Grains Of Red-Brown And More

Posted on



Pittu, Thalapa and Halapa

Aari *mama* (Uncle) poured the red-brown finger millet (kurakkan) into the round stone mortar and started turning the handle in slow rhythmic movements. A quiet few minutes passed only interrupted by the sound of the mortar turning… then a sheet of grayish-white flour tumbled down at a leisurely pace forming a rudimentary circle. The flour was finally ready to make a multitude of edibles.

Words Chamindra Warusawitharane Photographs Indika de Silva

In arid areas of Africa and Asia finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*) grows on clumps of green stalks during three months and turns a pleasing red-brown on approaching harvesting season. Finger millet is a traditional grain that is fast gaining popularity thanks to its nutritious value, especially amongst diabetic patients. Finger millet is high in starch and is considered ‘superior’ to wheat in the sense that its proteins are more easily digested. It has the third highest iron content of any grain. This

wholesome grain is made into porridge, pittu, roti, hoppers, bread and even crackers in various regions of the globe. I was lucky enough to witness the making of several traditional Sri Lankan food items with finger millet, otherwise known as *kurahang* or *kurakkan*.

Thalapa

These chocolate brown mounds used to be a staple food in the absence of rice and the art of eating sticky mounds of thalapa is somewhat tricky.

Ingredients

Finger millet flour

A pinch of salt

Water

'Elbow grease'

Mangalika placed the pot of water on the fire and added a pinch of salt. Handful by handful the finger millet flour fell into the boiling water. Mangalika kept stirring with vigour until the flour and the salty water became a thick dough resembling chocolate ice cream. Off the fire the pot went on to a table and the dough became three separate balls of thalapa. Placed on lotus leaves the thalapa was ready.

Eating thalapa is a different art. Pinch off a little bit of thalapa and roll it in to a tiny ball, then soak it in the fiery meat, fish or lentil curry. You have to swallow the tiny ball of thalapa soaked in gravy since any attempts to chew it will clamp your teeth together in a sticky substance. The curry that accompanies thalapa is called 'aanam', which is made with ground coconut and is a curry with lots of gravy in it.

Pittu

Pittu is a much loved dish in Sri Lanka and certain parts of South Asia. As Mangalika told me, you need practice and the equivalent of a green thumb in cooking to make 'real' pittu. And it was master chef Aari *mama* who made the pittu.

Ingredients

Finger millet flour

Water

Salt

‘Knack’

Aari *mama* put the flour in a clay pot with a wide mouth. He sprinkled a little bit of water and salt and started mixing the flour with his hand. He kept sprinkling water and mixing the flour, his hand sweeping in a circular movement. A few minutes into mixing, we saw the dough separate into tiny pearl-shapes (pittu dough is dry compared to the thalapa dough). Afterwards, Aari *mama* poured some water into yet another wide-mouthed clay pot and tied a clean white cloth covering the mouth. The pearl-shapes went on top of the white cloth. Then he covered the pittu dough with another pot and up went the pot on to the fire. Within half an hour the pittu was ready for consumption.

Pittu is a delicious treat with either curd or yoghurt and sugar for the sweet-toothed. Those who prefer to treat their taste buds to a little bit of zest, can eat pittu with coconut milk and lunu miris (a fiery mix of red chillies, onions, salt, lime and Maldive fish) or with meat or fish curry.

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Halapa

This honeyed delicacy is a sought after sweetmeat during festivities or simply as something to nibble on.

Ingredients

Finger millet flour

Scraped coconut

Sugar/treacle

A pinch of salt

Suriya leaves

Mangalika boiled the sugar with a little bit of water and kept stirring until the sugar melted. Once the sugar became a thick puddle of sweet liquid, she added the scraped coconut and kept stirring and mixing. Slowly the mixture turned a light brown. Leaving the sweet mix aside to cool, Mangalika made the finger millet dough with water, flour and a pinch of salt. Then she spread the creamy brown dough on heart-shaped *Suriya* leaves and topped one side of each leaf with the coconut-sugar mix. Folded in two like sandwiches, one by one the *Suriya* leaves cradling the halapa mix went on top of another white cloth covering a water filled pot. In about half an hour the nectarous halapa were ready.

As I watched Mangalika spread the table with the food they just cooked, I could not help but think of the other food items Sri Lankans make with finger millet. The brown roti that you can eat with lunu miris, nutritious porridge and home-made bread. Finally, the table was set with dishes of thalapa and pittu. A fiery fish curry lay next to a dish of dhal ‘aanam’ while another bore the halapa wrapped in heart-shaped leaves. There was only one thing left for us to do, tuck in!

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