Sri Lankan Delights Made Easy

Posted on



Ready to eat; a dish of tempered bean curry and Ambul Thiyal

“Sri Lankan cookery has evolved” says Koluu and these recipes reflect that. A few innovative tweaks and tips while preserving the authentic flavours and nutritional value allow two traditional dishes to find its way into a busy lifestyle.

Words Chiranthi Rajapakse Photographs Menaka Aravinda

Ambul Thiyal:

Kiribath and Ambul Thiyal – so many festive occasions conjure up the vision of this enticing combination. The distinctive fish dish of Ambul Thiyal doesn't always look enticing but once a well-prepared dish is tasted it's never forgotten. Its tangy, slightly sour but delicious flavour makes it the ideal accompaniment for kiribath or pol roti; it adds just the right amount of spiciness to the meal.

This is however an Ambul Thiyal recipe with a difference. Koluu characterises it as a perfect example of 'less is more'. The only ingredients are goraka, pepper and salt, making the dish a quick and easy one to prepare. Says Koluu, "many recipes use other ingredients such as karapincha, garlic and ginger. People don't believe that Ambul Thiyal can be made with only these few ingredients. But of all the recipes I've tried this is the best and the most effective method of preparation."

Koluu emphasises that the correct quantities of goraka and salt must be added in order to achieve the desired taste. He also advocates the use of a red fish such as kelavalla or thalapath in preparing this dish. While it can be prepared with fish such as seer, it's hard to get the same taste says Koluu.

The key ingredient goraka, is a commonly found, though rather curious looking fruit. Goraka is valued for its sun-dried rind, which is used for flavouring curries and gives the Ambul Thiyal its distinctive sour sweet taste.

The method of preparation too, is unusual. Cooking Ambul Thiyal usually brings visions of time spent in front of a hot fire. Not any more. This recipe calls for the fish to be placed on a baking tray and popped into the oven for about 40 minutes. "Basically it cooks in its own steam, which is why it's important to cover the dish" says Koluu. Apart from the usual accompaniments of hoppers, kiribath, or roti, Koluu also recommends Ambul Thiyal with bread as an ideal snack.

Another advantage of Ambul Thiyal is that since both goraka and salt are good preservatives, the dish can be kept for a long time. "Refrigerated it can be kept for months," Koluu advises.
This makes it ideal for busy occasions, since the dish can easily be prepared beforehand and simply taken out of the fridge and reheated.

Recipe

1 kilo fish cleaned and cut into chunks

100 grams (soaked) goraka ground to a fine paste

100 grams pepper corns (soaked) ground to fine paste

1 level teaspoon of salt

1 cup water

Method:

Add goraka and pepper paste into a bowl. Then add the salt and water and blend till smooth. Then add the fish into the bowl and see that all the pieces are coated well.

Put the fish into a baking tray, cover with lid or foil and pop into a heated oven. Then lower the heat and let it cook for 40 minutes and take it out and cool.

This preparation can be kept for some time.

Tempered Bean Curry:

Whatever the occasion, bean curry always blends in well with a rice and curry meal. Tempering the beans adds a tasty flavour and spices up what would otherwise be an ordinary dish. Much of the flavouring in this recipe comes from the condiment powder and cumin powder. Maldive fish also adds an extra taste to the dish, but it can be omitted by vegetarians.

When it comes to the cooking Koluu is particular that the beans should be in a crunchy state. He explains, “Once you temper the beans and have it slightly cooked, quickly pour in the coconut milk. As soon as the coconut milk is cooked the dish should be taken off the fire immediately.”

Adds Koluu, “The secret is fast cooking, the beans should not be overcooked. The policy is now to cook beans or any green vegetable over a high fire to preserve the nutritional value. Modern methods of Sri Lankan cooking are different; we capture the same flavour; but we have discovered the nutritional value.”

Another advantage of fast cooking is that it keeps the appealing green colour of the beans. Says Koluu in conclusion, “One of the nicest things about eating rice and

curry is seeing the colours on your plate.” Remembering the colour and vividness of Sri Lankan meals,
it’s hard to disagree.

Recipe

500 grams beans stringed and

cut into pieces

Sprig of curry leaves

150 grams of sliced onions

3 cloves garlic sliced

¼ teaspoon of turmeric powder

1 ½ teaspoons of chilli flakes

1 ½ teaspoons of raw

condiment powder

1 teaspoon of cumin powder

1 tablespoon of Maldive fish

1 ½ cups of coconut milk

2 tablespoons of vegetable oil

Salt

Method:

In a bowl combine the beans with chilli flakes, condiment powders and salt. Heat pan on the fire, add vegetable oil and heat, then add the curry leaves, garlic, and onions. When the onions are browning add the beans and sauté for a few minutes, once you see them changing into a darker green add the Maldive fish and continue to sauté. Then add the coconut milk, cook for a further three minutes and take off

the fire.

Though almost everyone looks forward to eating Ambul Thiyal few people now have the time to go through a lengthy process of preparing it. Therefore the innovative method of cooking it in an oven is more convenient and reflects how Sri Lankan cooking has changed with the times. “Season it nicely and put it in the oven and that’s it” says Koluu. Good news for busy cooks.Koluu, Executive Chef and Partner, Lemon Bar and Kitchen

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