



Rejuvenating beli mal is enjoyed with a piece of jaggery

“Beli Mal Bomu” sign boards can be commonly seen on the roadsides in suburban and rural areas withstanding rain or shine. To energise before an adventurous voyage and de-stress after a lengthy journey, street vendors stand by the road with wooden tables laden with this beverage. There will be many beli mal stalls at the foot of Mihintale, where pilgrims visit on Poson Poya to commemorate the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka by Arahant Mahinda.

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Photography Menaka Aravinda and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham



The colourful brew is strained and served

At the foot of the sacred Mihintale, where the sun shines brightly and flowers bloom, are rows of make-shift stalls for the faithful to rest. After a tiring journey our gasps for breath and our dried lips indicated that we needed a cooling beverage to re-boost. Here we took refuge in a small stall with a board listing some cooling options, and we decided to have *Beli Mal*.

Beli is Sinhalese for Bael fruit and *Mal* is for flower. This fruit is said to be indigenous to Sri Lanka and it has plenty of nutrients. The Bael fruit is also special as it is one of the cleanest fruits to be found, given that they grow on tall trees away from artificial contaminations.

However, even before the ages of fertiliser and pesticides, ancient Sri Lankans were quite aware of the invigorating nature of this dainty bloom.

Sun-dried bael flowers are brewed in boiling water, and consumed as a hot beverage. It is known to cool the body from the inside.

The longer it's boiled, the better it tastes and the brew is stronger in colour. Very much like black tea, the *beli mal* concoction tastes pleasanter when consumed with jaggery. Since the beverage is just slightly bitter in taste, the jaggery acts as a sweetener.

We sat in Margret's little stall to rejuvenate before getting back on our feet. She poured the beverage into small cups making small talk about the scorching heat. *Beli mal* was the most apt option she tells us. I couldn't help but wonder if those ancient intellects, the sculptors, the mechanics and masterminds took pleasure in sipping a cup of *beli mal* ever so often.

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Sun-dried bael flowers, the main component to a healing beverage

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