

Good Fruit by the Way

Posted on

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Come July, August, September in this many-splendoured isle of Sri Lanka where nature has been more than bountiful in her gifts and one of the most pleasant

sights to greet both the local people and visitors are the small but distinctly charming pavement stalls laden with luscious fruits in season – Durian, Mangosteens, and Rambuttans.

The delightful aroma of fresh, ripe mangosteens or rambuttans is hard to resist. Young and old stop by, children wait for the last bell to run to the nearest hawker close to the school and buy even a few red, juicy hairy fruits, the rambuttans, to split between the thumbs of both hands and pop the white, seed with the sweet, delicious pulp around it into the mouth. These fruits resemble lichees, only to the Sri Lankan palate there is no second to the rambuttans.

All along the main roads in Colombo, where a vendor can squat with his or her basket away from the eyes of the law, (and the law often turns a blind eye on this) they would be in quick business. Sri Lankans, young and old do not need much urging, except that they sometimes haggle about the price. But they buy the fruits by the score, sometimes hundreds.

From among the crowds, the vendor sees the foreigner, the visitors on holiday, looking on inquisitively, curiously And in the quaint lingo that is particularly charming they'd say "come lady, miss, sir, you try, super red rambuttans, mangosteens...yum, yum you no get in your country..." And who can or does resist?

Very often, to the consternation of the local buyers waiting around to make a bargain, the whole basket quickly changes hands, with the visitors laden with the juicy, delicacies walking away happily. trying out the succulent rambuttans or mangosteens and obviously enjoying every moment of its sweet tasty, juiciness.

Mangosteens, round. deep. dark brown in colour with a touch of golden orange sometimes, must be placed between the palms of both hands and pressed hard, to break the hard outer cover. Then with the thumbs of both hands and pressed hard to open at the point of the crack and ah ... yummy ... suck deeply of the white pulp inside. The mangosteen too has a seed, but a soft one, which is thrown away.

The place famous for mangosteens is Kalutara, 45 miles south of the city, but worthwhile, if you can get there as the main road along the southern coast is another feast for the eyes. The best rambuttans could be obtained in Malwana which is north of Colombo, another treat for the eyes to see the prolific orchards of green leaves with an abundance of the red, hairy, fruits, the trees so laden that the fruits almost hand to the ground.

But, if these trips outside, to the places of growing are not possible for one reason or another, fruit can still be obtained anywhere along the streets, from Colombo, where the vendors sell along the pavements or in the busy markets in the city and every suburb.

This is also the season of the Durian, the fruit that many love to hate – that is until they have been initiated into the delights of what the fruit contains after it has been peeled of its obnoxious smell for which it has become notorious. A stately tree, the durian is a well known fruit tree of South East Asia. In Singapore and Malaysia most people love it. It grows to a large extent in India and Indonesia. In Sri Lanka this is the time of the year that it makes its appearance in quantity. This tree grows only in some areas, mostly in the central highlands, particularly the Kandy District.

It is hard to define its exact smell. There is a lingering pungency about the odour of Durian, distinctly unpleasant to many, and tolerated with tasteful expectation by others. But what is interesting is that the smell is confined to the hard prickly shell or outer rind.

For those who get accustomed to it, and it does not take long to get used to, after the shell has been cut away, it is the finest and most delicious fruit of the east.

The durian is the favourite food of the orangutangs of Sumatra. It has great supporters among people too. As far back as 1869 an important man called Wallace, in the Malay Archipelago, said that he would choose the durian as the king, and the orange as the queen of fruits.

Its fruits can weigh up to 4 kgs. The custard-like pulp inside, once one has acquired a taste for it, is second to none. The rich glutinous smoothness of the pulp adds to its delicacy. The best description of its taste and flavour is that it has “a rich butter-like custard highly flavoured with almonds, but intermingled with it, come wafts of flavour that call to mind cream-cheese, onion sauce, brown sheery, and other incongruities”.

“It is neither acid, nor sweet, nor juicy, yet one feels the want of none of these qualities, for it is perfect as it is”. Again, it is at around this time of each year that the durian too can be seen strung up along the small pavement market stalls or lying in great, big baskets with vendors shouting themselves hoarse about its delights.

Many Asians, especially Arabs from the Middle East, the Malays of South East Asia

and the Japanese from the Far East, believe the durian has aphrodisiac qualities. Hence it is always a cherished gift among the men from those regions. Hence also, a fruit seller with a load of durian, is bound to make good profit when he sells to a customer who believes in the aphrodisiac quality of the fruit.

Durian is available mostly along the Kandy Road, one of the most picturesque roads in the island leading to the central highlands. The durian season almost coincides with the season of the famous Kandy Perahera.

Price wise the durian costs from Rs 25 to Rs 35 per fruit. But mangosteens when in season could be bought from Rs 1 to 1.25 per fruit, while a hundred rambuttans could cost as little as Rs 20. (US\$1 = Rs. 28/- approx).

While the durian, mangosteen and rambuttan are seasonal fruits, there is also the mouthwatering mangoes of various varieties which have their best season around April and May and again around December, but which is available in most places throughout the year. Of course, naturally the prices off-season are a trifle higher. Mangoes are among the trees – a hundred thousand of each kind that King Parakrama Bahu the Great of Polonnaruwa planted in a great national fruit orchard.

King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe of Kandy thought so highly of the mango that the fruit was amongst the daily offerings he made to the Sacred Tooth Relic.

The mango figures prominently in the literature of the Indian sub-continent. Kalidasa in Sakuntala refers to the mango as “the first living breath of spring”.

In the same work, this great ancient Indian poet makes of the mango sprig a worthy offering to the God of Love. The varieties of the mango are almost legion. About 210 varieties of this fruit were identified by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research a few years ago. but this is said to be less than a fifth of the world’s known varieties.

In Sri Lanka, most people, given a choice between a delicious juicy, ripe, Karutha Kolambam, which has its best harvest in the northern peninsula of Jaffna, or the humble Dampara which makes suckers of all of us, and a delectable ice cream or chocolate mousse, the odds are that most would choose the mango. It is known that many foreigners too, have become completely enamoured of its delicious tasty properties.

And yet. another fruit for all seasons, which is the most inexpensive of all, is the

banana which is available all year around. There is a demand for bananas always. Every visitor, whether he or she decides to splurge in five-star comfort or live in the smaller pensions or guest houses scattered all over this sunny tropical isle, will be familiar with the common banana. You can have them real sweet, sweet sour or just fleshy and bland, these abound in different varieties. So, if you happen to be in this sunny, isle at any time of year, make your pick of any of the delicious, fruits in season. Sure you'll take back with you the exciting tastes of fruity surprise.



Tasting the delicious Mangosteen.



A young girl buys Rambuttan at the kerb.



A city fruit seller awaits customer.