Dutch Cooking: A Survival

Posted on

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The Dutch if you must know, decided to invade Ceylon, as it was then called, in the latter 16 hundreds. I am told they did this rather cautiously, if not firmly, and being the dedicated agriculturists and good eaters they were, proceeded to enrich and embellish the tropical countryside with a variety of tropical flora, mainly spices.

They also brought with them a great wealth of culinary expertise, which over the years was expertly hybridised with indigenous as well as alien concoctions.

I am reliably informed that a good few of the pure Dutch preparations are still made in a very few homes of Sri Lanka. And except perhaps in those of resident Dutchmen (nearly all of them expatriates not destined to be holders of Sri Lankan passports) it is the descendants of the Dutch who struggle to preserve some of the genuine old Dutch dishes.

The Dutch Burghers as they been known for many years are these folk and alas they are now in a minority group. Not for any lack of fertility, I hasten to add, but because most of them have emigrated to larger countries with opportunities to math and of course are thriving.

At the risk of digression, I am urged by my relatives and friends of genuine Dutch descent to emphasise the fact that surnames such as De Hoedt, Vanderstraaten, Van Twest, Foenander, Brohier. Yan der Hoeven and so on are truly indicative of the Dutch ancestors. If I have omitted others it is because the scope of this article deals with food: Dutch food.. and tropicalised, not native Dutch food. “Native” i essentially a more popular adjective of the British who adroitly ousted the Dutch and proceeded to grow more kinds of crops, including the spices. But they also contrived to soft-pedal Dutch cooking and introduce their own. Much of this survives and waxes powerfully in the more submissive and colonial-type homes and eating-houses.

So we are still confronted with beefsteak, roastbeef, steak and kidney pies and poached eggs. But the more delightful crumpets, muffins, scones and apple pies are woefully scarce. Pure Dutch food is almost non-existent these days. Hopefully, some enterprising Dutchman (or woman) will decide to add a Dutch restaurant to our growing international collection comprising German. Indian, Muslim, Chinese, Japanese and many others. This may nee irate the need for importation of the precise ingredients and cooking utensils from the land of wooden shoes and windmills. I am certain that the very few surviving Dutch utensils are now treasured heirlooms with more than antique value. The Dutch Burghers are, apart from being stubborn, thrifty and green-thumbed, quite sentimental. Grandma de Hoedt would have a stroke if her precious ‘poffertje pan’ was removed from its place of honour in the living-room to be ruined in some commercial restaurant! Nor can the available flour, cheese, and fruit compete with the real things from Rotterdam! So, with sadness and reluctance I am wont to describe Dutch preparations which are brave adaptations of the genuine stuff. Since the same applies in most Chinese, Muslim and “English” eating places, I suppose I am entitled to take this liberty.

“Breudher”, supposedly pure Dutch, is not. It is a hybrid more of English composition, a sort of sultana cake somewhat starved of the latter, and on the dry side, but consumed with zest and plenty of butter, over the Festive Season. The real thing is spelled “Brooder” and more correctly called “Turban Koek” and this great repast is over-generous in that no less than thirty eggs are added to three pounds of wheaten dough, one of butter, one of sugar and just a smattering (¼ lb.) of raisins! As if this were not enough, the doughty Dutch add lashings of thick cream to the wedges of this at teatime – or rather tiffin-time!

“Poffertjes” are smaller size, resembling miniature bread rolls but almost spherical, and richer by far. No doubt a hearty Dutchman is able to stow away at least a dozen

as a light snack, popping one into his mouth at a time and at a rate of one per three minutes of dedicated feasting.

Since no less than twelve eggs, three tablespoonfuls of rich milk, and a quarter pound of sultanas are added to a mere one pound of dough, consuming twelve poffertjes in about half an hour at a genteel party of twelve average Dutchmen necessitates the womenfolk working furiously with their immense iron poffertje pans.

Poffertjes must be eaten fresh, remember! If the very idea of this has titillated your taste-buds, wash down this, mentally of course, with “home-made ginger-beer”. This is not the unhappy fizzy stuff the British brought in and is perpetuated these days in hopeless competition with the big names in Yankee aereated waters.

No.

