A Sweet Afternoon

Posted on



A basketful of ala dosi for afternoon tea

It’s flaky at first bite. A sugary delight that adds a touch of sweetness to evenings in the Southern Sri Lankan household.

Words Keshini de Silva **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

Guiding us towards the South, the Pelawatta –Morawaka road stretched on. As we passed the village of Neluwa, the scenery became wild, rather uncommon for a terrain bordering the Sinharaja Rainforest. The sun glinted through the web of leaves. Humble homes peeped through the foliage. The village shop entertained customers who along with their purchases traded in the worldly chatter of the day. Despite the cool shade offered by the umbrella of green, our mouths were parched. An invitation for tea, when we dropped into Maheshi’s house in Morawaka was a

welcome treat. As we huddled into the living room she emerged with a tray filled with steaming hot cups of the refreshing brew. By its side was a plate of light brown square shaped delicacies; *Ala dosi*!

Rarely seen in the cities except during Avurudu time, *ala dosi* is a common sweet in the Southern parts and is a favourite teatime snack.

Ala dosi or potato toffee is as the name says made from potato and sugar.

Ala dosi or potato toffee is as the name says made from potato and sugar. Its origins are unclear, however the village folk of the South believe it was concocted after the arrival of the Dutch. While introducing their lamprais and croquettes, the Dutch inculcated a love for dessert amongst the locals by sharing with them love cakes and toffee. Thus, it is assumed that *ala dosi* was conjured up by inspired Sri Lankans.



Enjoy ala dosi with a cup of plain tea

In the village, sugar is rarely added to evening tea or any other warm beverage that is drunk without milk. A bite of kitul or palmyrah jaggery, or as in this case *dosi*, with a sip is all the saccharinity one needs. For us, the mouthful of tea and toffee came with a ginger hit at the end, and, ironically, with no trace of potatoes!

What’s remarkable about *ala dosi* is that it’s an economical and completely vegan treat. Ingredients are easy to source and inexpensive, Maheshi explained. Although

exotic to us city-folk, the easy preparation makes it the ideal daily dose of sweetness for the family. Amused by our intrigue, she invited us to her kitchen, to show us how it’s prepared.

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While the potatoes boiled, she rounded up the other ingredients from the various nooks and crannies of the kitchen; sugar, cardamom and to add a crunch, a handful of local peanuts. Ginger was gathered from the backyard The backyards in rural Sri Lanka, which nearly always face the kitchen, are purpose-built. You would find handy trees like the *karapincha* (curry leaf) and jack trees that make for a great cook or even the *kohomba* trees used as disinfectant. It’s also a great play pen for the children, who adults can keep a watchful eye on as they prepare food.

The potatoes bubbled to a boil and were peeled then smashed. Sugar was added; there was no clear measurement, the trick is to add 1/3 more sugar than the weight of the potatoes, yet it’s quite dependent on taste. Maheshi poured in the sugar judging the quantity with experience. Once the sugar started to dissolve, crushed peanuts, ginger and cardamom were stirred in. The wood-fired stove filled the kitchen with smoke as it slowly cooked the *dosi*. When the mixture gurgled with thickness, it was heaved off the fire and poured onto a buttered tray. Flattened with a wooden stick, squares outlined with a wet knife and the tray of sweetness was left to dry on the table. It’s imperative that the mixture was taken out in time. Too late and it would be thick, rigid and hard to bite into. Too early, and it would be a chewy mess that wouldn’t set.

As we began to bid our goodbyes, Maheshi wrapped up some *dosis* for us; it had cooled and set in 20 minutes! No excuses, she said, we must take them as a sugary token to remember our visit to her village. And thus, with a package soaked with the honeyed aroma of *ala dos*i in hand, we headed home with sweet memories.

