FROM A KITCHEN PAST

Posted on

The kurahan gala or grinding stone used to prepare millet flours

Preparing a meal was a labour of love for the cook of yesteryear

Words Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

Rosalind would not have liked my little electric grinder that comes in handy for a quick pol sambal, a spicy coconut mix, on the go. And she would have frowned on the packets of dessicated coconut that I use.

For a traditional village cook like Rosalind, pol sambola (a spicy coconut mixture) would have come from nothing less than the miris gala or chilli stone, a flat and heavy slab of granite, paired with a heavy granite roller under which real coconut—fluffy and pure white

straight off the hiramane, or a floor seated coconut scraper—would be transformed into the delicious puller that every Sri Lankan loves. All the ingredients—black pepper, onions, chillies and maldive fish were ground into a delicious mix, not to the whirring rhythm of steel blades but to the staccato thud of the heavy roller, crushing the ingredients against the stone. Now and then there would be silence during which her hands would move to add a new ingredient or to bring the mix together. Of course, her pol sambal was dangerously delicious and far more appetising than my five-minute concoctions.

Rosalind presided over my grandmother's formidable kitchen, which was dominated by a huge dara lipa or firewood hearth, piles of chatti, earthenware pots used for cooking, and a host of other kitchen implements that have now been relegated to history. Clay, stone and wooden wares were everywhere. There was not a single automated machine in sight.

Of her many cutting implements, the manna, a heavy iron knife shaped like a chopper, and the wak pihiya (curved knife) stood out. Both were used for a variety of purposes including to crack a coconut open into two perfect halves with a single, well-aimed blow of the blunt edge across the middle of the nut. Of course, before that, the nut would have to be extracted from the coir encasing of the fruit, accomplished with a pol ula, a crowbar-like iron rod whose pointed edge would be buried deep in the soil. The fruit is embedded into the flat edge that is pointing upward and the husk dislodged with a couple of twists. In experienced hands, it would take just a few minutes.

The manna and wak of course are knives and not dedicated nutcrackers, unlike the giraya, which is used exclusively for cracking small nuts like the areca nut. In the Sri Lankan kitchen, Rosalind deftly transformed the wak into a shredder to make mallung, finely cut greens and stems mixed with fluffy coconut, onions, and seasoning. There was an art to it—she would squat on the floor or sit on a very low stool, position the handle of the knife with her big and second toes so that it stood horizontally upright with the sharp edge turned upwards, and then use it to speedily shred bundles of luscious mukunuwenna (sessile joyseed). This Rosalind did flawlessly, effortlessly and miraculously. I could never do it and was discouraged from trying for fear that I might mallung myself instead. The manna and wak were also used to chop meats, fish and other ingredients.

Back then, we also had our own traditional water cooler, the gurulettuwa, a clay pot with a long stemmed neck that stored and cooled water. The gurulettuwa had to be seasoned before it was used, by boiling water and coconut refuse (used grated coconut) in it over a gentle fire. The same method is also used to season other new earthenware cooking utensils.

Rice is the staple of Sri Lanka and, as such, a range of equipment was used for its preparation. Rathu kekulu haal, a variety of red rice, came straight from the paddy fields, sometimes unhusked or with too much of the red pellicle that lies between the white grain and the husk. It had to be dehusked or whitened down a little first, and Rosalind would do the needful with a heavy mol gaha (pestle) and vangediya (mortar). She preferred granite mol gahas to wooden ones, saying they were not heavy enough. The mol gaha was also used to make rice flour out of raw rice, and to pound herbs and raw rice for our regular breakfast of kola kanda—herbal rice congee.

Dehusked rice was separated from the husks in a kulla, a rattan woven sheaf into which the rice would be placed and tossed methodically to separate the fine powdered grains and husks from the large whole grains. The smaller grains were often used to prepare congee or to be further pounded and the bigger ones were boiled as the main dish for lunch. The grains were washed in a nambiliya, a small serrated earthenware bowl in which the rice and water were swished around and then poured into a koraha, a larger multi-purpose serrated clay basin.

The husked rice was stored in either a large haal muttiya (clay pot) or in bata kola petti (woven cane rice storage boxes). Grandma also had a huge vee pettiya, a large teak box, for storing unhusked rice and spices. There was also a haal pettiya, also to store rice, with three compartments for different types of rice. It also contained a pot for miti haal: to be filled with a fistful of rice every day for charity or for a rainy day.

Kurahan or finger millet cannot be pounded into a flour. The kurahan gala or grinding stone comprises of a beautifully-shaped rock with a handle on the side and hole in the centre, placed upon a heavy round rock slab with a stick generally made of kithul wood stuck in the centre. The grain is placed in the hole in the middle and ground by turning the slab on top.

Coconut shells were put to good use in the kitchen. Cleaned, polished and attached to long sticks,they were very efficient pol katu handi or coconut shell ladles. Rosalind would use them to stir curries over the fire, and even drip a little hot curry on to my palm for tasting. They stirred and served boiled rice, curries, even sweetmeats such as coconut rock and milk toffee. A large ladle, made out of the bark of the kithul palm, was used to turn and fluff out the just-cooked rice.

My grandma’s kitchen birthed delicious fare such as pittu (a rolled cus cus-like preparation prepared from rice and coconut) and indi appa (string hoppers), prepared with special rattan equipment like the pittu bambu and indi appa thattu. During the festive season, it was time to prepare auspicious sweetmeats. Out came the kokis and athiraha attchu (molds

for the preparation of various festive sweetmeats).

My grandmother ran a busy kitchen. It was a hive of activity and a hub of social life with an earthy organic atmosphere that is missing from today's streamlined modern kitchens. Rosalind would have frowned upon the steel cooking machines of today. She may find my own kitchen a little clinical and sterile. For her, cooking was an activity that required one to roll up their sleeves and get one's hands messy. It was heavy physical work, a labour of love and dedication no longer available in the fast food society of today.