



Head over Meals

by Nazima Versay Kudus

Of Sorbet, Sherbert, Sarbat and All That Jazz

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Sharbat transliterated as sorbet, sherbet or *sarbat* comes from a Persian word *sharbat* meaning a drink of sugar and water. The word was derived from the Arabic *shariba*, "to drink". In the late Middle Ages, the Arabic word *sharāb* had come to mean "alcoholic beverage" and the alternate form *sharbat* took on the meaning of a sweet non-alcoholic drink.

The process of human migration and culinary creativity slightly differentiates one version from another. One common similarity is that it is always served chilled. However, in different parts of the world, there exist differences in terms of ingredients, textures and its serving purposes.

Sorbet and sherbet are served in concentrated form and eaten with a spoon. Sorbet is made from fruit and sugar or other natural flavours that is then churned like ice cream. Its texture is drier and rougher, which is why it has to sit longer at room temperature before eating. In the past, it was mainly a palate cleanser and served between courses in high-end restaurants. Sherbet, on the other hand, is made of fruit, sugar and cream (one to two percent of milkfat). It has an almost ice cream-like texture due to its cream content. Ten percent and more milkfat will make it ice-cream.

In Penang, *air sarbat* is a beverage. To prepare the cordial, the ingredients are *sarbat* root, cardamom, star anise, clove, cumin, fennel seed, nutmeg seed, pandan leaves, rose petal, rose essence, artificial red colouring, sugar and water are put to boil until they produce sweet and aromatic red cordial. Once the concoction is ready, ice cubes and water are added to the cordial. A cold sweet *air sarbat* would quench down anyone's thirst on a hot sunny day. Bottled *sarbat* cordial is stored in a refrigerator and is normally prepared ahead of special occasions like Ramadans or *kenduris*. Other additions to the *sarbat* can include *kembang semangkuk*, *getah anggur* or *biji selasih* which are believed to have 'cooling' properties when added. These three items need to be soaked, dirty residue discarded and then plopped into the *sarbat* drink. *Kembang semangkuk* are seeds from the pods of a big log tree scientifically known as *scaphium macropodum* and *scaphium lychnophorum*. The seeds when soaked in a bowl of water for half an hour produce jelly type fibre that will occupy the whole bowl space hence the Malay name, *kembang semangkuk*. *Getah anggur* is jelly-like katira or its scientific name *olibanum gum resin* and *biji selasih* are basil seeds. Both have to be soaked in water overnight until fluffy. If preparing the concoction is too complicated, alternatively pre packed *sarbat* herbs are sold at Meera Sahib on King Street or just get a glass at Ais Tingkap on Tamil Street.

Today, many opt to use bottled cordials of *sarbat* called *air sirap* which can be purchased in shops and supermarkets. I am of the opinion that *air sirap* DOES NOT belong in the same league as *air sarbat*. *Air sarbat* is a cut above the rest!

