

SUDEVI'S SAFFRON BURFI

recipe and notes from Sudevi Geary



Burfi, a traditional condensed milk sweet, is my favourite treat to make for my deities. It's simple, and yet requires time and concentration, which makes it perfect for a peaceful, deep meditative cooking process. I learnt how to make burfi from my father, who used to make it for the deities in the New York and Boston temples in the 70's. For me – and I think for many others – burfi is reminiscent of an older time, of sweet and hazy childhood memories, of early morning mangal arati sweets and festival days.

Saffron burfi is made with only three ingredients: milk, sugar, and saffron, and the process essentially involves boiling down milk until it thickens into a tough paste that can be rolled. However, there are a few tricks to getting burfi right and it's important to know that every batch can be quite different depending on the milk quality, the pan, the sugar, the heat, etc. So, before I lay out the recipe, here are some essential tips:

- 1.** Burfi is cooked on a constant high heat. This means that once the milk has come to the boil, you need to keep stirring using a flat edged spatula (wooden or metal), being sure to scrape evenly across the bottom of the pan to prevent sticking. This is why burfi requires concentration (and how the repetitive stirring can also feel quite meditative), because once the milk sticks to the bottom, it's very likely to burn, and that's what we want to avoid at all costs.
- 2.** Cooking burfi on a gas or induction stove is ideal because you can quickly turn down the heat if the milk starts to overboil or burn. If you have an electric stove, be ready to slide the pot off the hob when this happens. It will allow you a moment to catch your breath and unstick the milk from the bottom of the pan or reduce the heat slightly to avoid overboiling.
- 3.** Always use a large heavy-bottomed pan, ideally stainless steel. Thin-bottomed and aluminium pans will cause the milk to burn too easily and will require a lot more effort to condense the milk without burfi. The wider the pot, the quicker it will cook, but high sides will allow plenty of space for the milk to expand as it boils. Try to use a pot that has both a wide bottom and high capacity in relation to the amount of milk used.
- 4.** The milk is likely to overboil in the early stages and more likely to burn in the later stages once it starts to thicken, especially once you've added the sugar. If your burfi does burn, take the pan off the stove and transfer the contents into a fresh pot, leaving the burned parts behind. Burned burfi will continue to burn and the flavour will be negatively affected.

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5. When cooking for the deities we try to use the best quality ingredients that we can afford. This is especially true for burfi, which requires good quality whole/full fat milk with a high fat content. No less than 3% fat, 4 or 5% is better. I prefer to use organic unhomogenised cream top milk. The creamier your milk, the more easily the milk will condense and the better your burfi will taste. If you don't have access to golden top milk, try adding a little unwhipped cream to the milk at the beginning (around 1 part cream to 8 parts milk). But only a little will do. If you add too much cream (or make it almost entirely from cream as I once mistakenly did) the end result will be greasy and hard.

6. I don't cook with white sugar, so my sugar of choice for burfi is soft light brown cane sugar. This adds a richness to the flavour of burfi without being overpowering. However, because brown sugar can curdle milk in the early stages of boiling, you have to wait until the milk has clearly condensed into something between evaporated milk and condensed milk before adding the sugar.

7. Saffron is (and should be!) expensive, so luckily this recipe only requires a pinch. But because saffron is so prized – it truly is the spice of the heavens – there's also a lot of counterfeit saffron on the market (soluble string coated in dye and fragrance). Try to buy your saffron from a reputable shop and choose the best quality available.

8. The real trick is to keep stirring throughout once the milk boils, even if the milk isn't sticking or overboiling. My father said that the constant stirring allows the moisture to evaporate more easily, and therefore condense the milk faster. Meanwhile, the more milk you boil, the longer it will take to condense. This recipe uses only 1 litre/quart of milk as that's the easiest and quickest amount to work with.

9. Finally, sing to the milk! Serenade it into burfi for extra sweetness. (Although probably don't play any instruments as I once did. That didn't end well!)

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TIME

45 mins—1.5 hours cooking (depending on heat, milk quality, etc), 1 hour cooling time, and 10 minutes ball rolling.

MAKES

8—20 balls, depending on rolling size

INGREDIENTS

1 litre (1 quart) whole/full fat unhomogenised milk
(Add ½ cup unwhipped cream if the milk isn't creamy enough)
¼ cup soft light brown sugar

(This recipe is for lightly sweetened burfi. Feel free to add a little sugar more if you prefer your sweets to be extra sweet)

1 pinch of saffron

METHOD

1. Add the milk and saffron (and cream, if using) to a large heavy-bottomed pan and set on a high heat and stir occasionally.
2. Once the milk starts to simmer, start stirring continuously, paying attention to the tips detailed above.
3. After a while you'll start to notice the milk condensing. Once it's reached a thickness that's somewhere between evaporate milk and condensed milk from a can – which can take anywhere between 25 and 50 minutes depending on the pan, the milk, and the heat of the stove – add your sugar and be sure to stir it in quickly.
4. Keep stirring and reduce the heat slightly if it's sticking too much. You should begin to see the bottom of the pan showing through. Be sure to stir/scrape the thickening burfi from all corners of the pot to prevent burning.
5. Once the burfi has reached a quite solid putty consistency, take the pan off the stove and immediately transfer the burfi into a dish and bowl, cover with a towel and let it cool in the fridge for an hour.
6. Remove the burfi from the fridge, scoop out small chunks (about the size of ping pong ball, or whatever you prefer) and roll into even balls.
7. Offer to the Lords!
8. Burfi can last for a few weeks if kept in the fridge.

