Currying Flavour with KAJU: Never is the delicious cashew nut more Sri Lankan than when curried!

Posted on



Kiri kaju or milky caju curry is a delicious mild and mellow curry

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Cooking is alchemy of the hearth. Magic happens in the kitchen when raw ingredients pass through the hands of a cook with a passion for the culinary arts. Consider the transformation of the simple cashew, that lovely and luscious, creamy queen of nuts. The *Anacridiaceae* or cashew tree is a foreigner to Sri Lanka, introduced by the Portuguese who brought it to Asia from Brazil. The Portuguese gift was a blessing for the nut has been today homogenised and nationalised as an ingredient of unequalled delight with a distinct Sri Lankan identity.

Kaju, as the cashew is called locally, is local delicacy, to be enjoyed boiled, roasted, salted, eaten whole on its own, or chopped and ground to be added to festive delicacies like dodol, bibikkan and Christmas cake. And never is kaju more Sri Lankan than in a delicious curry. The following is an exploration of the different permutations of cashew curry, resulting from the wizardry of the island's chefs.

Kaju curry is found across spicy curry-loving South Asia. Neighbouring India has its own version, richer in comparison with the addition of ingredients like whipping cream and butter. The Sri Lankan version is more delicate and subtle, with the light creaminess of coconut milk used to thicken the gravy. Softened to melt-in-the-mouth consistency, creamed with coconut and delicately spiced, the mellow kiri-kaju or white kaju curry is undoubtedly the mother of all cashew curries, inspiring a dozen or more variations.

The first steps of the kiri-kaju are the foundation for almost all cashew curries: the hard nut is softened by soaking it in water for at least a couple of hours, or preferably overnight. The base ingredients are prepared – sliced red onions, a few cloves of crushed garlic, a few curry leaves, fresh green chillies, a few grains of fenugreek, a teaspoon or two of unroasted curry powder, turmeric powder, coconut milk, coconut cream and salt to taste. Being a '*kirata*' or 'white milk-based' preparation, this is a mild creamy dish. The nuts are mixed with all the other ingredients except the onions and garlic, covered with light coconut milk and brought to a slow boil. The onions and garlic, which have been tempered lightly in a vegetable oil are added to the mix, which is simmered until the gravy thickens. A thicker coconut cream can be added to make the gravy smooth and creamy. The cashew is thus transformed into mildly spicy and mellow, creamy and cashew-nutty *kirata*.

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Home cooks adjust the flavours and textures of their curries to suit the family palate. They may throw in a few more flavours, like lemon grass, pandanus, cumin, fennel, cinnamon, cardamom and cloves, and even grated ginger and chilli powder. And of course, a home may have a secret ingredient that makes their kaju dish unique. Despite the combination of flavours, the perfect kaju curry will be infused with the flavour of the main ingredient. The regal and delicate kaju is the main tune of this delicious medley, and the surrounding notes only enrich but never intrude.

Kaju doesn't always have to be the main item of a dish. It may enhance other dishes like the very popular kaju with green peas and chicken liver. The kirata or white milky version is prepared with canned green peas, chicken liver, a handful of chopped onion, a tablespoon or two of ground coconut, a cup of water, a pinch of turmeric, a teaspoon of white pepper, a few green chillies and salt to taste. The liver is boiled, chopped and set aside. The water, cashews, chopped onions, chopped green chillies, seasoning, saffron, ground coconut are mixed and cooked over low heat, stirring constantly. The chopped liver is added and the curry is allowed to simmer. The peas are added last, just before the dish is completed. Similarly, it can be cooked with meats like lamb and chicken, and seafoods like prawns, and with vegetables like pumpkin, potatoes and beans.

Kaju is often an ingredient in the *hath maluwa*, a traditional curry associated with the Goddess Pattini, prepared with seven different vegetables on the Sinhala and Tamil New Year Festive celebrations. While the varieties of vegetables may differ from area to area, cashew is almost always included in this very healthy and auspicious preparation. Other ingredients may include ash plantain, golden melon buds, elabatu, jak seeds, ladies fingers and winter melon. The *hath maluwa* accompanies milk rice.

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For zesty tongues that crave a little more fire, there is the fiery dark cashew curry and kaju *temperadu* or stir-fried kaju. Against the light kaju *kirata*, the dark cashew curry is hotter, prepared with roasted curry powder, mustard seeds, pepper and a splattering of dry chillie flakes, in addition to all the other ingredients. It's preparation is a little different: the onions, garlic, ginger, green chillies, curry

leaves, pandanus, and lemon grass are tempered to a golden brown, the curry powder is stirred in, the softened kaju is added and then the coconut milk, which is then simmered until the gravy is thick and creamy and dark.

Kaju *temperadu* is a delicious stir-fry prepared with boiled cashew. Stir-fry onions, chopped garlic, chopped ginger, curry leaves, chopped green chillies, then add in the boiled kaju, stir in roasted curry powder, chillie flakes and salt. Cook for a few minutes. For a moist stir-fry, add some coconut milk.

It's good to note that the kaju is a nut of substance… not only is it creamy and delicious, but it's a power food, packed with protein, carbs, thiamine, niacin, carotene and riboflavin, and minerals such as calcium, phosphorus, magnesium and iron. It has more magnesium than the almond nut, and is saturated with oleic acid, a heart-friendly fat. Ayurvedic physicians will tell you that the nut has sattvic qualities that promote positive mental health, reducing conditions such as depression.

If you'd like to play alchemist with this queen of nuts, here are a few tips to help you along – a pinch of baking salt in the water when soaking, speeds up the softening process. If you like your kaju crunchy, forget the baking powder and reduce soaking time. New to curry? Don't worry. The spicy transformation of the exotic kaju can whet your appetite for curry. Enjoy!

Recipe
Cashew with green peas and chicken liver

INGREDIENTS:

125 gms canned green peas

100 gms kaju (cashew)

50 gms chicken liver

1 small onion

2 teaspoons ground coconut

1 cup water

turmeric

1 teaspoon white pepper

salt

2 green chillies

METHOD:

Boil liver, chop and set aside. To one cup water add kaju, chopped onion, green chillies, seasoning, saffron, ground coconut and cook over low heat, stirring constantly. Add chopped liver and allow to simmer. Lastly add peas.

