

Sweet By Nature



Coconut shells with forming jaggery

Tikiri Bandara nimbly makes his way up the Kitul Palm to reach the flourish of fronds at 20 feet high. He positions himself precariously on a scaffolding and is soon absorbed in the demanding routine of Kitul tapping. This is the beginning of no simple means in the making of jaggery and treacle - sweet penchants amongst many Sri Lankans.

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“This takes up all of my time, so it is my livelihood,” says Tikiri Bandara of making treacle and jaggery. And it is little wonder why, as one observes the arduous process involved. Hidden away from the Deniyaya town, the little hamlet of Anguruwadiya amidst sparse tea estates, is where we find this industrious Kitul tapper. Emerging from his humble ‘katu meti’ (clay and timber) abode at the edge of a tea estate, he is eager to reveal the tricks of his trade. Although he launches into the finer details of drawing sap from the flower, an inundation of age-old terminology estranges his curious audience. Eager to get to the bottom of it we

follow in his wake to where a Kitul palm (*Caryota urens*) stands with a flower at a timely stage for drawing sap.

What is advantageous for those making a living off the Kitul Palm is that the trees grow abundantly in the region and need little or no attention for its upkeep. All that is required is a wait for the flowering to take place. A tree can bear up to two flowers a year and an experienced tapper can identify when the time is ripe for tapping. Bandara has chosen a 20-foot tall tree far more manageable than those that grow as tall as 40 feet or more, deeper in the forest. The Kitul flower is really an inflorescence where its thick stem bears a cluster of flowers and Bandara points out that when the stem extremity is filled with clusters and is on the verge of unfolding, it is mature enough for tapping. With a knife and clay pot on his person, he first pauses to say a quick prayer before hoisting himself up a ladder of sorts. Long staffs laid against the palm tree are tethered with woody creepers at regular intervals, to create footholds to make the ascent along this improvised ladder. Within moments Bandara is a mere silhouette high above the ground. There he positions himself on the crude platform at the base of the inflorescence.

The crescent shaped inflorescence can easily be seen from a distance with its free end drooping heavily with the clusters of flowers. About two days prior to making the cut to release the sap, the sheath enclosing the flower is removed and a small incision is first made at the base of the stem. To this bruise a medicinal paste is administered to trigger the draining of the sap. It is then draped with cane and an arecanut sheathe or in some cases a polythene sheet to gather the flower in place and protect from winds.

These tasks must all be conducted with caution as the flower stem may break, and a wooden bracket is also placed to firmly prop the stem. Bandara proceeds to unravel the draping to release the pressure and promptly makes a clean cut at the free end, releasing a rain of flower clusters. The flower is draped once more in a tight sheathe and the clay pot is secured just below the cut to collect the now 'tearing' flower.

Thelijja, or the smoky sap can thus be collected twice a day, once in the morning and again in the late afternoon, for as long as six months. On average 30 bottles of treacle can be produced from each flower and in some cases a maximum of a 100. Bandara emerges from the kitchen with pots of previously collected sap and prepares a blazing hearth. A large wok is placed over the fire to which the sap is

poured through a filter and allowed to boil. The surface foam that appears is removed and the boiling is continued with stirring. Gradually the darkening liquid gains a thick consistency and when the syrupy liquid trickles from the spoon in a continuous 'string', it is considered to have boiled down to 60 percent. This is the desired consistency for treacle which is left to cool and poured into bottles. The treacle can be reduced further by boiling to gain a premium quality identified by a characteristic beehive residue formed on the spoon.

The day's work doesn't end however, as Bandara continues to stir the treacle for another half an hour more and little by little the treacle thickens to a delectable consistency. The toffee brown ooze is poured into coconut shells and left to cool. Within a short span of 15-20 minutes the shells' contents transform to a dark brown and harden to form jaggery. The depressed centres, we learn are characteristic of unadulterated jaggery (no sugar added) as are the light centres visible in a cross section. Two halves from each shell form a unit or a 'hakuru mula' sold at 400 rupees, the price for a full bottle of treacle as well. It provides adequate means to make living says Bandara, who need not even sell his goods to shops as a steady stream of customers arrive at his doorstep to collect the goods. In addition to jaggery and treacle, on occasion another local favourite 'weli hakuru' - jaggery of a grainy and crumbly consistency resulting from aged treacle is also produced.

Making these palatable delights is all in a day's work for Tikiri Bandara and it was now time to unwind. Steaming cups of plain tea arrive, accompanied with soft brown chunks of jaggery. With each sip, we indulge in the sweet goodness that melts in our mouths... ah!

