In the Christmas Mood

Posted on

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Although we are as tropical as can be, the spirit of Christmas begins to manifest itself even before December. Christmas is very special for us all, although we are multi-racial and multi-religious. For the Christian this is an extra-special occasion

but the others are quite happy to share the excitement, goodwill and gifts that are so much a part of Yuletide.

Who cares if there is no snow?

And if the kids and simple souls insist on this effect for their little nativity display, or their dinner tables, there is plenty of kapok cotton about for the purpose! Christmas begins in earnest by the first of December, for the shops and stores offer extra-special goodies, and togs, toys and, more toys co madden the children and the childish. Music is an essential ingredient towards a merry Christmas. The audio cassette shops come alive with carols and rather more lively pop offerings in between which a few of the more frenzied bailas of Portuguese origin can be heard for the entertainment of shoppers and distraction of drivers. Groups of all grades and denominations begin serious practice of carols and inject quite a variety of special effects into their noisy offerings. The little ones are ruthlessly goaded to join singing classes in the hope of their being included in choirs.

The more chic and elite groups must forget some of the more ‘in’ and ‘with it’ sounds in favour of hymns and Christmas melodies which can be anything from White Christmas, Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer and Jingle Bells to some quite off beat Sinhala renditions from the pens of local composers sung loudly, draggingly and nostalgically with more than the usual rolling of eyes heavenwards, Mary’s boychild Jesus Christ…yo ho ho.

Hotels, big and small, gear themselves for that special Christmas Eve dinner and dance. This involves ritzy decor, the hiring of the best available musical groups, recruitment of more staff, and some special instructions to the Chefs or else. Harassed office staff first draft the ads, then sit back and await the responses, which can, and often are, too much for them to bundle. Diplomacy and tact from the upper echelons see to it that the better-known get priority, but there are lots of hotels now and few, if any, are left out to fend for themselves. Nor is this much of a problem. Restaurants of every size and type put on some special stuff and, of course, the necessary decorations. And there are many of us, mainly the older ones, who prefer to celebrate Yuletide at home and in peace with loved ones.

All kinds of cake hit the shelves of bakeries and supermarkets, and although ‘Christmas Cake ‘ tops them all for richness and price, there are others who prefer the sweeter Love cake, a soft chocolate or lemon cake and some great local preparations with lots of colour and decor. Drink, of course, makes a Christmas all

the warmer. Being ‘in the best of spirits’ can also mean that the best of spirits should be in you. Little old ladies revel in ginger wine, fruit wine and some charming homemade and quite harmless stuff, but the diehards must have Scotch, brandy, rum, wines of all types plus sherry, vermouth and so on.

However, all the liquor shops will tell you that for sheer volume of sales, good old arrack tops them all. During Christmas you can smell out arrack in any tippler’s habitat ranging from a wayside hut to the booze cabinet of a minister or a diplomat.

In the most Christian homes, particularly outside the city, the Christmas Eve dinner could rival the next day’s extravaganza of food. A lot depends on who is coming. It is seldom, if ever a strictly family affair, but then some families are so large that only the closest relatives can be accommodated and fed.

Drinks all around, of course, with the men clustering round the mini-bar arranged for the occasion. As soon as the marvellous aromas are sniffed, hungry and meaningful glances suggest a change from liquid to solid fare. The table is beautifully laid out with the best of crockery, cutlery and decorations. Usually a little Christmas tree is the centrepiece but in many homes a huge bowl of fruit is also an attraction.

Soup comes first, usually a hot one but not so thick and plentiful as to insatiate. Then the first course, usually fish or seafood comes in, with suitable veg, and sauces and sometimes white wine (No one would dream of having water). There is a laughing warning for the feasters not to fill up too soon and too much; this is just the first course – a sort of starter.

The main course then steams in. A huge dish or two or three of roast turkey, chicken or duck, surrounded by sausages, lavish slices of ham, perhaps mushrooms and with ample garnishing involving bright green peas, carrots, baked potatoes and who knows – may be the choicest of asparagus tips.

Consigning this load into one’s already happy stomach takes many minutes of dedicated selecting, cutting, mouthing and chewing. Few words are spoken and the clink, clink of cutlery on crockery is music to the hosts, but muted carols from a hi-fi close by could help to emphasise the ‘if music be the food of love’ cliche.

The teetotallers sip fruit juices, a harmless punch or that all-time favorite, ginger beer but those with well-defended livers get the red wine. Servings later, there are

signs of satiation and the conversation livens up but not for too long.

