Going Bananas!

Posted on



The banana fruit is not only the most consumed but also the most widely cultivated fruit crop in the country. A favourite among the locals, it comes in a variety of shapes, sizes, colours and tastes.

A banana is a pleasant accompaniment not only to all main meals but also to biscuits, buns and cakes. Common enough to fill up the everyday breakfast table, or as a snack with plain tea, they are also grand enough to adorn all kinds of festive spreads.

Words Kamalika Jayathilaka

Interchangeably referred to as plantains the banana fruit bears boundless significance to the culture and lifestyle of Sri Lankans. The most unique feature of the banana fruit is the fact that it comes not from a tree but from a large plant that is also a herb with a succulent, very juicy stem. The whole plant has its manifold uses for the locals. We use the banana leaf as a plate to serve food on, eat the

inflorescence or flower (Kehel Muwa), and of course eat the fruit.

We cook bananas, consuming it as a vegetable by turning it into a spicy curry to accompany rice. Some of these types of bananas that are cooked include Alu kesel (Ash plantains), Mondan, Ela Mondan, Atamuru and Kithala; and then there are those that we eat raw as a fruit or dessert when ripe by merely peeling off the skin and eating with the hand (also making it a delicious instant but healthy snack).

These can be grouped under three broad categories: Mysore, Kolikuttu and Cavendish bananas. Ambul and Seeni bananas go under the first category, and are rather small and thin and turn yellow when ripe. There are about 40 different varieties of ‘Ambul’ itself, depending on the areas grown. Kolikuttu bananas include Kolikuttu, Suwendel, Puwalu and Rath Kehel, these grow to be a little bigger or rather fatter than the first category and also turn yellow when ripe. Anamalu, Ambun, Bim Kehel, Nethrapalam and Dole are some of the Cavendish bananas common in the country. They are much bigger than the first two types and remain green when ripe. Nethrapalam however, is rather unique, as it turns red when ripe and is larger than the rest. It is also the most expensive type in Sri Lanka. All three types are equally popular among Sri Lankans.

> The cultural significance of bananas is its close bond with the Sinhala & Tamil New Year

The highlight of the cultural significance of bananas is its close bond with the Sinhala Tamil New Year, which falls in April, where a bunch of bananas is an essential component in the Avurudu menu along with traditional sweetmeats and Kiribath (milk rice) a traditional Sri Lankan dish. Therefore, during April the yellow bananas like Ambul and Kolikuttu are in high demand. Even though Kolikuttu and Ambul are both sought after to fulfill this rather delicious purpose, Ambul is most preferred by the locals as it goes best with milk rice. Kiribath in Sri Lanka is an essential dish for any auspicious moment and therefore so is a bunch or two of Ambul or Kolikuttu bananas. These two types are also often used for religious offerings to various deities in temples and kovils. For the Hindus the whole banana plant holds much more significance as it is regarded as a symbol of fertility and prosperity. Thus two banana plants bearing fruits are placed on either side of the main entrance at weddings. Plants without fruits or with raw fruits, are placed at the threshold to funerals. The fruit is also used by Hindus to finalise business and

other cultural agreements by placing an Ambul banana on a betel leaf and offering it to the other party.

The banana fruit also comes with high medicinal value and also closely tied are local beliefs of their effects on the body. Seeni kehel for instance is often recommended for the sick, the elderly and children being full of nutrients for increased energy and vitality. Nethrapalam is believed to be good for the eyes and general vitality. Meanwhile, Ambul is supposed to loosen your bowels and Kolikuttu is believed to bring about constipation. Ambul and Ambun are to be avoided when you have a cold, as they are believed to be ‘cooling’ and therefore enhance phlegm, while Kolikuttu is considered ‘heaty’. What is more, all types of bananas are believed to help improve nerve function, restore normal bowel function, treat heartburn, reduce heart problems, protect eyesight and strengthen bones. Apart from all this as a result of their high content of potassium and fibre they are generally recommended by most doctors.

Bananas which are found in plenty in this beautiful tropical island get blended into delicious cakes, breads, muffins and desserts while others become spicy dishes to suit your preferred taste.

Banana Flambe

Ingredients

1 large banana

50g Sugar

30g butter

10g Rum

50ml Cream

Method

Cut the banana into slices. Add the sugar into the pan and make a caramel. Then add the butter and cream and put the banana into the mixture. Finally, flambé with rum.

(Courtesy: Hilton Colombo)

Tempered Alu Kesel

Ingredients:

250g Ash plantains cut into pieces

2 Bombay Onions

4 green chilies

2 tablespoons of crushed Chilies

2 tablespoons of crushed Maldive fish

Pandan leaf (Rampé)

Curry leaves

1-½ tablespoons of Coconut oil

1 teaspoon of salt

¼ teaspoon of turmeric

2 Tomatoes

Method:

Heat oil in a pan and add onions, the curry leaves and pandan leaf. Mix the ash plantains (with the skin) with salt pepper and crushed chilies, add it into the pan and serve when cooked.

(Courtesy: Cinnamon Grand)

Alu Kesel Curry

Ingredients

500g ash plantains

50g red onions

50g garlic

3 pieces of cinnamon

Few green chilies

Pinch of turmeric

Curry leaves

Pandan Leaf (Rampé)

Lemongrass

Some fenugreek

(ulu haal)

Pepper

Coconut milk (½ thick and ½ thin)

½ tablespoon of salt

Method:

Peel the plantains and cut them into a preferred shape, thinly chop the red onions, garlic and green chilies; tear the pandan leaf and lemongrass into 1-inch pieces. Mix the fenugreek, cinnamon, curry leaves, pandan leaf red onions, garlic and green chilies in a pan and add the plantain; mix well. Add the thin milk and bring to boil and when the plantains are well cooked add the thick coconut milk and let it simmer. Finally, add salt according to your preferred taste, remove from stove and stir well.

(Courtesy: Cinnamon Grand)

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