

In the Kitchen

Posted on



All ingredients ready, lets start cooking...

I am not much of a cook but I do love food and what better way to experience Sri Lankan village food other than in wattle and daub kitchen with brick stoves in the company of Hemalatha Nanda and Gunawathi Nanda.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

We had arrived in Nawakulam, Ponnawa in Medawachchiya at Hemalatha Nanda's residence. We were going to make six dishes, (actually Hemalatha Nanda and Gunawathi Nanda were) that were favourites in the locality.

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Within the confines of the clay kitchen were all the required spices that had been placed neatly on shelves, and other utensils had their specified places so that when required could be accessed easily. We soon got down to business and the first dish that was to be prepared was called 'Kola Handi Gema' (literally means stirring the leaves).

Don't ask me about quantities because in a village kitchen everything is done by taste and feel. As such the quantities used for Kola Hendi Gama, we were told, were enough for four to five people. Firstly, thibbatu (turkey beans) and long beans were put together in a clay pot, water was added and salt to taste. Then the mixture was boiled for about five minutes until the thibbatu became soft. At this stage the cut pumpkin leaves were added and stirred well. It is because of this step that the dish is called Kola Hendi Gama (prior to cutting the leaves the leaves need to be plucked from the stalk making sure that the coarse part is removed). Once the leaves too were cooked, the mixture was taken out of the pot. About two table spoons of oil was added to a clay pot and when hot, mustard seeds were first added, once the seeds started popping, onions and green chillie were tempered in the oil till golden brown. Gunawathi Nanda placed some mustard seeds in the palm of her hand and said, "we need to add this much of mustard seeds."

The cooked thibbatu and pumpkin leaves were added to the onion mixture and tempered for a few minutes and then before we knew it the dish was ready. The aroma that wafted started to tingle my taste buds. We were still on the first dish and already my stomach was growling. As usual my friend said that I am always hungry, well what am I do to if I love food?

Hemalatha Nanda was now preparing to make the Wattakka Maluwa (pumpkin dish). Cut about 500g of pumpkin into cubes, add about 20g cut green chilies and salt to taste and place the entire mixture in a clay pot, add water and keep to boil. Once the pumpkin was ready, once again oil was heated, first the mustard seeds and then onions added and heated till they turned golden brown. Then the pumpkin mixture was added and cooked for a few minutes. My stomach continued to rumble, there were four more dishes to make.

Undu Hodda (Black Lentil curry), undu seeds, are first roasted and then ground. Add onions, rampe, curry powder, uluhal, chili powder, coconut milk, undu flour (about one tablespoon) and stir well till the flour is completely dissolved. Then it is kept on the stove to cook stirring continuously. While Gunawathi Nanda was explaining, my friend had to relay a Sinhala saying, "Handigan nethi hoddai, gahanne nathi lamayai hariyata hedenna ne" meaning just like a child who is not disciplined does not grow up well, a curry that is not stirred will not turn out well. Relevance? well you will have to ask him. Jokes aside, this is a tasty preparation said to be very cooling. As a result it is a favourite during the dry season, where those working in the paddy fields eat this flavoursome concoction with rice or rotti. Once the undu hoddi was ready, lime juice was added and taken off the stove.

The next preparation was Kiri Hodi with murunga leaves. Curry powder and turmeric were added in small quantities, then ground pepper, (Hemalatha Nanda quickly took a few

pepper corns, into a traditional mortar and used the pestle to grind some pepper, which was fresh and full of flavour), salt, sliced red onions, curry leaves and rampe leaves, salt and the coconut milk were added and then the mixture was kept on the stove to boil. The kiri hodi was continuously stirred so that it does not curdle and then murunga leaves were added.

Diya bath, this is made using rice prepared the previous day. The rice is first soaked in water and kept overnight. The water is drained, then onions, dried chilli pieces that have been roasted, salt and a bit of lime juice are added and mixed well. Then add coconut milk and mix well. Now, it is ready to eat. This is perfect for breakfast and is very tasty. Gunawathi Nanda and Hemalatha Nanda said that once you eat this in the morning, you will feel 'fit' for the rest of the day.

The final dish to make was the kurakkan rotti; first the kurakkan flour (about 500g) is mixed with water to make a dough. Add salt to taste. While the dough was being made the 'thatiya' (a rotti pan) was kept on the stove to heat. No oil or butter was used. The dough was placed on the thatiya and while on the stove, Gunawathi nanda shaped the rotti into a circle. She said her hand was not getting burnt when we inquired. One by one the rottis were made. And, finally all the food was ready. Yes!

We laid all the dishes on a pedura (mat) on the floor and served ourselves. Each dish was full of flavour and I was surprised as not many spices were used during preparation. One by one I tasted all the curries with kurakkan roti and finally had the diya bath. I was full and satisfied.

In the city we are used to eating highly processed food, oil and starch, but if we do eat simple meals such as those that we just prepared, well dieting may become a thing of the past.

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