

All countries in the world have their own culinary identity but in the twin-island nation of Trinidad & Tobago, each island has its own. One of the things that sets Tobago apart from Trinidad is its locally made sweets. Not only are they delicious, but some of these sweets have a long history. For example, tooloom and sugar cakes were developed by African slaves who received part of their supplies in sugar and molasses.

I have a terrible sweet tooth and these sweets are an absolute must anytime I visit Tobago. Sweets are one of the first things people ask for as presents if someone is visiting the island. They are readily available from vendors found outside the ferry terminal and airport. The sweets are sold in packets containing about five pieces each, selling for between US\$1.00 to US\$1.50 per packet.

## Ode to Tobago Sweets

by Jo-Anne Nina Sewlal



*Homemade sweets sold by street vendors in Tobago are delicious souvenirs. Here are fudge and nut cakes*

Vendors sell a variety of local sweets, but here are some that have maintained their popularity over the decades.

Firstly, there are Benne Balls, which I think are the best known of the Tobago sweets, made from benne — known elsewhere as sesame — seeds. When most people think of sesame seeds they think of them toasted and sprinkled on hamburger buns or used as sesame oil in Asian cooking. However, these local sweets are made of a mixture of melted sugar and toasted sesame seeds. Although traditionally shaped into balls they can also be formed into sticks or bars.

It is said that these seeds originated in Africa, since their closest relatives are found growing there. African slaves brought sesame, which they called benne, to North America and most likely to the Caribbean. They are very nutritious seeds, high in antioxidants, and contain three times more calcium than a comparable measure of milk.

There are many other sweets made in Tobago that come in the shape of balls. One is made from pawpaw (papaya). In this sweet, the green fruit is used, mixed with granulated sugar and cooked until the mixture gels. Green food colouring is added at the end to emphasize the colour of the fruit.

Another such sweet is tooloom, which is made by caramelizing sugar and adding molasses, both of which add to the almost black colour of this sweet. Other ingredients include grated ginger and coconut as well as pieces of dried orange peel (the skin of the orange along with a little rind, usually hung and left to dry).

Nut cakes are another popular sweet on the island. Halved peanuts are toasted and added to a simple-syrup mixture that also has some ginger added. Spoonfuls are then placed on a well-oiled tray — or the marble slab that was a necessity for candy making in days gone by. The heaps are allowed to dry as they form wide mounds.

A colourful sweet is sugar cake. Despite the name these are not comprised of pure sugar. They are similar to nut cakes, but grated coconut is used in place of the nuts. You can add food colouring to make them any colour you want but traditionally they are pink or white, sometimes a combination of both. A packet will usually contain three cakes with a combination of pink and white cakes.

Fudge is a well-known sweet around the world, but in Tobago the popular variation is Coconut Fudge where sugar, coconut milk and condensed milk are mixed over heat to dissolve the sugar. The mixture is poured into a tray and allowed to cool and then cut into squares.

The final sweets usually sold by vendors are peppermint sticks. A mixture of water, sugar and margarine is boiled to form a heavy syrup. Peppermint oil is added to give it flavour. The mixture is poured onto a marble slab or oiled tray. The edges are folded into the centre and, as the mixture gets cooler, it is repeatedly rolled and pulled by hand. Finally, sections are cut and shaped to form sticks.

So if you visit Tobago, why not pick up a few of these traditional confections and take a sweet taste tour of our culture?