Sour and Spicy… Ambul Thiyal!

Posted on



Flavoursome Ambul Thiyal

The tingling aroma of spices permeated through the house and lured us to the kitchen where a dish of Ambul Thiyal slowly simmered in the stove emitting an enticing savour…

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Ambul Thiyal or the Sour Fish Curry is believed to have originated from Ambalangoda, a coastal town located in the Galle District. Regardless of its roots, the dish is famed throughout the island of Sri Lanka and is a favourtie among many who show a partiality towards fish. Depending on the region, the spices used to flavour the dish and the way it is cooked, slightly differs as people tend to incorporate their own individuality to this unique dish. One distinctive feature of Ambul Thiyal is that it could be kept in room temperature up to one week and preserved even longer when refrigerated, unlike most other cuisines.

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In the olden days it is said that Ambul Thiyal with angiti bath and pol sambol made the perfect combo after the harvesting period. Harvested paddy seeds that are only half filled were called angiti and it was boiled, pounded and served with Ambul Thiyal and pol sambol in many village homes when rice mills were not a common sight. However, as we rarely get to witness such customs in this day and age, milk rice or white rice with Ambul Thiyal present equally tempting combos.

How To Make…

The ingredients needed for the preparation are fish – preferably tuna, goraka (gambooge), pepper, salt, chillie powder, curry leaves (karapincha) and pandan leaves (rampe). If the ingredients mentioned prove too hard to find, one can use substitutes such as tamarind paste for goraka and cilantro for rampe. The fish is first deboned and cut into cubes. After washing the cut pieces, they are kept aside while the paste of the Ambul Thiyal, the most significant item of the dish, is made. When preparing the mixture, while some opt to blend the ingredients, the traditional way requires the ingredients to be mixed utilising a grinding stone.

First the goraka is boiled till they turn soft and then ground. As the goraka takes on the texture of a fine paste, pepper and chillie are included and further ground together. Then the finely ground paste is scraped into a bowl where salt and water is added to dissolve the hard paste into a thick concoction. Curry leaves are added and mixed before coating the pieces of fish with the paste. The coated fish are meticulously placed in a clay pot, layered with a banana leaf in order to prevent the fish from sticking to the pot. The left over gravy is then poured in, while as a final touch rampe leaves are spread on top. Some prefer to add rampe leaves to the bottom before placing the fish, as the zest given by the leaves are heightened by doing so.

Finally the pot is kept on the stove, closed, and is simmered on low heat till the gravy disappears as Ambul Thiyal is served as a dry dish.

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Taste Galore

Lured in by the scrumptious smell of the Ambul Thiyal, we surrounded the table where a steaming pot of white rice along with pol sambol – eye catching in bright orange – made way for a mouthwatering feast. Eagerly serving a generous portion we dug in, savouring the explosion of a multitude of flavours that struck us. Sourness and spiciness dominated our tastebuds and we took our time to identify the different flavours with each bite. The milky taste of the rice mingling with the salty, sharp and tangy taste of the two sides packed the goodness of Sri Lankan cuisine into one delectable bundle and we could not resist going for a second helping.

A dish that could be easily prepared, Ambul Thiyal adds that extra bite to an otherwise ordinary spread!!

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