The NUTMEG Mystique

Posted on
THE BASE: The trunk of the nutmeg tree

No cake is complete without its aroma, no biriyani fit for a Mogul Emperor without its flavour, no choice curry or dessert worth its name without its sweet and spice, without the wafts of its mystic fragrance. It is the two in one mother of all spices that comes packed with the brightly coloured mace aril round the pearl containing the spice that is worth its weight in gold; and one nation, Grenada, even has it on its national flag. It's the indispensable nutmeg. Never start practicing your culinary arts without it.

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From curries to casseroles, from puddings to Christmas cakes, from vegetable salads to watalappan, nutmeg dominates every dish and calls the shots as the main spice ingredient in every recipe. The list is endless. And if you wash down your meals with a cola drink, remember even that comes laced with drops of nutmeg oil. And as you brush your teeth after your meals, note, yes, the toothpaste has it too.

Nutmeg, called Myristica fragrans in Latin and Saddikka in Sinhala and Tamil, comes double packed with another different flavoured spice, mace referred to as wasawasi

in the vernacular, and is one of the world's most expensive spices. A kilo of nutmeg sells for over 2,000 rupees in Colombo and each seed is sold at approximately 10 to 15 rupees. But this may seem on the low side when you consider that in the 14th Century the going barter rate in Europe was three sheep or a cow for just half a kilo of nutmeg.

The nutmeg tree, which rises to a height of over sixty feet needs plenty of water and a temperature between 20 and 30 degrees centigrade to flourish; and thus in Sri Lanka it is found mainly in the Kandy and Matale districts though it also grows in Bandarawela, Ella, Koslanda, Katuwana, Kabaragala, Wattegana and other areas which provide its required climatic conditions. It is also averse to strong winds and is normally cultivated in leeward slopes and sheltered valleys.

The evergreen tree is covered with dense foliage and hides an important trait until it is six years old: its sex. For the nutmeg tree, like the human species comes in pairs. Only the female trees bear fruit, the males are barren. But don't write off the male tree as a redundant off shoot of nature, as an example of its extravagant squander.

For the male tree, though it does not produce fruit, pollinates the female tree and thus earns its right to exist in nature's order of things. One male nutmeg stud tree can service a harem of ten, which become heavy with fruit in the summer months of May and June. But this vital factor of gender is carefully concealed by the tree; and for planters, having no inkling as to the sex of the seedlings they are planting at the beginning of the rainy season; it is like tossing a coin and waiting for six years for it to fall to find out whether they have won or lost. They have nothing to go by but the observed probability factor, which is generally fifty percent, like heads male, tails female. The only grace offered is that sometimes certain trees turn out to be bisexual.

The nutmeg tree comes of age when it is about twenty years and will go on bearing fruit for sixty years. The blooming of the fruit on the bough, its maturing in its leafy bower and its final fall on the ground at the appointed hour is a well choreographed enchanting scene of a pregnant tree in the throes of delivery. From its first appearance as a small green pod, it grows to the size of a lime. As the days pass it gains further weight and grows bigger and bigger until it reaches the size of a plumply tangerine and its colour turns from green to pumpkin yellow. Then when fully ripened, it starts to split open and, as if beside itself with joy and excitement, impatient to show the world the beauty of its heart, reveals the first glimpse of the

scarlet draped spice that men have died for.

For the nutmeg has a bloody history. Until the 19th Century, nutmeg grew only in the far flung volcanic islands of Banda, 1,200 miles east of Java. Being a part of the Indonesian province of Malacca, it had a roaring trade selling nutmeg to Arab traders who in turn sold the precious spice to Europeans. The wily Arabs however never revealed the source. But the Banda islands cover was blown when a Portuguese fleet cast anchor in the port of Malacca and secured it. From there, having learnt of the Banda Islands and the nutmeg treasure trove, it sailed to Banda where it remained for a month, loading the ships with the spice. The Portuguese however did not remain in Banda permanently and maintained only an unsteady foothold in the island.

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It was the coming of the Dutch in 1621 that tragically changed the fate of the Banda Islanders. Nutmeg, which for centuries had been their blessed life giver now rang the death knell of their very existence. Armed Dutch soldiers occupied the islands and forced the ruling oligarchy to sign a treaty that would give the Dutch total monopoly of the nutmeg trade.Any violation of the treaty was treated as punishable with death; and soon the executions began in earnest followed by wholesale slaughter. Before the Dutch had arrived the island population had been between 13,000 and 15,000. By the time the Dutch had finished their massacres less than a thousand islanders remained alive. Thereafter the Dutch staffed the island with slaves to work on the plantations and continued to hold onto the island until the beginning of the Second World War.

In 1810 a British squadron, aboard frigates, arrived in the Banda islands and overpowered the Dutch. Before the Dutch finally managed to regain control the British removed many nutmeg trees and transported them to Sri Lanka where the tree found a home away from home. The climate was ideal. Not only did Sri Lanka have the necessary rainfall but the land was blessed with the required sunshine to dry the nutmeg for use as a valuable spice.

Once the fruit had opened up and dropped to the ground the mace covered nuts are

gathered and laid out on a mat and exposed to the sun. This process takes approximately six weeks. During this period the scarlet mace naturally separates itself from the hard nut and becomes wrinkled and reddish-brown, ready for instant use as wasawasi. At the end of the drying period the kernel inside the seed reduces in size and gives a rattling sound when the seed is shaken. This is a sure sign that the process is complete. The seed is cracked open, the nut broken and the powdery reddish spicy substance is extracted and used not only to enhance the flavour of every meal made but also to garnish with a waft of incense each meal served.

But it is not only food that nutmeg enhances. There is also nutmeg oil which is used to scent soaps and perfumes. Nutmeg can also help you gain a smoother skin. When facial pores are clogged with excess oil and dead skin cells, giving rise to acne. A scrub made from nutmeg powder mixed with honey and made into a paste, which is then applied to the acne may help to make the marks less visible and then not at all. Nutmeg can be your apple a day to keep the doctor at bay as well for it comes laden with a bagful of health benefits. It can help you beat fatigue and it stimulates your brain. The Greeks and Romans used it as a brain tonic and it maybe the secret of Plato’s and Aristotle’s genius. The Chinese use it as a pain killer to gain relief from aching joints and muscular pains by applying nutmeg oil to the affected areas. It is also used as a sedative and helps calm anxiety and beat depression’s blues.

In ayurvedha nutmeg is used in many kasayas (medicinal concoctions) to cure digestion related problems such as diarrhea, constipation and puffiness. It can also help in overcoming socially awkward problems like bad breath and flatulence. For those with insomnia a cup of milk with some nutmeg powder will also aid in relaxing the muscles and inducing sleep.

But don’t go overboard. Too much of nutmeg can give you a high. It was widely used as snuff hundreds of years ago and it can also cause mild hallucinations if eaten by the spoonful with the nutmeg high setting in after five to six hours of consumption. It is also added to cocktails. In Jamaica, for instance, nutmeg is sprinkled over a rum cocktail to add more jazz while in Sri Lanka it is taken with betel.

And last but not least, nutmeg also has a great reputation as an aphrodisiac. And the famous fictional character in literature, Sinbad the Sailor is well known as a steady user of the love potion which, perhaps, explains why his story runs for a thousand and one nights.