It’s Ambarella Time

Posted on
Ingredients for ambarella curry. In the centre a basket full of Ambarella.

Looks can fool. So don’t sidestep the humble ambarella, which will surprise you with its culinary versatality, nourish and even heal you.

Words Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

In every fruit a hidden treasure awaits discovery. The ubiquitous ambarella, piled in nondescript heaps in vegetable markets and roadside stalls across Colombo, are no exception. Unremarkable in appearance, perhaps because they pale beside their flamboyant cousin, the mango, the ambarella has a Cinderella persona. The fruit bursts into a profusion of flavours in the kitchen, not at the midnight hour but in the deft hands of a creative cook. It is also nutritious, has a host of medicinal uses, and a surprising history.

Few fruits are delicious unripe; the ambarella is one. Bite into the flesh of the young or just-matured fruit to release a sourness that gives to a delightful sweetness. It’s crunchy and chewable, and sweetness is never quite right without that sour edge. Wedges of the flesh dipped in salt and chilli flakes are a street snack relished not only in Sri Lanka but across Asia. Those who grew up munching on these treats would be surprised to learn that ambarella *(Spondias dulcis)* is a non-native species; the fruit is of Melanisian and Latin American stock, and its presence in Sri Lanka is the result of colonisation. Ancient seafarers transported it to the Caribbean islands and, from there, the story goes, it spread across the world.

Tropical and subtropical Asia provided especially suitable growing conditions, and so it came to be known by various names throughout the region: the Malay plum, the hog plum, the hevi, and the golden apple, to name a few. In Sri Lanka, it retained its original moniker ‘ambarella’, and flourished in the wet and intermediate zones. Between the two local varieties – the dwarf cultivar and the tall one – the island is assured of a year-round supply of ambarella fruit.

With such abundance, it’s no wonder Sri Lankans found numerous ways to enjoy ambarella. Many a Sri Lankan will know ambarella best as an *achcharu*, a hot and acidic salad, purchased from a vendor after school, to be munched with relish. But

street snacks aside, the fruit packs culinary potential. In the kitchen, it can be the magic ingredient that transforms a boring plate of rice and curry into a delight. The mature flesh makes a delicious translucent curry: slightly acidic, slightly sweet. Preserved ambarella, in the form of dark brown chutney, is a favourite ‘puller’ with rice and curry. The chutney also makes a tasty sandwich filling that even goes well with cheese and cucumber. At breakfast, ambarella jam on toast is an alternative to marmalade, while tangy ambarella juice is both cooling and nourishing on a hot tropical afternoon.

Taste apart, the fruit is nutritious. The Sri Lanka Agriculture Department states it is rich in calcium, phosphorous, carotene and Vitamin C, and lists numerous medicinal uses, for example, as treatment for diabetes mellitus, indigestion, urinary tract infections, hypertension and haemorrhoids. In fact, the fruit is said to contain more Vitamin C than do oranges. It is also used to treat sores, wounds and burns, while the leaves and bark are used in medicines for dysentery, oral infections such as cracked tongue and thrush.

As the ambarella spread across the world, not every host country took a liking to its fruit. In India, the farmers saw in it a useful fast-growing shade tree for their crops rather than a cultivable fruit. However, in Melanisia, the fruit is held on par with mango and papaya. The ambarella is a member of the Anacardiaceae family, which includes mango and cashew. The fruit is a *drupe*, with a thin skin covering thick flesh surrounding a single hard seed. When ripe, both flesh and skin turn mottle orangy brown. The local Sri Lankan palate prefers unripe ambarella because the ripe flesh tends to be slightly acidic and more fibrous. To cut it, peel the fruit and make
shallow lengthwise incisions all around stopping short of cutting into the seed. When all the segments have been marked, place the knife into one of the incisions, move it around to gently dislodge the flesh, segment by segment from the pit.

Here are a few ways to enjoy ambarella. If you find the fruit sour, just think of ambarella as life… it takes some sourness to bring out its sweetness.

Ambarella is marinaded in crushed cloves and cardamom, ground mustard, garlic and karapincha, sera and rampa, turmeric and chilli powder before it is curried.

Ambarella Curry

Ingredients

5-6 ambarella fruits

50g red onions (chopped)

25g green chillies (chopped – reduce quantity for a mild curry)

1 sprig rampa (pandanus)

1 sprig sera (lemon grass)

1 tablespoon ulu hal (fenugreek)

Coconut oil for tempering spices

2 tablespoons of chilli powder

(reduce quantity for a mild curry)

½ teaspoon turmeric

2 tablespoons roasted curry powder

4 tablespoons sugar

Grind the following:

A handful of karapincha (curry leaves)

1 tablespoon mustard seeds

4 cloves garlic

Crush the following:

1 teaspoon cloves

1 stick cinnamon

4 cardamoms

Wash the fruit very well, peel and cut lengthwise around the fibrous pith. Remove

the pieces and put aside. The pith can also be cooked if you wish. Crush cloves and cardamom. Grind mustard, garlic and *karapincha*, *sera* and *rampa* into a paste. Rub the paste, turmeric and chilli powder into the fruit. Put aside.

Heat a little oil in a clay pot, and fry the *ulu hal* for a few minutes, until it turns a slightly dark brown. Add crushed cardamom and cloves, and cinnamon. Fry for a few seconds. Add onions, chillies and stir-fry.

Add the seasoned fruit into the pot, stirring well to mix all the ingredients. Add water, and heat over a medium fire. Leave to cook for five minutes, then lower heat and boil for another ten minutes. When the curry starts to boil, add the roasted curry powder and sugar. When the gravy starts to thicken and the fruit looks transparent, add salt, and continue to boil for a few minutes. The curry, now dark and thick, is ready to be relished.

Ambarella chutney is a great ‘puller’ for rice and curry. It also makes a delicious sandwich filling

Ambarella Jam

Ingredients

5-6 mature ambarella fruit

4 cups water

1 cup sugar (adjust to taste)

Cinnamon

Salt

2-3 tablespoons brandy (optional)

Cut the fruit into chunks and place in a large heavy pan. Add water making sure the fruit is fully immersed. Bring to a boil on medium fire. Add sugar and let it boil stirring from time to time. Allow water to simmer and turn syrupy, and the ambarella to crystallise. Add cinnamon flakes, and continue stirring, making sure that the contents do not get burned. When all the water is absorbed and the fruit is smooth and golden, turn off the fire. Add a few drops of brandy and stir. Allow to

cool. Fill in jars, and store in refrigerator. Ambarella contains pectin, which allows the syrup to set into a nice jelly. Enjoy spread on toast or biscuits.

Cool ambarella juice is so pleasing on a hot day

Ambarella Juice

Ingredients

4 ambarella fruits

Water

Honey

Peel and cut the fruit into small squares. Discard seed. Put into blender with water. Blend it into juice. Sieve and serve, adding a spoonful of honey.






