



An array of of sambols; 1-Lunu miris, 2-seeni sambol, 3-coconut sambol, 4-biling (bilimbi) sambol, 5-kunisso (sprat) sambol, 6-winged bean sambol, 7-radish sambol, 8-nelum ala (lotus root) sambol, 9-kohila ala sambol (Location: Nuga Gama, Cinnamon Grand)

It's a dish that is often noticed only by its absence. It doesn't get the same attention that more flamboyant dishes do, but without that tangy dish of coconut sambol or lunu miris, would milk rice or hoppers ever taste the same? Unobtrusive but tasty, the sambol is the almost inevitable accompaniment for most Sri Lankan meals.

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Defined simply, a sambol is a spicy relish served as a side dish. Sambols can be made with various ingredients but in Sri Lanka a sambol often includes red chillies, onions, coconut and maldive fish mixed together. Numerous variations can be created by the addition of different vegetables and seasonings.

Many different methods exist to prepare sambols, however tracking them down is another matter. The inventiveness of most Sri Lankan cooks is rivalled only by their vagueness when it comes to recording recipes. A query for recipes is usually met with the vague answer of "...just add a little bit of this and a bit of that and mix together..." which is not the most informative start. Also since sambols are such a staple part of Sri Lankan food, the assumption is that everyone must know how to make a sambol (presumably from birth!).

The interesting thing about the sambol is its versatility; it manages to invade every strata of society.

Possibly the most efficient way of learning how to make one is to watch. There are numerous different types of sambols depending on what ingredients are chosen. The basic idea is to mix the ingredients finely together to create a spicy dish that is usually eaten uncooked. To take a common example, coconut sambol is made from a mixture of coconut, onions, green chillies, garlic, chillie powder and maldive fish. The ingredients are all crushed and mixed thoroughly together until the coconut turns an even shade of red.

Written down it sounds the easiest thing in the world. In practice it can range from bland to delicious; most cooks claim that the trick is to get the correct balance of ingredients. Nowadays a grinder or chopper is often used to mix the ingredients but purists will insist that grinding using a mirisgala (grinding stone) or mortar and pestle and mixing by hand is best. Depending on whether you have the inclination to labour over your cooking or not, you can take your pick.

Coconut sambol is just the start, there are many other types of sambol. Carrot, minchi, gotukola, winged bean, radish, karapincha, nelum ala, katta sambol, luunu, seenisambol, lunu miris (chillie onion sambol)... there is a long list. Gotukola, minchi, winged bean and karapincha are all leaf-based sambols. Seeni sambol differs somewhat in preparation from the other types, since it involves the frying of onions in shallow oil. Seeni sambol and lunu miris are popular accompaniments for hoppers or milkrice while the leaf-based sambols are often eaten with rice.

Lunu miris is prepared by grinding chillie pieces and chillie powder together, adding maldive fish and onions and combining to form a paste. For many people the sambol is an essential dish; in fact many Sri Lankans declare that without it a meal would not taste the same. Ash plantain and pumpkin are examples of somewhat less common types of sambols which are popular among the Tamil community.

The interesting thing about the sambol is its versatility; it manages to invade every strata of society. A stop at a small shop for breakfast anywhere in the island will bring you the inevitable roti and lunu miris while a buffet at an upmarket hotel will find the sambol displayed here as well. The setting may change but the sambol remains the same. Perhaps one reason for this wide appeal is the fact that most of the ingredients can be easily found and preparation is relatively inexpensive. The word sambol, sambolaya (Sinhala) or sambal (Tamil) has become part of popular culture, with restaurants adopting it as their name.

Meals are more than just food in Sri Lanka. A meal is a method of social interaction; a way of extending hospitality. Families meet over meals, it's where discussion takes place. Among it all the sambol lurks unobtrusively. There is something quintessentially Sri Lankan about it. It's mixed up, spicy and unpredictable - depending on the mood of the chef it can range from mild to explosively hot - you never know quite what to expect. In fact, quite like Sri Lanka itself.

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