

Apé Kema

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The Hela Bojun Hala



Stringhoppers in the making

The Pelwehera Hela Bojun Hala on the Dambulla - Habarana main road, offers favourite Sri Lankan cuisine (Apé Kema) that tingles our taste buds while evoking deep nostalgia...

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa

Photographs Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam and Geeth Viduranga

The milky morning air was still curdling when we pulled up at the Hela Bojun Hala in Pelwehera managed by the Ministry of Agriculture. A small, green-roofed pavilion stood in the middle of a land still growing: most of it was sapling and grass but at its far end was a plantation of tall trees, their sinewy arms thrust to the skies.

We had forsaken breakfast, and after the long drive from Colombo the good smells issuing from the pavilion were hard to resist. We were greeted by the warm, spontaneous if somewhat shy smiles of the bevy of ladies busy cooking and serving; no fine hotel school manners here. I realised that letting these village ladies run the whole show in their own way has been a very astute idea. They were the perfect hostesses for a place selling traditional Sri Lankan food.

The cooking and serving was done in plain view. Dressed in green and white uniforms, the ladies fried, cooked and filled the *watti* plates with food that filled the place with fresh smells. You can serve yourself with no compunction about carbs: wheat flour doesn't make it to this kitchen, the food being compounded of the goodness of local rice varieties and nutritious seeds.

Morning or evening, anyone stopping here can tuck into a hearty, delicious country banquet, of a kind enjoyed by kings, at very affordable rates. You yourself can fill your *watti* plate with hoppers or string hoppers with sambols to go. There's a great variety of staples: the main dishes would be made of rice, soy, manioc and other healthy ingredients, according to heirlooms of traditional recipes handed down from mother to daughter. There is also a sweet array of Avurudu fare. Simmering in oil are kavun and peni-walalu, emanating sweet wafts of thick treacle and rice flour. The peni-walalu are golden brown and not too soggy to the touch, but at the first contact with your teeth they will ooze treacle mixed with the tang of *ulundu* (Black Gram). They also serve a well-loved mushroom soup, and indigenous beverages made of local seeds.

The Bojun Hala concept has immense potential... the culinary expertise of village ladies is the best aspect of all.

The idea of the Hela Bojun Hala was undoubtedly an inspired one. Also set up in Kandy, Kundasale, Dambulla and Anuradhapura, these food outlets cater to a growing partiality for traditional fare that is recognised as healthy and nutritious by tourists as well as Sri Lankans. The concept has also provided meaningful employment for a good number of rural women.

The Pelwehera outlet is the biggest of all Bojun Hal, with an area for children to play freely and for adults to explore. The seating was made of wood and sheltered by thatched roofs. A more traditional seating area would have added more comfort and compelled more travellers to stop by.

A wall separates the kitchen from the plant selling area, which is divided into a 'seeds unit' and a 'fruit and vegetable plant unit' where saplings with emerald young foliage are stacked up.

The Bojun Hala concept possesses immense potential in a world that is looking for healthy alternatives to fatty and greasy cooking. The novelty of employing the spontaneous

hospitality as well as the culinary expertise of village ladies is the best aspect of all. It was truly a Sri Lankan experience.

