes; the next aisle contains all other varieties like pappad, pappadam, vaththal, vadam sourced from other parts of India. A conversation with Mr Vijayaraghavan, owner of Ambika Appalam Depot gives us some insight into this industry and how the company has managed to grow into a successful business over the last century....Yes, the company has indeed, quietly, without too much ceremony, turned one hundred!

The year 1915, saw the start of this business, in a very small way. Mr Vijayaraghavan’s grandfather, started the business. Initially they sold only hand-pressed Kerala-style pappadam from door to door, at 8-10 bundles a day, simply bound by jute thread and no brand name. This was merely to support the family. A few years later, Mr K A Velayudhan, father of Mr Vijayaraghavan dropped out of school and joined the family-business. By 1945, the business expanded to include appalam that was more popular in Tamil

Nadu and was officially given a name. “Ambika Appalam” came into existence and the first hand-drawn picture of the Goddess adorned the packing.

In due course, a few extra hands were employed in manufacture, to meet the ever increasing demand for good quality appalams, but the manufacture and packaging continued at home. Very soon, a few more items like vathals, vadams (sun dried fryums), pickles and edible powders joined the product list. This happened purely on request from their loyal customers. Surprisingly, the customers also provided the recipes for these items and in turn helped the company grow. The family is grateful to these customers

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for their encouragement and confidence. In this respect, Ambika maintains good relations with all its employees and customers and welcomes useful and productive criticism from both parties.

Ambika Appalam Depot grew slowly and surely, but it was not until 1963 that the first shop came to be in the neighbourhood of Mylapore on North Mada Street. Growing demand required larger manufacture base - Ambika appalam outsourced the manufacture to cottage industries. Soon another outlet was opened at Usman road in T Nagar. Nevertheless, the popularity of the brand was not because of any aggressive business strategy but in never compromising on quality and hygiene of product and satisfaction of the customers - Mr Vijayaraghavan personally tests quality of the product both



before placing orders on his vendors. In this regard, the company has, till date, shunned excessive mechanization and use of preservatives, both of which they believe compromise on quality. At Ambika, they believe that often lack of quality with regards to taste and shelf life is due to the poor quality of agricultural produce that goes into manufacture, poor weather etc. On such occasions, Ambika refuses to stock these finished products, but allows the vendor to sell his produce elsewhere sans the Ambika trademark. As a result, some of the popular products are not available from time to time.

Ambika, it appears, does not have too many rivals in the market; Mr Vijayaraghavan is wise in the ways of the trade - he states clearly that if another brand makes a product better than he does, then he prefers to provide his customer with the "rival" brand and discontinue his own product. He declares without any hesitation that, if his preferred raw material is monopolized by a rival brand,

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then too, he gives in - "there is enough opportunity and goodwill in the trade to keep me from snatching from another. Live and let live."

One such blessing that he cherishes is his suppliers - they are all sons or family members of suppliers from his father's days. The suppliers of rice, urad and other ingredients are aware of the quality that is required for making appalam. Similarly, the manufacturing plants are aware of the conventional techniques and finished quality that Ambika requires. The support that Mr Vijayaraghavan has had in cornering the appalam retail market is largely due to their consistency and assured quality. In the mid-1990s Ambika began exporting their products to other countries and have now established their

names in the foreign market too. It remains to be seen if the foreign MNC products that go by the name "Lentil snacks" will stand up to the quality of Ambika.

Along the way, Ambika started stocking other household items too - long before the departmental store culture was to emerge in the markets. This was intended to provide an "all-under-one-roof" experience to his customers. That, customer satisfaction is of prime importance is obvious in the orderliness of the outlet, the organised and user-friendly manner in which the products are displayed and the simplicity of the sales staff.

As far as Business development is concerned, Ambika Appalam Depot has had its finger on the pulse of the market - they have evolved technology-wise, insisted on keeping traditions wherever necessary and computerized their outlets and manufacturing facilities. But they have always been mindful of the integrity that goes with being a family business

and a legacy. Recipes and techniques - the backbone of the business that had been passed on word of mouth are being documented for the coming generations. Mr Vijayaraghavan hopes that his children will be equally appreciative of these. At the same time he is open to new ideas and strategies from them; his son Mr Vyas is excited about taking charge of some areas of the business and about exploring new concepts in wholesaling, retailing, and other consumer-friendly ideas.

Ambika Appalam Depot grew from a small family business into an enterprise over a period of a hundred years.

They set their standards high and never compromised on the quality of the products that they stocked and sold - their unscrupulous record set the benchmark for their own partners, rivals and other businesses. They are true Champions of Chennai.

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