Relishing Chutneys, Pickles and Sambols

Posted on

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Over most of the gluttonous globe, all sorts of chutneys, pickles and sambols, especially the varieties you can keep for long periods, add zest to the bland food.

All kinds of fruits, nuts, fruit and vegetables plus odd leaves and little parts of fish and animals have been converted into these taste-bud titillators.

Whereas chutneys and pickles have origins in Western countries, sambols are essentially Eastern. The word could be a derivation of the Tamil ‘sambar,’ but let’s not go into detail over languages at this stage. A good eater of these I am. A good cook I am not, although it is not a complicated, tedious, and involved business to produce a panful of various sliced fruit, pop them into vinegar, add sugar, spice, this and that, sometimes cook it, and then fill jam jars with the mixture.

Sounds easy? It is easy. But one useful trick is to keep tasting and experimenting as you go on. You may eventually end up with famous products, go into mass production and find yourself in the role of a chutney or pickle tycoon. At the rate these things sell in Sri lankan supermarkets, shops and grocery stores, it is evident that the good ones are always there, fresh and inviting, and the not-so-goods

gather dust (and Heaven knows what else inside) in sad comers. As far as I know, chutneys are more swe□□t than pickles, and sambols can be sour, spicy hot or enticingly salty.

Sambols (except for that dish de la dish, seeni sambol) are short-lived and must be eaten with rice or pancake, or whatever they call those Indian offerings starting with chapaties, in as short a time as possible. Let’s start with chutneys. Those we encounter in Sri lanka are vastly different from the Indian kinds. Very concentrated, sharp and tangy lumps on your rice are Indian chutneys. In carefree Sri lanka we like them sweeter, more glutinous, infinitely more spicy but lilOt awful hot, and fragrant in the bargain.

So the leading chutney to hit the market is mango chutney and there are a few brands; although for price and consistency the dear, faithful Marketing Department comes up with the best.You eat mango chutney with just about everything. It adds the essential ingredient of sweetness to rice and curry, can convert slices of roast beef to delicious mouthfuls, especially since we cannot get cranberry sauce, and will blend with grace with string-hoppers, hoppers, and the like. A small topping of mango chutney on cheese over savoury crackers is an hors- d’oeuvre that the French have yet to learn about.

I love chutney! There is always a bottle on the table and a spare one in the pantry just in case. And in addition to mango, you can get date, lime and tamarind chutney. The last-named is not so common these days but well worth asking your grandma to make for you. Chutneys take time to make and the initial step is to obtain the fruit in season, because mango, for instance, must be just right for chutneying. Not too ripe, mind, and certainly not too tender, if you know what I mean. The pulp from each mango is carefully removed and cut into thin strips, then sun-dried, after which it is kept in good vinegar until it is well preserved, or pickled When the time comes to make the chutney, other delightful ingredient like sugar, garlic and chilli powder are added and the whole lot well mixed. It must NEVER be cooked. That, according to a dear departed aunt (who.se mother won prizes for the best chutneys in former days in Kandy) is cheating. It is sacrilegious to cheat at chutney making.

Perhaps other ingredients went in too, but the end result was, and Should be, something to make you salivate. Just I did more than 50 years ago when I offered my services as ‘taster’ and, when the huge enamel bowl which the mixing was finished, as ‘licker of fin ‘ A good chutney keeps almost for ever, and Christmas

presents of this divine stuff to close members the family were more appreciated than the usual tlun you buy in shops like clothes, toiletries, ornaments and the like-there was no comparison.

Pickles are different. You need to cook them to some extent and noc so much sugar please! A vegetable pickle can contain slices of dried lime, and bits and pieces of chilli salt and of course vinegar, the whole concoction boiled and cooled, then kept for as long as you can stand being without some of it with your rice and curry. A good lime pickle is known as a ‘rice-puller’ but there are l(){S of other rice-pullers as well, and it can be exciting to organize some sort of a contest for these great offerings.

Besides lime, there are date pickles, a mixture of the two, and all kinds of combinations. The more expensive ones can yield a treasure trove of cadjunuts (cashews), sultanas, and strange nibbly things for seekers of pickle-provender. A very special kind of pickle i known as ‘pachadi’, and this quite a dry one, into which choice chunks of dried fish are added. One gropes for words to describe the flavour of a good ‘pachadi’. I’d much rather grope within the dark contents of the bottle for the more toothsome morsels therein.

