

Cheers to Homemade Wine!

Posted on



Christmas in Sri Lanka is never complete without a glass of homemade wine. Family recipes and loving attention give these concoctions a buzz that branded wine can never match

This Christmas forget the wine stores, the magic is in the home cellar.

Words Daleena Samarajiwa **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

The holiday season is around the corner and it's time to party plan. Wine is on the menu of course, and homes that transformed their kitchens into mini wineries well in advance will soon be reaping the rewards of their hard work. Homemade wine is a charming Sri Lankan tradition, especially at Christmas. Nothing else has quite the same personal touch at this time of the year than wine bottled by Mum: crushed, sweetened, steeped and fermented with love.

Sri Lanka's homemade wine menu is lengthy and fascinating. Nelli wine, king coconut wine, pineapple wine, lemon wine, ginger wine, carrot wine, beetroot wine, date wine and even cashew pulan wine. Sweet and often very spicy, they're the ideal beverage to enjoy at the end of a meal - the Sri Lankan equivalent of dessert wine.

Suzanne de Zilwa Paiva, who is a teacher of culinary arts, has been making wine at home for over two decades, carrying on a family tradition that intrigued her as a child.

“My grandfather, the late Lucien Van Langenberg, devoted an entire room in his house in Dehiwala to making wine. He passed away when I was 11-years-old, but I still remember the room,” she says. Curiosity would drive Suzanne and her cousin to explore whenever the door was left open. “It looked like a laboratory, with huge funnels and huge pouches of red liquid hanging and draining into buckets.”

Homemade wine is a longstanding colonial Christmas tradition – the season is just not complete without a glass of sweet milk wine and a slice of rich Christmas cake. Suzanne makes milk, king coconut, date and pineapple wines mainly for Christmas, and sometimes for special orders from friends.

“The best time to start is about ten months ahead,” she says. “Milk wine can be made three months before Christmas. It tastes really good.”

The tradition is also continued by the nuns of the Franciscan Order, who prepare delicious homemade food products to raise funds for charity. Their wines are sold at places like the Jam Room in Nuwara Eliya and the Rosarian Convent in Jaffna.

The home wine-makers’ toolkit contains a few essentials. In the past, large porcelain containers were used to store the liquid during fermentation. Today, other vessels substitute. Suzanne uses a large plastic bucket with a lid for king coconut wine, and huge glass jars for fruit wines. Large bowls are required for chopped fruit and to mix ingredients, and a funnel, coffee filters and muslin for filtering. Narrow-necked glass bottles with corks or lids, sterilized by being immersed in boiling water, are used to store the finished wine.

Most fruits and vegetables are suitable for wine making. Choose fruit when it is just ripe, wash and rinse it thoroughly, then peel and chop or blend finely. Surprisingly, Suzanne includes the entire pineapple – thick skin and all – chopped finely by hand. When making mango and beetroot wine, however, she discards the peel.

Yeast is used to ferment most fruit wines, while spices like cinnamon, cardamom, cloves and mace jazz them up and also act as preservatives. Milk wine made with arrack does not require yeast. Caramelized sugar not only sweetens but also gives the brew a distinct golden colour.

The filtering is a tedious but important process that ensures not only clarity but a sterile

environment inside the bottle. Suzanne strains the fermented liquid first through muslin and then several times over through either blotting paper with cotton wool or coffee filters. "The lovely colour and clarity of the wine comes in the final filtering," she says.

Wine making at home is painstaking work. "It can take about four days to filter the contents of a single bottle of milk wine, and you have to repeat the process at least twice to get very clear wine," says Suzanne. "If you haven't got the patience, don't even try."

A glass or two of wine is good for you. It helps the body digest all that rich festive food and the blood to circulate a little faster. Homemade wines also lack the chemicals used to increase the shelf life of commercially made wine, and so they tend to be healthier.

This charming Christmas custom is giving way to convenience as many today opt to buy their wine from stores instead. Thankfully, people like Suzanne are dedicated to continuing the tradition. She shares two of her favourite wine recipes with us here.

Quantity

3x750 ml bottles



Milk wine is a classic and a must; it looks beguiling and tastes very sweet, but packs a punch thanks to its high arrack content

Milk Wine

Ingredients

- 2 x 750ml bottles of arrack
- 500ml of milk
- 375ml of water
- ½ bottle water
- 500g sugar
- 50ml lime or lemon juice
- Rind of 2 lemons and 2 limes
- 25 cloves
- 12 cardamoms

- 2 sticks cinnamon
- 1 blade mace
- 1 crushed nutmeg
- 1 teacup caramelized sugar(see separate recipe)

Method

Lightly pound the spices. Fill a glass bottle with arrack add the spices, lime and lemon rinds. Secure the stopper or cork tightly and store for five days in a warm dry place, giving it a good shake twice a day.

Add the milk to a pan, place it on the fire and bring it to a boil. Once boiling, take it off the heat and leave to cool. When it is warm, add the lime juice. Stir well.

Put the rest of the arrack into a bucket, and add the sugar. Stir well. Strain out the spices from the mix prepared earlier and add the liquid to the arrack and sugar. Add the milk mixture and the caramelized sugar. Mix well. Take an empty glass bottle, fit the funnel onto it, make a cone with the filter paper and place it in the funnel. Start filtering the liquid, a little at a time. Repeat the process at least twice. Seal the bottles with a cork or lid and store for at least three months before drinking.

Caramelized Sugar

- 250g sugar
- 1 tbsp water
- 250ml hot water

Add sugar and a tablespoon of water to a pan, place over heat and stir, allowing the sugar to caramelize until very dark brown but not burnt. Add the hot water, stirring well. Add to the wine before it is filtered.



King coconut, or thambili, wine

King Coconut Wine

Ingredients

- 6 x 750ml bottles of king coconut water (approx. 15-17 fruits, depending on size)

- 3kg sugar
- 200ml lime juice
- 20 cardamoms
- 20 cloves
- 1 blade mace
- 3 pieces cinnamon
- 25g yeast
- 1 tspn sugar
- 250ml warm water
- 200ml of caramelized sugar (as per the milk wine recipe)

Method

Crush the spices then mix all ingredients together in a large sterilized plastic bucket. Cover and store for 15 days. Prepare the caramelized sugar, add it to the liquid, stir and leave to ferment for three weeks in a warm, dark place. Filter following the same process as milk wine and store in a cool, dry place.

