Discover Currying Fruity Flavours

Posted on
Seasoning the mango

Three exotic tropical fruit dishes from Sri Lanka to delight the curry gourmand in you.

Words Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

Sri Lanka, more than any other place in the world, is undoubtedly the home of curry. It's a nation that goes into withdrawal if deprived of curry for just a day. It is also a nation that will curry just about anything, from leaves, to roots and flowers. And, of course, Sri Lankans curry fruits… mangoes, pineapples, amberella, even bananas among others—all delicious 'meats' for the curry aficionado.

A typical Sri Lankan meal comprises a main dish of boiled rice with a spectrum of curried vegetables, and a protein dish like meat or fish. Fruits can be a satisfying alternative to meat for avegetarian, although they do not satisfy the full protein dietary requirement. Exotic fruits spiced up with a carefully selected mix of condiments make Sri Lankan meals exciting. The spices serve to not only flavour the meal, but also benefit health with their antioxidant and balancing properties. For example, a teaspoon of *ulu hal* (fenugreek), a spice with a very distinctive flavour, is added to increase appetite and aid digestion, as well as alleviate excessive *vata* (air element) and *kapha* (earth or phlemy element) conditions.

The general rule for home cooking is knowing the quantity of the various ingredients, says Chithra Surasena, who presides over a busy hearth in a home in Sri Lanka's Kotte district. There are two schools of fruit cooking—one that uses coconut milk and one that does not. Chitra favours the latter because it is truer to the original flavour of the fruit. Sri Lankan homes usually follow a basic recipe, but temper the ingredients and methods to the tastes of the family.

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Chitra shared her family recipe for three fruity curries – amberella (*Sponias dulcis*),

mango and pineapple – to make this article possible. All three dishes use the same ingredients and cooking methods, with a few variations for cooking pineapple. The rule of thumb for a perfect fruit curry is to pick well-seasoned fruit, on the verge of ripening, when the acids within the flesh that make it sour are about to break down and turn into sugars. The flesh is still firm to the touch but the fruit is not too sour.

Be warned, this is a fiery sweet and sour, hot and spicy recipe for chilli-heat-loving Sri Lankan tastebuds. Reduce the quantities of green chillies and chilli powder for a milder version. The best cooking utensil is the clay pot, which enhances the earthy flavour of these tropical fruits. A metal pot may interact with the acids in the fruit and give the dish a slightly tinny flavour, says Chitra.

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So how do you curry fruit? Chitra started with amberella curry.

Amberella curry

500 g amberella

(about five to six fruits)

50 g red onions (chopped)

(the small variety is better)

25 g green chillies (chopped)

1 sprig rampa (pandanus)

(omit for pineapple curry)

1 sprig sera (lemon grass)

1 tablespoon ulu hal (fenugreek)

Coconut oil for tempering spices

2 tablespoons of chilli powder

½ teaspoon turmeric

2 tablespoons roasted curry powder

4 tablespoons sugar

Grind the

following:

A handful of karapincha

(curry leaves)

1 tablespoon mustard seeds

4 cloves garlic

(omit for pineapple curry)

Crush the following:

1 teaspoon cloves

1 stick cinnamon

4 cardamoms

Wash the fruit very well, peel and cut lengthwise around the fibrous pith. Remove the pieces and put aside. You could use or discard pith.

Crush cloves, cinnamon and cardamom. Grind mustard, garlic, karapincha, sera and rampa into a paste. Rub the paste, turmeric and chilli powder into the fruit. Set the fruit aside.

Heat a little oil in a clay pot, and fry the ulu hal for a few minutes, until it turns a slightly dark brown. Add the crushed spices. Fry for a few seconds.

Add the seasoned fruit into the pot, along with the chillies and onions. Stir well to

mix all the ingredients. Add about 2-3 cups of water, and heat over a medium fire. Leave to cook for five minutes, then lower heat and boil for another 10 minutes. When the curry starts to boil, add the roasted curry powder and sugar. When the gravy starts to thicken and the fruit looks transparent, add salt, and continue to boil for a few minutes. The curry, now dark and thick, is ready to be relished.

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Mango curry

Substitute amberella with 500 grammes of seasoned, just-about-to-ripen mangoes. Mangoes are sometimes cooked with the peel on, but Chitra says it's better to peel the fruit for health reasons — because it may contain preservatives and pesticides — and simply because the peel is not tasty. So peel the mangoes and cut the flesh lengthwise. You can cook the seed too if it has flesh around it. Prepare it, follow the same method for amberella curry.

Pineapple curry

To prepare pineapple curry, use the same ingredients omitting garlic and rampa. The method of preparing pineapple curry is slightly different to that of amberella and mango curry because of the soft succulent texture of the fruit. Choose a firm but ripe pineapple. Unripe pineapple would be too sour, and a too-ripe pineapple would become mushy when curried. Peel and get rid of the 'eyes'. Cut the pineapple either in lengthwise chunks or in squares. Discard the very acidic pith.

To prepare, grind the mustard and curry leaves and set aside. Sauté the ulu hal and other spices for a few minutes, then add onions, karapincha, sera and green chillies and fry a little longer. Next, add the fruit and the rest of the ingredients, including the mustard paste and salt, except the curry powder and sugar, and half a cup of water. Mix well and cook over medium flame, taking care not to crush the pineapple. When the curry begins to boil, add the sugar and roasted curry powder. Continue to boil until the gravy starts to thicken.

To keep the pineapple firm, do not cover when it is cooking. Mango and amberella curry can be closed when cooking, but not for too long because the flesh will become mushy, says Chitra. She also recommends that the dishes be cooked a day

ahead. If you leave them for a day, the juices mix well and the dish becomes even more tasty, she says.

While mango and amberella curry are best with fluffy white rice, pineapple curry is best with savoury yellow rice. These dishes can be served for lunch or dinner, with other accompanying dishes like pol sambal, beans, eggplant pahi and meats. Enjoy!