“Gengivre Bier” is made of sterner stuff! Apart from the ginger, water, sugar and sweet toddy, the real thing requires bee’s honey, lemon, nutmeg, cinnamon and mace, plus orange or lemon rind and two eggs per dozen bottlefuls. The much simpler Dutch Burgher version tries hard to provide some excitement ·with the odd floating and bloated raisin in each tumblerful, but the real thing must be an ‘experience’. Finally, if your taste-buds can stand the strain, “lamprais”!

I am assuming that the spelling is correct as my table dictionary does not include this essentially Sri Lankan word. In the past few years a variety of lamprais makers have shown up, mostly in and around Colombo, also with a variety of spellings. “Lump Rice”, although clumsy, is not as misleading as “lumpfries”! – for, although the rice in a lamprais can be lumpy, nothing fried is permitted in one. Certainly not according to the Burgher ladies of Colombo who dominate the lamprais scene.

In developing the lamprais, the Ceylonese Dutch decided to combine the Indonesian “Lempur”, which is a preparation of boiled rice with assorted meats all wrapped in a banana leaf, with the Sri Lankan Sinhalese “buth-mula” – traditionally a parcel of rice and curry wrapped in banana or lotus leaf, taken on a journey. The usual travel book definition of lamprais is that it is rice boiled in meat stock with curries that are dIY and all of it baked in a wrapping of banana leaf. I have seen it described a Dutch improvement of rice and curry.

What an understatement lamprais is much more in concept, execution and taste.

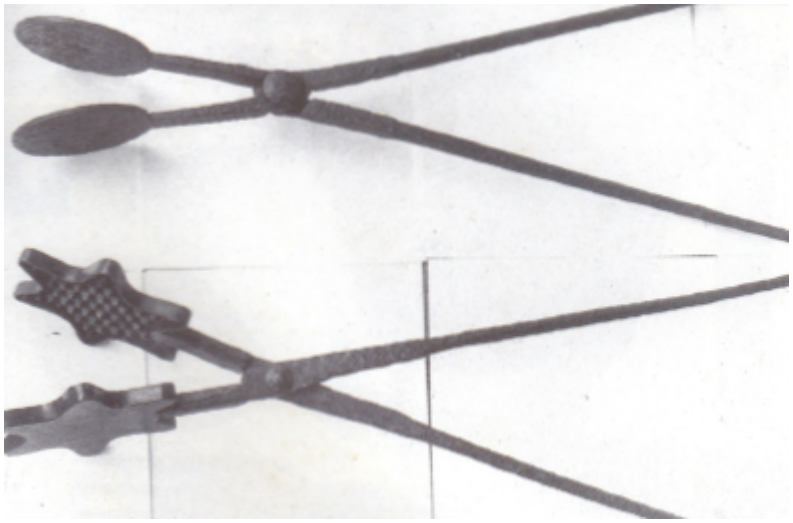
Here is my definition of a genuine Dutch lamprais. Into the rice to be cooked is inserted a small cloth bag of very special spices, all to be boiled in stock of chicken, pork or beef. With the rice are some meatballs, a portion of cooking banana (known as ash plantain) curried dry, some “seeni sambol” – that delicious Sri lankan rice and curry accompaniment made of tempered onions, chillies, ginger, the essential Maldivian fish, many spices and some sugar and some Indonesian “blachang” made of crushed dried prawns plus garlic, ginger and assorted spices. To this is added a generous helping of spicy, but not too hot curry of diced chicken, pork and beef. The bag of spices is removed and each tempting portion is then wrapped in a lightly . warmed, tender leaf (warmed over coconut shell charcoal only). The wrapped-up lamprais tastes best after two to three hours when the subtle flavour of the banana leaf has permeated the □□nole mouthwatering portion.

The result is a rice and curry packet of rare flavour, with good keeping qualities and a marvellous degree of digestibility and pronounced lumprise.

To dwell on the merits and demerits of the sub species of lamprais in Sri Lanka coupled with the experience of their makers, would run into a modest volume. Rather than invoke fury on one side and (hopefully) praise, kisses and perhaps an imitation to lunch on the other, by naming notable lamprais makers, I will at this stage terminate this effort and make an entry in my diary: “Remember to collect your thirty lamprais on Saturday afternoon at Dehiwela.”



Lamprais – the special rice of the Dutch



Moulds for sweetmeats seen at the Dutch Museum, Colombo.



Breudher – the sultana cake made on festive occasions.