

Currying Flavours

Posted on



Every cook's magic spice collection:

1. Chilli
2. Pepper
3. Unroasted Curry Powder (thunapaha)
4. Roasted Curry Powder (kalu thunapaha)
5. Turmeric
6. Mustard
7. Ginger
8. Jaffna Curry Powder
9. Cumin Powder
10. Cinnamon Powder
11. Coriander
12. Goraka

The secret of a great Sri Lankan curry is in the mix of herbs and spices.

Words Daleena Samara | **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

There was a time when the incessant swish and thud of the old fashioned grinding stone, the *miris gala*, would resound in kitchens across Sri Lanka. No kitchen would be free from the sounds and aromas emanating from spices crushed into curry paste on large slabs of rock to flavour the day's fare. It was a labour of love, performed with bare hands. Growing up on the island, I remember our cook bend over the large flat mortar. She would heave a heavy cylindrical pestle back and forth along its surface, crushing cumin, mustard, garlic, ginger, pepper and a host of other fragrant ingredients into a fine paste, shape it into little heaps that would go directly into the chatty pots, flavouring the meats, vegetables and salads. Delicious aromas of curry wafted through the house and mingled with the curry smells in the neighbourhood.

Today, the electric grinder has replaced the *miris gala* making such hard work obsolete. And for the time-pressed, there are plenty of ready-made curry mixes in grocery stores. Yet few can replicate the delicious combo of the homemade spice blend that makes a dish inviting and memorable. Even today, each cook has their own combination tailored to the tastes of the household. It's the little nuances, such as how much of coriander, cumin and fennel to

use, or whether or not to include fenugreek in the mix or just toss in the seeds, that make a curry exciting.

The first curries were probably cooked in India, where spices were amassed through trade and colonial activities. The word “curry” goes back to the South Indian *kari*, and the roots of the Portuguese word *caril* (spice mix) to *karil* in Kannada. *Kari* and *karil* mean the spicy sauce that accompanies rice. The world had discovered these aromatic ingredients, packed with essential oils and oleoresins, a compound that creates the aroma and flavour that makes a spice a spice. In hot tropical Sri Lanka, spices helped to not just enhance taste, but to preserve foods. Many spices also had medicinal value. Little wonder then that the new ingredients were welcomed and localised. Sri Lanka started off with just cinnamon, but became home to cardamom, cloves and just about every other spice. Her cooks selected the best blends for local tastes and created the Sri Lankan curry powder.

In general, Sri Lankans always use a base of cumin, fennel and coriander, to which they may also add cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, fenugreek, dry chillies, pepper, mustard, turmeric, *karapincha* (curry leaves), *sera* (lemon grass) and *rampe* (pandan or screw pine). A kitchen in Sri Lanka is dysfunctional without any one of these ingredients.

Coconut is another important ingredient that makes Sri Lankan curry unique. The spices and other ingredients are usually simmered in and later thickened with fresh coconut milk. Additionally, some foods are given special ingredients to balance not only flavours but elemental values – hearty foods like crab, for example, are cooked with *siyambala* (tamarind) leaves that are said to cool the system, while pork and all seafoods are cooked with dry *goraka* (*Garcinia-Cambogia*), an acidic ingredient said to neutralise toxicity if present. Fish *ambul thiyal*, a southern speciality, is a delicious and unique spicy preparation of fish cooked mainly in *goraka* paste, pepper and salt.

Importantly, Sri Lankans have two main types of curry powders: *thunapaha* or white (unroasted) curry powders and *kalu kudu* or black (roasted) curry powders. The former is a mild and light mix of just coriander, cumin and fennel, usually sun dried and used to flavour mild curries, such as egg curry, white fish curry and vegetable curries. Black curry powders aren't really black, but dark brown because the ingredients are all gently dry roasted, left to cool, and finely ground. Roasted coriander emits a delicious aroma, as does roasted cumin and fennel. Black curry powders generally include a wide range of Sri Lankan curry spices and are used in red or hot curries such as beef, chicken, and certain vegetables such as black *kos* (jackfruit) curry. Roasted curry powder is also sometimes tempered with onions, green chillies and garlic and used to garnish curries.

Just as the combination and quantities of spices used in a curry spice mixture varies from home to home, so does it from region to region across Asia. Across the Palk Strait, tastes differ somewhat. A close Indian variant of Sri Lankan curry powder is Madras curry powder, which uses all of the ingredients favoured by the island's cooks plus nutmeg and dry Indian bay leaves, and sometimes star anise, which adds a slight liquorice tang. In northern India, where curry powder is called *garam masala*, even more ingredients are added, and curries are cooked in curd or cream and ghee. Maharashtra curry powder includes a dry lichen called *kalpasi* (black stone flower) and dry mace, while in southern Orissa the oils of the pandan flowers and fruit are also used in curries. Every ingredient influences the flavour of a curry, and leaves a distinct mark on the region's cuisine.

The dozens of herbs and spices available can bewilder the first-time curry cook. So, if the chef in you is yearning to venture into local curry territory, make sure you buy all of the ingredients mentioned earlier in this article. Then experiment and find the combination that you really like. Usually, the ratio of key condiments unroasted for any dish is one part coriander seeds, to half a part of cumin and quarter part of fennel. Grind it well and sieve to get the fibres out. Add the rest of the ingredients according to taste. Not everything has to be ground. Cinnamon, for example, can be tossed right into the pot just as it is. Cloves and cardamom can simply be crushed and added. And don't forget that curries need plenty of other ingredients, like onions, fresh garlic and ginger, green chillies and lime or lemon. The latter adds the finishing touch, creating a delicate balance of sourness and saltiness that local cooks call *lunu ambul*.

Alternatively, almost every local supermarket carries a wide variety of ready made curry powders for almost every curry. Choose a dish and pick a mix to suit it, but remember that having the individual ingredients on hand can be fun – you can taste and smell them and pick and choose. Even if you use a ready-made curry powder, it won't hurt to add in individual spices. When cooking with spices, however, you have to learn how to strike a balance between retaining the original flavour of what you are cooking, and enhancing it with a rich medley of spicy flavours. It's a juggling act that you will master with practice and eventually savour.

