Pumpkin Magic

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Eerie pumpkin decorations add spook to halloween (©Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam)

Halloween’s pumpkins take a spicy twist in Sri Lanka’s curry cuisine

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Bulbous, bright and fresh pumpkin (©Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam)

You won’t find jack-o’-lanterns in Sri Lankan homes on Halloween. You may find them in hotels and restaurants. But if you really want to dig into a warm and fiery pumpkin on October 31 (or any other day), order yourself a dish of *wattaka* curry. *Wattakka* is the Sinhala name for the rotund vegetable; in Tamil it’s called

Poosanikai.

There’s nothing to beat the Sri Lankan *wattakka malluma*, pumpkin curried in heady spices like cloves, cardamom, cummin, mustard and turmeric, tempered onions and garlic, cooked in creamy coconut milk. *Wattakka kalu pol malluma,* the curry thickened with grounded roasted coconut and raw rice, is to die for. It may not look as spectacular as Halloween’s spooky pumpkin faces, but it’s a masterpiece in its own right.

While mothers may love you for eating *wattakka* because of its health-giving properties, a veggie lover really doesn’t need much persuasion to dig into this very tasty dish. The aromas of roasted coconut fused with a medley of spices and the natural sweetness of *wattakka*, breath life into fluffy boiled white rice. *Wattaka baduma* (stir-fry) is a less spicy accompanying dish, while dhal curry with tender *wattakka l*eaves is a healthy favourite. So is *wattakka* soup, with tempered curry leaves, green chillies and pepper. For someone with a sweet tooth there’s also *wattakka* cake and *wattakka* jam.

It’s good for your health

Besides pleasuring the palate, the *wattakka* harbours intriguing riches: the alpha and beta carotene that infuses its flesh with a golden glow, boost heart, vision and skin health. They are the beauty ingredient that add colour to cheeks. *Wattakka* is also a rich source of fibre, magnesium, potassium, zinc, calcium and vitamins A, E, and C.

Sri Lanka’s indigenous medical system, ayurveda, uses parts of the fruit as well as the tender leaves in a host of medicines for ailments ranging from abscesses to ulcers, gonorrhoea and urinary diseases, burns, scalds and worm infestation. The seeds aid urinary health and are associated with cholesterol and cancer reduction. *Wattaka* is also said to boost libido; possibly why the Hopi Americans considered the blossoms symbols of fertility.

The first pumpkin eaters

“Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater…” goes a popular Western children’s rhyme. The world’s first pumpkin eaters were the indigenous tribes of Central and South America. They snacked on pumpkin, probably roasted over open fires. Later, they used mats woven with strips of dry pumpkin. Ancient pumpkin seeds found in

Mexico date back to 7000 B.C. From there, pumpkin cuisine spread throughout the Americas, spawning delicacies like sweet pumpkin pie, pumpkin bread, preserved pumpkin, toasted pumpkin seeds and even pumpkin beer and ale. A pumpkin culture was born, heightened in October when the autumn harvest festivals calls for hollowed-out pumpkin lanterns with spooky faces, a tradition brought to the Americas by Irish settlers. Christopher Columbus is said to have introduced pumpkins to Europe, from where they spread to the rest of the world including toSri Lanka.

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Tropical Sri Lanka is home to a handful of the dozens of the world's pumpkin varieties. This amazing culinary fruit is part of the Curcurbitaceae genus, to which also belong squash and gourds. Just as squashes have soft or hard skins, pumpkins have either soft or hard skins. Among Sri Lanka's share of *wattakka* are the ash pumpkin, Malaysian, Batana, Arjuna, Samson, Meemini, Ruhunu, and Janani. Not all are yellow-skinned. Some are greenish while others like the Samson are ash coloured. The Arjuna is a large, round and segmented and turns yellowy orange as it ripens. It boasts high beta-carotene content compared to other varieties. Shapewise, some are plump and rounded, others gourd-shaped or oval. Yet, once sliced, they reveal a succulent yellow shaded and nutritous middle.



A plump wattakka ready for harvesting in Gannoruwa

Planting *wattakka* is also a great way to start a vegetable plot at home. *Wattakka* is grown all year round across the Island. It’s a popular income earner for farmers between the two main paddy harvests. In Jaffna, home to exotic vegetarian cuisine, the plump pumpkin takes centre stage, being the must have curry with rice or chapati. Nourished by the peninsula’s rich soil, this vegetable grows to be quite large, round and bright.

As for *wattakka* lore, Sri Lanka has no Cinderella story to tell. Lore or fact, pumpkins have always been popular. If you crave for its orange goodness on Halloween, treat yourself to some Sri Lankan *wattakka* dishes. On these tropical shores it is an easy find.