

It's Kotthu Style

Posted on



A 'mixed-grill' kotthu, featuring beef, pork and mutton. The versatile kotthu takes on a multitude of forms

Forget gangnam style, Sri Lanka offers something better. It's kotthu style, and it's everywhere.

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Out at Galle Face Green, they are rapping up a sumptuous feast. It's a familiar sound...

katta katta katta, kattak kattak katataka tat kat. The kotthu makers brandish their heavy metal cleavers with a flourish, one in each hand, chopping down rhythmically on roti, onions, green chillies, garlic, cabbage, chicken, until everything edible on their hotplate drumhead ends up in a tantalising pile of delicious morsels. The beat pauses to sizzle in an egg, drizzle in thick gravy before the knives come down again, chopping, then making fluid side steps and swings that bring the medley together.

Forget gangnam style, Sri Lanka offers something better. It's kotthu style, and it's everywhere - at the corner food stall down the road, the small 'hotels' down Galle Road, house parties, in fine-dining restaurants and five-star hotels. Kotthu, which literally means 'chop' (it all up), is a dish like no other, it's perfect party fare, and that unmissable all-in-one meal that brings the night on the town to a perfect close.

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Galle Face Green is a kotthu hotspot, the experience heightened by the breeze and the rolling Indian Ocean. The kotthu stalls here - there are about five - get very busy, especially on weekends and public holidays. "Why kotthu and not a hot dog?" we asked a young couple from outstation visiting relatives in Colombo, digging into their kotthu on the grass, and four young people sitting on the steps near the stalls splitting two kotthus between them. All gave it an unanimous thumb's up: "We just like it," they said. "It's spicy," said the couple.

Naushad, of Boolan Fast Food on the Green, says business is thriving. Everyone loves a kotthu, after all. Sharaf, of Rauf Nana Halal Fast Food, one of the oldest stalls at the Green, says, "On weekends it gets so crowded, we don't have a moment to breathe." Since he and his six brothers make kotthu through the night, that's quite a statement.

Kotthu is a party animal which comes out to play at night. If you want to try it, you have to wait till dusk. That's when the kotthu makers get out their cleavers at sundown and make music till midnight.

Pilawoos (aka Pilas) down Galle Road is an institution ever associated with late-night kotthu binges. Its outlets in Bambalapitiya and Wellawatte are the local version of the grungy drive-in, drawing the party-goers, who park their cars by the sidewalk after a night on the town. They place their orders from their cars and are served in their cars by a team of waiters. The place is immortalised in the lyrics of Kotthu, a song about eating kotthu by local hip hop and R&B great Iraj Weeraratne. The song captures the yearning and eating of

kotthu at Pilas, and then the pain of not being able to meet the tab. Yes, musicians are echoing the kotthu beat, too.

Kotthu is an evolving story. In the beginning, the expansive wafer-thin flat bread called *godamba* ruled as the kotthu base, chopped into fine strips and mixed with a ladle in a wok, possibly to make use of the leftovers. It was a mix, like chop-suey, but far more interesting, or fried rice, but with roti, and generously spiced up to suit the palates of spice-loving, chillie-craving Sri Lankans. Today, however, the kotthu has come into its own – demanding its own tools and implements: two heavy cleavers and a broad flat hotplate.

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Nowadays, kotthu makers are no longer cooks but artisans – in fact, master kotthu makers are called kotthu *baases* (leaders or masters). An experienced kotthu *baas* can chop up a dish of kotthu in five minutes flat.

As the kotthu culture grows, festivals are organised regularly to pit the masters of kotthu against each other. There's even a national record for the country's largest kotthu, held by Hilton Hotel. As many as 40 chefs chopped up a whopping kotthu weighing over 2,100 kg, at the hotel's Curry Leaf restaurant. It fed 4,000. The kotthu *baases* are also chopping in style, drumming up beats with the choppers – you'll hear the tune if you watch them at work.

Inspired by its name, which means 'chop', the *baases* have made the chopping central to this cuisine – today naan bread, rice, string hoppers, pittu and even bread have migrated to the grill to join the ever growing range of kotthu dishes. Here's what's on the menu: roast chicken kotthu, curry chicken kotthu, fish kotthu, beef kotthu, mutton kotthu, pork kotthu, egg kotthu, vegetarian kotthu, stringhopper kotthu, pittu kotthu, rice kotthu, *paan* (bread) kotthu, seafood kotthu and cheese kotthu. Travelling down the southern Sri Lankan coastline, you will see more variations like avocado kotthu and salmon kotthu, usually gentler versions of the local fare.

The migration of kotthu culture to more genteel quarters like fine-dining restaurants and five-star hotels has tamed kotthu's rough street image and spawned delicate kotthu preparations that can be enjoyed by candlelight. Colombo Hilton's Curry Leaf puts out a spread of kotthu on most nights, with the variety including not only godamba roti kotthu but also pittu kotthu. "All manner of seafood and meat kotthus are made here, and there is vegan kotthu as well. The guests appreciate the options," says Head Chef Karu. Kotthu is a versatile dish that accommodates most tastes. He recommends a hot cup of ginger tea to

wash down the spicy fare.

A recent addition to the list of kotthu dishes demonstrated on YouTube is ice cream kotthu, which has a group of young people delighting in a stomach-churning slapstick chop up of icecream, cookies and nuts and other sweets. Elsewhere, someone even churned up a chocolate kotthu. You have to be flexible with kotthu – after all, isn't Sri Lanka's catchphrase "Anything goes?" Yes, of course, especially with kotthu.

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