

Kolam is draw at Pongal festival

BY THAYUMANASAMY SUNDARAM • SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE • FEBRUARY 10, 2010

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Kolam, the traditional rice flour drawing done by women of southeastern India every morning on the thresholds of their homes usually attracts attention for its complexity and brings praise from neighbors for its beauty. The kolam art-form, usually passed on from mothers to daughters, takes extra significance during the Pongal festival which falls in mid-January when the sun enters the constellation Mahara (Capricorn).

Pongal is celebrated when Indian farmers say thanks for their crops and share their joy with others. Kolam is drawn by releasing a stream of rice powder held between thumb and index fingers, producing a thin line, and is then shaped using the wrist to produce abstract patterns or shapes like flowers or animals.

Rows of dots are first placed on the ground to guide the women in producing the patterns that vary from two to 20 square feet. It is customary to draw a different pattern for each day and for every day of the year. Rice powder usage in Kolam has been linked to people's desire to share their bounty of rice with other living creatures.

So it is only natural for Indians in the U.S. to incorporate kolam during Pongal festivities. However, January is still too cold to draw kolam outdoors and expect birds to eat the rice. So we decided to draw kolam indoors, on top of rectangular black plastic tablecloths fixed to the floor, thus giving the festival more of an authentic touch. Families celebrating Pongal welcomed the idea.

Children participated in drawing simple kolams of their own. Then Pongal celebration began with a pot of sweet rice symbolically boiling over (Pongal in Tamil language has two meanings: rice-boiling over and the dish itself). Soon everyone enjoyed a traditional South-Indian cuisine including pongal.

Everyone was happy that we were still able to practice a tradition that dates back several centuries and pass it on to the younger generation.



Special to the Chronicle The initial kolam design is laid out.



Special to the Chronicle Rice-flour kolam being drawn on the threshold of the house.

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Special to the Chronicle Traditional sweet rice Pongal is being prepared.

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