Prince of Pastries

Posted on

Kimbula banis

It’s the fun bun loved by the young. The no frills, no fills, sugar-sprinkled roll relished by the retired. The ageless, classless European-inspired creation that has turned Sri Lanka into a nation of bread addicts incapable of going without their daily pastry kick.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

Say the words ‘*kimbula banis*’ and I’ll tell you about the flood of nostalgic it evokes, holding me in delightful captivity with its sugary chains. As for most Sri Lankans, the sugar-coated bread roll was the staple snack of my childhood, and thoughts of its sweet, sweet taste and freshly-baked smell linger on, reviving memories of days gone by. Old friends come to mind with thoughts of the friendships built on *kimbula banis* – on the lean student years when we went Dutch to save tuck money, ‘going half half’ on a single *kimbula*.

Long after they have left their slates and satchels behind them, tens of thousands buy *kimbula banis* each day to kick start their energy levels. The undiminished loyalty of every level of society for this simple croissant-style pastry has given it the exalted status of Sri Lanka’s national bun.

But it’s not home-baked. It was the colonialists who started it all, bringing the Vienna roll to the Island’s shores and in the process changing Sri Lankan pastry preferences forever.

In the 17th century, what we think of now as the Vienna roll was hard, crusty and round. As you might have guessed, it came from Austria. Made from white flour, yeast, malt, water and salt, the top side was usually marked to resemble a crown, and no wonder, because it was the stuff of royalty, the official bread roll served at the court of the Habsburg Empire. At that time it was called the *Kaisersemmel*, the Emperor of Rolls.

In the 19th century, bakers began making bread in new way. Lacking the acid

sourness typical of *lactobacillus*, these new sweet-fermented rolls were a hit, lauded at the International Exposition in Paris of 1867.

And thus began the Vienna roll, which waltzed into Sri Lanka to become the nation's favourite bun some time during the occupation of the British. Its appearance underwent a radical change: it lost its rounded shape and the bun's five sections took on a more defined aspect. The new form suggested that of one of Sri Lanka's more fearsome reptilian residents, and it can't have taken long for some unsung yokel to give the roll the moniker by which we know it today. Which is how the *Kaisersemmel*, bread once served at the banquets of the Habsburgs, came to be known in Sinhalese as the 'crocodile roll'.

But its simple appearance belies the artistry involved. Let's take a peek behind the scenes at one of the oldest traditional bakeries in the commercial capital, Bake House in Colombo 10, where master baker Kumara works away each night to produce the handmade *kimbula banis* that appear on the bakery shelves each morning.

It's nearly 6pm. This is Kumara's last task of the day and the one he relishes most. First he mixes the flour to make the dough, adding 100g of sugar, 15g of salt, 150g of margarine, 20g of yeast and one egg for every kilo of flour. He places it all in the mixer and as the spindle turns he slowly adds half a litre of water. When the dough stops sticking to the bowl, he takes it out and leaves it to leaven for 15 to 20 minutes.

He breaks the dough into equal-sized lumps and leaves them to rise for a further 10 minutes. Each one is then flattened out, rolled up, subdivided, left to rise some more, and shaped into the form that we all know and love. Sugar syrup is brushed on before the whole thing is rolled in sugar.

It is now ready to be baked, but this is a busy bakery and the *kimbula banis*, however exalted, is one of the many treats in the queue for the oven. It must wait its turn, so the tray with the uncooked crocodiles is placed in the refrigerator, where it can be kept up for to a week.

When the time comes for baking, a fire is lit in the oven at midnight. Due to local laws to prevent air pollution, traditional ovens are not allowed; only those that have been in operation since before the regulations were introduced are permitted. Kumara's bakery has been here a long time, so a wood fire still burns.

It takes two hours or so for the heat to rise to the required temperature, which is over 230 degrees Celsius. The ashes are then removed and, after the morning bread has been baked, in go the *kimbula banis*. After 15 minutes, here they are, puffed up, golden and bursting with the delicious aroma only a wood fire can provide. Fit for a Habsburg emperor and all of Sri Lanka’s uncrowned kings and queens.