Pounding flour in a vangediya is a labour of love.
Often two people will pound the grain simultaneously.

In kitchens past, women used heavy stone equipment to crush grain. It was a labour of love and skill.

Words Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

Whisk yourself back in time to a kitchen at the turn of the 20th Century. It was kitchen sans the electric grinder, blender and mixer at a time when supermarkets were not around to offer a distracting, too-wide selection of ingredients. Yet this antiquated kitchen created the cuisine that secured Sri Lanka its culinary fame, by churning out feasts of loved local fare like hoppers, *pittu* and stringhoppers, often for very large families. Behind every dish was the cook of yesteryear, who went many a mile to make it all happen. If you wonder how she did it, then think of her as a mystical alchemist, the kitchen goddess, who with the heave of a hefty pole could shatter grain into fine flour for a dinner to relish. Long ago, the stringhopper, for example, began its journey in the kitchen as *vee* (rice paddy). While today's cook would be nonplussed if handed a bag of paddy with which to prepare dinner, yesteryear's kitchen goddess knew exactly what to do with it— she would turn to her *vangediya* and *mol gaha* (mortar and pestle) to dehusk it and make rice. The *vangediya* and *mol gaha* and *kurahan gala* (millet grinding stone), along with the *miris gala* (chillie grinding stone), *kulla* (winnowing sheaf) and *hiramanaya* (coconut scraper) were her culinary toolbox. The best grinding stones were made from the finest granite, chiselled by expert craftsmen. The *mol gaha* was usually made of kitul palm wood. Formidable contraptions, they would last generations, hardy gadgets that left miniscule ecological footprints that no trendy gadget can match.

The grinders, the *vangediya* and *mol gaha*, were especially prized, and most often inherited than purchased. As is often the case, they were imbued with superstition, with a list of don'ts to protect the household from misfortune.For example, when not in use, the *mol gaha* would never be placed in the *vangediya*; or if a householder was suffering from an infectious disease such as chicken pox or mumps, the *vangediya* would fall silent.

Likewise, no one dared to sit on a *vangediya* for that too would attract bad luck, a belief that may stem from local folk tale, The *Gamarala's Vangediya*: a young man visited the home of his prospective bride. The bride's mother invited him in and offered him her *vangediya* as a seat. Soon after he had sat down, she asked him to get up because she wanted to stand on the *vangediya* and get something down from a high shelf. When she had finished, she invited

him to sit once again on the *vangediya*. But after a while she asked him to get up again because she needed the *vangediya* to pound some rice flour. The man left the house in disgust because the family had only one seat, a *vangediya*.

Milling *vee* in a *vangediya* was common back then. The *vee* was washed, dried and placed in the crevice of the *vangediya*, then pounded with the *mol gaha*. The upward and downward motions of the *mol gaha* loosened the husk and the layers of red bran around each grain. Smooth, skillful strokes minimised the percentage of broken kernels.

The *vangediya* also came in handy to make fine rice flour. The clean rice was soaked overnight for pounding in the *vangediya* the next morning, to prepare dishes like string hoppers, hoppers and *pittu*. The *vangediya* was also used for excellent *pol sambal*, and sweets like *thala guli* (sweet sesame balls).

Vee brought home fresh from the first harvests of the *Maha* and *Yala* crop seasons were ritually blessed by the *kapu mahattaya* (ritual specialist) in the *vee hapeema* (*vee* biting) ceremony. It is only after then that the *vee* could be placed in the *vangediya* for dehusking. Traditionally, the *vangediya* was left idle from the moment the new vee entered the house until the *vee hapeema*.

The association between *vee* and the *vangediya* is somewhat mischievous, and a possible reason why a *vangediya* and *mol gaha* were often included in the girl’s dowry. The floor of the *magul poruwa* (wedding dais) is covered with washed but uncooked *vee* (paddy), the symbolism being that paddy is husked in a *vangediya* using a *mol gaha*, imagery with sexual innuendos.

And what of the other grinders in the possession of the kitchen goddess? The *kurahan gala* or millet grinder is a more complex machine, capable of grinding smaller, harder seeds into a finer powder than can the *vangediya*. It was commonly found in dry zone households where *kurahan* or finger millet, a product of *chena* (swidden) cultivation there, was often a key substitute for rice.

Also made of granite, the *kurahan gala* comprises two heavy cylindrical stones, the lower being the higher of the two and stationary, holding the upper slab, which also has two protrusions on opposite ends and a crevice at the centre. A piece of kitul palm wood wedged upright into a small crevice in the centre of the upper side of the lower slab is lodged into the crevice of the upper slab, holding it in place. Another longer kitul stick is wedged into the centre of one of the protrusions on the upper part to serve as a handle. The millet grains are poured a little at a time, in quantities of about 100 grammes, into the crevice.

To grind the grain, our kitchen goddess would rotate the upper slab holding the handle with one hand and pushing the stone with the other. As the wheel sped, the grain would filter down the crevice and spread onto the lower slab, and be crushed into fine flour. The flour gradually spread to the periphery and spilled into a tray placed below. It was then sieved and used to prepare delicious *kurahan rottis* and *pittu*, or *kurahan thalapa*.

Rotating the wheel required strength, stamina, patience and skill, which the kitchen goddess had in abundance. She was always fit enough to handle heavy equipment. The kitchen was her home gym.

She would mind her equipment lovingly, cleaning and wiping the *vangediya* and *mol gaha* dry with coconut refuse and water, and the *kurahan gala* with water. Tumeric or saffron water was used to disinfect them, but never soap. She was ever vigilant in caring for her equipment, taking every precaution to protect her tools, and family. There are stories that enemies would use these equipment to harm the household by rubbing poison on them or casting black spells on them if they were kept outside the house. Hence, they were always kept safe indoors.

Fast forward to today and the kitchen goddess has been replaced by the modern cook with choices and modern conveniences. Her predecessor’s tools are more likely to be put to ornamental use today, which is why there is a surplus of such equipment made of light grey *kudu gal*, rather than granite, on the market. The former is dangerous in the kitchen because it crumbles. But in the rare home where the heart still beats in the hearth, these traditions still remain alive, a legacy for generations to come.