Fresh pickles which have limited periods of viability, shall we say, are very easy to make and even easier to demolish-neat! Buxom ladies on street comers find their popularity lasting and lucrative when they offer small basinfuls of pineapple ‘achcharu’ to passers-by. For a few rupees you can get a generous pile of this speckled golden and light brown sweet-sour-hot delight and scoff it down in full view of envious passers-by. The speckling is caused by generous quantities of fresh country mustard. You can have the same thing with not-too-ripe coir mango, or those tremendous tropical wild olives we call ‘veralu’. These have no relationship to the black jobs they go crazy over in Mediterranean lands, but they are more versatile in that you can use the semiripe or seasoned ones lightly boiled in your ‘achcharu’, or let them ripen and fall off the trees. Then, before they are feasted on by assorted creepycrawlies, take them indoors fresh and incorporate them in another kind of fresh pickle which requires grated coconut, some jaggery and a dash of vinegar. One can go through several hundred wild olives in this manner and it is a good thing that these fruit are seasonal! Enterprising ladies in Colombo South make a very special ‘veralu achcharu’, selecting with fastidious care only the largest and plumpest of them during the season, which is May. They then boil them lightly, remove the stone in some dexterous manner and fill the insides with dried dates, after which they add the vinegar, mustard, chilli and bits and pieces. I can

recall acquiring some packets of this heavenly stuff and serving it to guests who go for arrack, and it was demolished in seconds, while other more civilized ‘tastes’ like cheese crackers, savoury cadjunuts and, well, ordinary things were ignored. Pickled onions are well known and the sour imported ones in clear preservative, packed in jars and costing more than a good rice and curry lunch for two are all very well, but give me home-made onion and mixed pickles anytime.

Small rounded onions are the main ingredient, but lots of other joys can join them to provide a bewildering bowlful of things from trees and bushes. Tender bean pods, little pieces of carrot, pieces of date, curry chillies of course, unripe pineapple and just about anything else you have encountered in other pickles can be added, boiled and stirred, not forgetting the mustard! This generous assortment must then be cooled, left to ‘ripen’ or ‘pickle’ and consumed later. But the menfolk, as well as the more energetic ladies, will not let up until you serve out little bowlfuls of the stuff, then salvage the rest and store in wide-mouthed jars for subsequent feasting. This means, of course, that there is no point in making just a few jars of it. But the best is yet to come.

Ever heard of Heart of Palms? The Polynesian kings served it to distinguished guests. It is, simply, and in our own Sinhala, ‘pol bada’, and although Sri lanka is anything but a monarchy these days, there are thousands of us who have eaten this, the tender ‘unborn’ fronds, so to speak, of the common coconut palm. If you have friends or relatives who on occasion decide to do away with old and unproductive coconut palms, persuade them to fight off the men paid to cut them down, and extract for you the tender ivory-white treasure hidden in the apex of the stem. This is ‘heartof-palm’ or ‘pol bada’. Eat it crisp and fresh if you must, but it is rejtlly too much and can get monotonous. However, in a pickle it is something very, very special.

Finally, ‘sambols’. Rather than repeat hundreds of writings before me, I’ll end this with the most famous of all sambols in this fair land. Sambols which keep, of course, and not the unbelievably tasty but temporary ‘pol sambol’ we all know and love so well. I am writing about ‘seeni sambol’, which means ‘sugar or sweet’ sambol, but it is much more than just that. It is a durable, lasting, mouth-watering and almost sacred concoction of daintily diced onions, spices, chilli, salt, sugar and, most important of all, slivers of that dreamy dried fish preparation from our friendly atoll-dwellers, Maldivian fish. It is a wellcooked, rather firm but not dry dream come true for not only rice-eaters but even semi-civilized types who can add it to buttered bread as an exotic spread, to pancakes, hoppers, stringhoppers, dhosai, roti,

chapatis and everything floury and carbohydrated, converting each mouthful into a seventh-heaven of sensation!

Enough is more than enough! The pantry calls …