It is pudding and sweet or fruit time! The really orthodox types insist on the steaming Christmas pudding but others prefer mince pies. The younger one's cannot survive without the latest in ice creams. Hands reach out to choose from the cornucopia of fresh tropical fruit in the centre. At first the grapes are nibbled, then an orange or mandarin is peeled and there could be a rush for the mangoes and papayas.

Finished, Not quite!

It is time to pull the crackers and have those sharp little bangs, the little trinkets and gifts and those outlandish paper caps for all to wear. Now it is close to midnight and the party breaks up, for tomorrow is Christmas and it is necessary to rise early. Falling asleep is no real problem, but the ladies, planning the Christmas lunch are determined to rise early and do better than the dinner.

Christmas lunch is not quite as frenzied as the dinner of the night before. Most are still fighting to recover their appetites and keep their eyes open. The hosts more than determined to rival that dinner!

Gifts are exchanged and discussed and the array of Christmas cards adorning the living room evoke cries of appreciation from the guests. The children develop keen appetites by virtue of some energetic playing with their new toys.

Drinks again, but here the accent is on the less stimulating stuff and more on juices, fizzes and may be a light punch. "Lunch!" Yell the hosts and swiftly the faithful gather once more around an elegant table, the carols are now louder and on and off something livelier with more zing to it can emanate from the hi-fi. The soup is often a cold consomme in contrast to the dinner and a superb way of paving one's palate for the coming surprises. Yet again, tantalising aromas are wafted in long before the guests are presented with a visual gastronomic extravaganza. It is an Eastern, or perhaps Sri Lankan meal with offerings to excite, challenge and of course, enliven. Twin mountains of rice steam up front, one pure white, the other faintly golden-yellow and tempered. Sprinkled on it are raisins, cadju nuts, dainty shredded lettuce or green curry chillies, and the flimsiest of fried onion cuttings. Sauces are there on the table; chili, tomato, mixedfruit, and delights like lime and mango chutney 'just for taste'. Dish after dish of curries greet the incredulous eyes of the fortunate. Curried chicken, naturally, and of course, pork. With a little luck wild boar in a

breathless ‘pol Kiri badun’ (cooked in the milk of the coconut kernel) can cause premature activation of the straining salivary glands. Chunks of fresh fried fish in batter, cadju curry, pink prawns and for Southerners with sharpened palates, chunks of steaky curried fish. Vegetables ranging from beans, beetroot, potatoes, leeks, and the inevitable lentils.

A zealous hostess will also toss along a dish of that incomparable hot-sweet ‘seeni sambol’ and even the staple of every Sri Lankan breakfast-coconut or ‘pol’ sambol! Gasps, mainly of sheer joy, are the dominant sound-effects. Many mouth-filled minutes later, perhaps an hour, and the torpid gathering, can hardly reach out for the sweets, which can range along a variety of puddings not forgetting the supersweet ‘watalappan’, a trifle and very often a mellow caramel. At last, and with considerable efforts, the heavier than-usual lot move into the sitting-room where tea and coffee round off yet another Christmas lunch to remember.

Thanks to the Christmas tree tradition, even the Forest Department cashes in on a growing demand for branches and fronds even complete saplings of fir trees grown in the hills. Thousands of these are trucked down for sale in the towns and cities, competing easily with the coo-formal plastic jobs from abroad. Whereas all these harvested decorations end up sadly and sometimes make good fuelwood, plastic ones are neatly folded up and kept for the next year. The more discerning and sentimental ladies acquire live potted New Zealand pines, or Araucarias, and bring them indoors alive vibrant and erect, to be decked with tinsel, baubles and coloured lights for the occasion.

The florists and horticulturists cash in for Christmas not only with Pinus and Cupifers, Araucarias and other fuzzy things, but also with lavish red carnations, roses, anthuriums and the amazing red bracted euphorbias. Red is very much the colour of Christmas as Father Christmas gowns will testify. Last but not least, the really loud sound of Christmas – crackers! All the wayside shops which sell greetings cards (big business just about everywhere) add crackers to their shelves or display trays. Not so much the genteel paper bon-bon type crackers which grace dinner tables at most homes, but the deafening, brilliant and nerve-shattering variety so loved by all Sri I.ankans. Particularly along the West and North-East coastal towns where Christians of a very lively disposition abound, saying ‘Happy Christmas’ with bangs is utterly compulsory. A few burnt fingers and singed hairs are shrugged away in the joy and excitement of a truly ear-blasting session to rival those of the neighbours. The faint-hearted and sensitive, plus their demoralised pet cats, dogs and cattle must surely dread the Yuletide din, and much too soon afterwards the

New Year bedlam! But taken as a whole, Christmas is for everyone and its celebration is much, much more on the credit side towards goodwill, friendship, forgiveness and love.

Christmas is forever.