In the Spirit of Sharing

Posted on
Four share this savan for six; they start their meal together and end it together

The savan, a large communal platter of delicious biryani, is rich with spiritual and social significance.

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What good is a delicious meal without company? Rich, spicy and in delicious variety, Muslim cuisine is all about communal dining. And the savan—that large platter of biryani spread with roast chicken or meat and other mouth-watering delicacies—takes communal dining to an entirely new level.

In June, savans come to the fore. Muslim families commence the Ramadan fast. For 30 days, they abstain from food and drink from dawn to dusk, breaking fast after sundown with light and easy-to-digest foods like congee and dates, to be followed by something heavier later, such as a savan. Savans will certainly be the main course on Eid ul Fitr, the celebration that follows the fast in June and July.

The savan is the legacy of the early Arab merchants who crossed oceans to buy the Island’s spices and precious stones. Their descendants and others of Islamic faith perpetuated the dish, carving a niche in the country’s cuisine that has benefitted all communities. Traditionally, the savan has been about people seated on a floor mat around a single bowl and eating straight from it, sharing its contents. This coming together has great spiritual significance for it is a time to not only bond but celebrate Allah’s blessings including that of sustenance.

In some Muslim countries, there’s strict etiquette for eating from this common platter. For example, hands are washed before eating. The act of savan eating starts together and ends together. No single person can sit down at a savan and start eating all alone. One’s portion has to be taken from the serving directly in front of you, and accepted with grace, even if it means foregoing the juicy chicken leg a couple of fingers distance away. Savan diners do not reach over and claim choice cuts. Restraint is expected. Likewise, the food is scooped delicately using a few fingers, rather than plunged into, and it is consumed in a well-mannered fashion. Before eating, each member says “Bismillah” (in the name of Allah) and

after the meal, “Alhamdulillah” (praise be to Allah). All contents of the savan are consumed so that nothing goes to waste. Everyone stays seated until the savan is empty. In some places, there is also a sitting etiquette—women sit with their legs to the side, and men cross-legged. The genders eat separately from different platters. In Sri Lanka, this segregation occurs at public feasts; at home, everyone pitches into the same bowl.

Biryani is the main item on a savan menu. There are several claims to the origin of this extremely rich rice preparation. Some say it existed as a dish called Oon Soru, prepared for warriors in Tamil Nadu in 2AD; others that it was a Persian delicacy going back to Moghul Queen Mumtaz Mahal (1591-1631) after she visited the army barracks and realised the soldiers were suffering from malnutrition. However, etymology of the word “biryani” can be traced back to the Persian birian (fried before cooking), pointing to Iranian origins. No matter where it was conceived, the dish is widespread across the Middle East and Asia, and has over the years acquired regional distinction. Today, there’s Malaysian biryani, Indonesian biryani, Turkish pilaf, Iranian biryani, Calcutta biryani and Tahiri biryani (from Karnakatta) among others. The word savan itself describes the large tray or platter. Most Muslim families own savans, often beautifully crafted heirlooms that have been passed down for generations.

A savan of Sri Lankan biryani is a mouth-watering profusion of flavours, with pepper and capsicum; cumin, fennel, dill, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, curry leaves, pandanus, lemon grass; cashew and raisins. It is prepared with the best basmati or samba (rice), usually roasted lightly in ghee before it is cooked. Yoghurt, lime and other seasonings add to the richness. A good biryani cook will tell you the dish will yield every different flavour: hot, spicy, salty, sweet, bitter, sour and astringent. Chunks of chicken, mutton or beef are added for meat-based biryanis and omitted for vegetarian. Accompanying dishes often counter the richness of the biryani. Thus slices of fresh pineapple, minchi (mint) sambal; Malay pickles made of onions, chillies and dates; raita salad made of cucumber, curd and onions; mango chutney or even a small bowl of sweet jam, and chicken gravy are served. It’s all washed down with rose-flavoured sherbert. Wattalappan or vanilla custard with raisins and nuts, and bananas usually make up dessert. The selection of dishes itself speaks of the movements of the Island’s Muslim communities—while biryani may be Middle Eastern, the pickles and wattalappan, are rooted in the Malay communities.

In Sri Lanka, time is transforming the traditions of savan dining. These days, the rituals are more relaxed. It is now more likely that a savan is ordered from a

caterer, and portions are served onto individual plates. Further, the savan has gone mainstream and is a popular and easy option to be ordered for dinner parties by rice and spice gourmands of any community. It is not uncommon to be invited to a home dinner, and see your Sinhalese hostess bring out a savan.

The word savan itself is taking on new meaning, associated with sharing. To order a savan means to share a large platter of food. Thus savans of stringhopper biryani and even lamprais—bearing quantities large enough to feed six to eight adults—can be ordered from various caterers. Although straying from the traditional preparation, they capture and continue the spirit of sharing on a platter, the essence of savan dining.



Photographs taken at Alhambra restaurant, Ramada Hotel, Colombo.