

## Red Ants' Chutney: Unspoken Traditional Superfood

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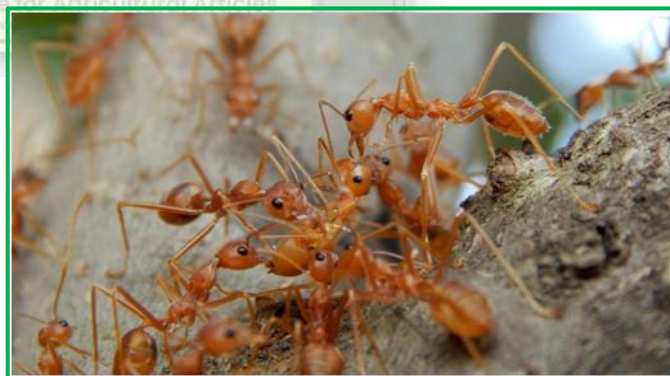
Red Ant Chutney, also referred to as Kai Chutney or Simel Baa Chutney. It is not just any exotic food; rather, it is an important aspect of tribal culture, seasonal cuisine, and, above all, a fascinating demonstration of how nature has been used by indigenous tribesmen to create effective remedies. Predominantly made and consumed in the forests of Eastern India, especially in states like Odisha,



Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh and also around the western coastal region of Karnataka, which has unique sour, spicy & tangy taste. In January-2024, the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, was officially awarded the Geographical Indication (GI) tag. Preparing this chutney takes patience—more so because of the process rather than the cooking. Ants are living creatures; thus, they are armed with a very strong sprayer of formic acid, which will burn your skin.

### Tribal Traditional Significance

For the tribals of Saharias, Bondas, and Kutia Kondhs of Odisha & Siddi, Halakki, and Kare Okkalu of Karnataka, the monsoon season does not bring only rain but also the time for harvesting the weaver ants (*Oecophylla smaragdina*). These are not those ants that get inside a bowl with sugar, but they are huge, bright red ants with larvae. Red ants' collection involves using long sticks and big leaves to touch the ants' nests high up in the mango and tamarind trees. In such a way, the frightened insects will swarm onto the leaves and be collected by folding the leaves in a basket. Unlike using pesticides, red ants are not killed and gathered with profound respect for the life circle in the forest. According to the cosmology of tribesmen, the sour taste of the red ant chutney is believed to symbolize the pure life-giving energy of the earth. Red ant chutney is considered a medicine to cure seasonal colds and joints' pains. Thus, to offer guests red ant chutney is the highest gesture of respect showing the host's capability to offer the rarest gift of the Earth.



## Traditional Making Process

Ingredients required are a handful of live red ants, a tablespoon of ant larva, ginger and garlic, fresh green chilies (to spice up the dish), Salt to taste. The collected ants and their pearl-shaped larvae, which are larger and creamier than their adult counterparts, must be taken away from their leaves and sticks. The main step is Neutralization



– which is done in order to eliminate the pain caused by the formic acid without eliminating the taste. The ants are washed and using salt water and lightly beaten using a mortar and pestle. While grinding the ants in the mortar using the pestle, you will have the formic acid released from its body. Instead of burning one's mouth, the acid creates an acidic taste that gives the chutney its distinctive lemon taste, sans the vinegar and tamarind. Tempering can be done to the raw paste with mustard oil and curry leaves (a tadka for a balanced taste), but the traditional method uses the raw paste only with all its enzymatic activity intact. Finally, the chutney that is prepared, yields a rough, brick-red paste with an earthy and tangy aroma, tingling in the mouth.

## Health Benefits of Red Ants' Chutney

Red ants are not merely filling food; they are nutrient-rich. According to studies, they consist of Protein: Around 40-50% of their body mass. Iron is present in extremely large amounts, and hence, the chutney acts as a natural treatment for anemia, which is prevalent among rural Indians. They are also rich in Calcium & Zinc, which are vital nutrients for bone health and immunity. Rheumatism and Joint aches are relieved after eating this chutney by tribal elders during the rainy season provides relief from arthritic joints. Formic acid is supposed to increase the flow of blood of that area and relieve inflammation. Being very sour, this food encourages the secretion of saliva and bile juices in the body. As the ants have effective antimicrobial peptides (antibiotics made by insects), this chutney is applied for treating coughs, colds, and sore throats. This chutney serves as a prebiotic, nourishing the beneficial bacteria in the stomach. According to traditional medicine, red ant chutney is prescribed for nursing women to boost milk production. The combination of high-calorie fats, protein, and iron is believed to speed postpartum recovery. To those who know nothing about Red Ant Chutney, the idea of consuming insects sets off alarms due to an allergy alert. Be warned. Although the formic acid found in these insects may be harmless in small amounts, it could be fatal for someone with shellfish or insect allergies.

## Conclusion

There is also a rising push to introduce Red Ant Chutney into the mainstream. Restaurants in Bhubaneswar and Raipur have started serving Kai Chutney dishes in their high-end dining establishments. Environmentalists welcome this shift because the process of collecting the weaver ants is sustainable; it requires no deforestation or industrial farming. Although it is becoming increasingly popular, it is still firmly grounded in its tribal customs and reflects an entirely sustainable food tradition. Red ant chutney is a strong example to illustrate that indigenous wisdom of how the knowledge passed down through generations and natural products can provide people with unique and distinct tastes but also brings numerous health advantages.