

[The Epicurean, Palliative Pleasures of Paan](#)

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The vegetarian dinner sparkled with spicy flavors sunk into rice, dhal, vegetables, yogurt, fruit chutneys, pickled limes, diced salad items, fried banana chips, lassi yogurt drink and tapioca dessert. Your guests are sated, lounging against couch pillows in the living room, perhaps regretting they ate a little too much. As the accomplished Hindu host and hostess you offer the crowning finale to the meal, a silver tray stacked with a pyramid of paan: bite-size lemony green triangles folded out of betel leaves, stuffed with thinly sliced areca nut and sweet spices and pierced at the top with a clove corn. The guests' eyes glow with Roman satisfaction as he pops a whole paan into his mouth...and delicately chews. His overripe breath is immediately freshened, the digestive chemistries are stimulated and a good-feeling, chocolate-like narcotic from the areca nut percolates into the brain neurons. Paan is the Hindi word for betel, a sinewy subtropical vine with heart-shaped leaves considered so sacred by Indian farmers that they take off their sandals before entering paan fields. The Sanskrit term-and oldest word for the leaf-is tambula. The art of paan is one of the oldest culinary cultures known to humanity, existing on a par with the American Indians' sacred love of tobacco (who also chewed fresh leaves with lime paste). The betel chew is esteemed in the Vedas as a sacred substance, a medicine and a token of honoring for ritual participants or guests. Undoubtedly its preparation and popularity root back into the pre-Vedic Saivite Harappan empire, where also the most sacred tree to Hindus-the fig-was theologically prized.

Later writings detailed its medicinal pharmacology and paan assumed a cupidic function in many plays and was identified as an aphrodisiac/social pleasure drug in the Kamasutra. With the transmission of Buddhism and Hinduism into Asia and Indonesia, paan was freighted into the ancient culinary cultures of China, Vietnam, Burma, Thailand, Campachia, Malaysia and Sumatra/Bali. Presently, one-tenth of Earth's population routinely chews paan. Like the formal ritual of the Japanese tea ceremony-which evolved out of Zen and sensual culture-the creation of a paan packet can be a beautiful act of grace and style. It has also developed its own array of elegant accouterments: Faberge-like ornate boxes (called paandans) to hold paan ingredients, finely wrought cutters to slice the hard areca nut into thin filets, delicate spoons and spittoons. Paan fanciers formulate their own individual taste combinations, and paan shops all over India offer a salad bar range of chew ingredients. Favored mixtures are drawn from clove, cardamom, nutmeg, fennel, camphor, nuts, dried fruits, flower extracts, silvered or gilded candies, sugar candy or honey. The starting combination is a duet of betel leaf and areca nut-often called the betel nut, but it is not from the betel vine. It is the nut of the areca catechu palm (pictured at far left). Botanically, betel (pictured at near left) has several species, cultivated as specialities in different habitats of India. The betel and areca nut combine into a pleasant bittersweet taste. Generally on top of this is a smear of lime paste and a tree bark extract. The areca nut and lime temporarily stain the mouth bright red. In ancient high society, paan was used as a lipstick by fashionable women. Many long-term users of paan purposely stain their mouths reddish black, but this is not caused by habitual paan use. One of the repulsive blemishes of India is the red spittle stains ejected by millions of paan chewers. This phenomena is echoed in American professional baseball where chewing and spitting tobacco chaw became

part of the manly baseball culture. Currently, teams like the Philadelphia Phillies are coming under heavy public criticism for their unsightly chew habit, watched by millions on TV, and copied by curious youngsters. The ayurvedic (Hindu medical system) analysis of paan states that alongside being a remedy for bad breath and stimulating salivation and digestion, the betel leaf is beneficial to heart tissue, and the areca nut reduces fat, induces bowel regularity and kills worms. For millions of Indians, paan is a mild biological addiction. The narcotic ingredient is an alkaloid in the areca nut called arakene. It is a stimulant, a distant cousin to cocaine (a key ingredient of Coca Cola until the 1920's), but appears in small amounts in the nut. Its affect is more like the mood-boosting feel of chocolate, which also has a brain-altering chemical. Chocolate came from South America to Europe in the 16th century and was considered an aphrodisiac and forbidden to children for centuries. Chocolate's brain chemical is also mildly addictive. Paan with fresh betel leaf is readily available in the subtropical countries that Hindus have migrated to, but was extremely rare in Europe and North America. Importing betel leaf was illegal. This is changing in the US with a betel vine plantation in Maui, Hawaii, catering to Indian stores of America with fresh betel leaves.