# Rice Blessings

Posted on
Delicious kiribath preparations have served as the central dishes of thanksgiving and celebration for millennia

**Sri Lanka’s milk rice preparations symbolise new beginnings, thanksgiving and blessings.**

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Sri Lankans love their rice, but never more so than in April. This is the month when rice is the indomitable queen of the hearth, especially when kitchens across the country are activated for the first time in the Sinhala and Tamil New Year. As Sri Lanka’s rice harvest festival, the Aluth Avurudu begs a culinary celebration of the grain. Sweetmeats and savoury dishes are prepared with ground rice, while whole rice, preferably from the harvest, is cooked into delicious rice dishes that only appear on auspicious occasions.

Prime of them is *kiribath* in Sinhala homes and pongal rice in Tamil homes. Odes to rice, these delicious preparations have served as the central rice dishes of celebrations for millennia, and are usually the first mouthful of any food consumed during the New Year.

*Kiribath* or milk rice is a creamy preparation, made with rice and coconut milk. It is the first dish of *Avurudu* to be cooked at an auspicious time provided by astrologers. It is also always the first meal of the new year, usually served and fed by the head of the household, the patriarch or matriarch, facing a predetermined auspicious direction. It is only thereafter that other foods are had.

Pongal rice has its origins in South India, where the preparation of sweet milk rice is the central activity of the second day of the new year. Pongal means harvest in Tamil, and the dish is both a celebration and a thanksgiving for the crop. New rice is ritually cooked in a new pot over open flames until it bubbles over the rim. The first portion is offered to Surya, the sun god, for the New Year also marks a new solar cycle and the arrival of spring. Thereafter, everyone pitches in, with the patriarch or matriarch of the household feeding the first mouthfuls to the family. Sri Lanka’s pongal rice is a fragrant creamy dish, cooked with mung dhal (green gram), raisins

and cashew nuts. The first servings are always offered to the gods. It can be prepared either sweet or savoury. The former sweetened with jaggery, and the latter fired up with salt, pepper, ginger, mustard seeds and spices.

*Kiribath* is easy to prepare and serves as a base for many other offshoots. In central Sri Lanka, this dish is usually prepared with white rice, and in the south, with red, usually of the starchy type of rice such as *kekulu* or jasmine. Raw rice is best, for parboiled rice never really achieves the true texture of this fine dish.

Wash the rice as usual and cook it first with a little more water than you would use when steaming or boiling rice. The amount of water would differ according to the type of rice used. For *kekulu*, the ratio would be two cups of water to two cups of rice, and an additional half cup of water. Simply boil without any seasoning until the water has soaked into the grain. Then add about one and a half cups of thick coconut milk. If using freshly squeezed milk, use only the *miti kiri*, the first squeezing. Thick canned milk is also suitable. Season with salt when adding the milk, keeping in mind that less salt is more for this dish. A little salt is better than even just enough salt and too much. Some add a few dill seeds to cut the heaviness of the carbohydrates. The rice has to be taken off the fire before the layer at the bottom gets roasted, affecting the flavour of the entire pot.

The quantity of ingredients remains more or less the same for kiribath made from red rice. Once cooked, dish it onto a flat dish and smoothen it out with a square of banana leaf that has been softened by heating. Cut into beautiful diamond shapes and serve with bright red *katta sambal* or yellow or red *pol sambal* (grated coconut mix). Kiribath lovers with a sweet tooth can enjoy the dish with a piece of *kithul* or *pol* jaggery.

Imbul kiribath is a honeyed variation, made of white kiribath with layered *pani-pol* (honey-coconut, stuffing). Cups of kiribath containing layers of honey-soaked shredded coconut. Put half a cup of treacle in a pan and bring it to boil. When bubbling, add one and a half cups fresh grated coconut, and a few crushed cardamoms. Mix until all the liquid is absorbed. Kithul palm treacle makes the best *pani pol*. Jaggery, either *kithul* or coconut jaggery, is a substitute. Grate the jaggery and melt it in a little water over the fire, stirring until it thickens, then add the coconut and cardamom.

Mung kiribath is delicious variation that is usually prepared in temples. It is served at the temple of the Goddess Pattini in Navagamuwa on any day and also in the

devales on the grounds of Buddhist temples. To prepare, soak dry mung bean seeds overnight. By morning, they would be softened and ready for cooking. Wash them with the rice and follow the usual kiribath recipe. You could call this dish a fusion of kiribath and pongal rice. Often, other ingredients such as cashew and raisins, are added.

These milk rice preparations are not just for New Year. Most Sri Lankan families prepare it at home on the first of every month, starting the month with blessings for the family. They are also served at religious events and celebrations, such as at weddings and the inauguration of business ventures. Milk rice, especially kiribath, is synonymous with new beginnings, thanksgiving and blessings. In a land where rice is lifeblood, they are an ode to rice.