The Currying Flavour

Posted on



A handful of karapincha makes a delicious difference to a curry. In the picture are spices such as dil, cumin, fenal, chilli, pepper, cardamom and cloves that flavour Sri Lanka’s curry cuisine

The delicate karapincha is best known for the magic it works on Sri Lanka’s curry cuisine. But there is more to this leaf than taste.

Words Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

To a Sri Lankan, life without karapincha would be insipid. The delicately fragrant leaf of the murraya koenigii, karapincha is one of the key flavours of Sri Lankan home cooking and the island’s spicy cuisine. It is the undisputed mother of the Island’s curry herbs.

A handful of fresh karapincha leaves, sizzled in hot oil or tossed fresh into a pot of bubbling curry, blends in with the spices, the coconut milk and other ingredients, adding subtle aromatic notes to the mix that other curry leaves like rampa, sera (pandanus and lemon grass respectively) and coriander leaves fail to provide. Karapincha enhances without dominating the spicy medley, be it a vegetable or meat dish, its mellow aroma heightening flavour and enjoyment and making the meal memorable.

The tropical shrub of the family rutaceae is a key ingredient of South Asian, especially Keralite and Sri Lankan, cuisine. It proliferates throughout the region, from the foothills of the Himalayas to South India and Sri Lanka, and also grows in Southeast Asia – in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Strangely enough, it can also be found in France, Germany and Iceland, despite its inability to withstand frost—probably propagated by visitors to Asia. And in some parts of East Africa.

A hardy plant, it takes root in dry and sandy soil, growing into smallish trees of up to six metres tall with a pretty and lush spreading canopy, across the country, especially in the dry zone. The small delicate leaves and slender trunk make it attractive and therefore suitable for ornamental purposes. It is said to be suitable as a hedge plant— probably not a good idea in Sri Lanka. Most Sri Lankan homes grow a tree in their backyard, often pruned down to a manageable height of about three metres. Growing a karapincha tree is also the practice of the Sri Lankan living overseas who cannot face life without karapincha. A small tree or two is plenty to keep curries tasting delicious.

It is not difficult to cook with karapincha—most of us toss in a handful of leaves, whole or shredded, raw or tempered, into the curry right at the beginning before bringing it all to a boil, or temper the leaves along with onions for an aromatic addition in the last few minutes of cooking. Often, we do both. The leaves are best used fresh because the flavour fades fast as they dry. A few leaves make all the difference to a pot of dhall, ala kirata (potato milk curry), chicken temperadu (stir fry) or hot beef curry.

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And there are dedicated karapincha dishes, like karapincha mallung and karapincha congee. Karapincha congee is a mixture of a cup or two of finely shredded leaves, grated coconut, chopped garlic and ginger, a teaspoon of mustard powder, and pepper and salt to taste. Mix the ingredients together and season with lime juice. Pass the same mix with a couple of green chillies thrown in, through a blender to make a fine and healthy karapincha dip for your potato wedges.

Of course, Sri Lankan cooking is not just about taste. Combinations of ingredients

and dishes are chosen to optimize nutritional balance and health, and often to address health issues. In that sense, karapincha is somewhat of a workhorse, adding much more than flavour. The native ayurvedic medicine system lists a variety of uses for almost all parts of the karapincha tree, from its leaves to bark, roots, fruits and flowers.

Its bark and roots are used as a tonic and a stomachic, and stimulant. The raw leaves, rich with amino acids and oils, purify the blood, bring down blood pressure, prevent diabetes and aid digestion. Studies have identified a compound that slows down the breakdown of starch, making it effective for weight control.

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Congee made of ground karapincha leaves and stems is said to clean the digestive tract, rid the stomach of worm infections, cure hypertension, and regulate blood pressure. Although it is medicinal, the gruel is delicious and a welcome breakfast especially when taken with jaggery. Karapincha’s antioxidant properties are also well known. In rural areas, the leaves are ground and applied to poisonous insect bites, and karapincha congee is given to recovering snake-bite victims.

Karapincha is known by many other names. In India, it has more than a dozen monikers that vary by region, including kitha neem and meetha neem. In Thailand it is called bai karee and hom kaek, in Laos dok kibe, and in Myanmar, pyi naw thein and pyin daw thein. In East Africa, the Swahili call it bizari, an apt name considering the somewhat bizarre use it is put to in that country: karapincha it is said serves as incense, burnt to keep children safe from evil spirits. Few Sri Lankans have heard of this trick up the karapincha sleeve, and if they did, it would be one more use to a wide repertoire that makes karapincha so precious and indispensible.

KARAPINCHA CONGEE

(A delicious and healthy breakfast dish)

2 cups of healthy fresh karapincha leaves

1 cup cooked red rice

1 cup freshly squeezed coconut milk (coconut cream can be used as a substitute)

Garlic

Salt to taste

Lightly run the cooked rice with about half a cup of water through the electric blender so that the grains are crushed but not ground to a pulp. Put it in a pot with either the fresh coconut milk, or coconut cream diluted in water. Add in a crushed clove or two of garlic. Bring it to boil on a medium fire.

Blend the fresh clean leaves with a little water. Strain the juice and add it to the boiling rice, stirring continuously. Remove from fire when the congee starts to boil and the mixture is creamy but not too thick. Cool and serve with pieces of jaggery.

