

Sweet nostalgia



Small parcels of delight

Sri Lanka is a confectioner's dream with an array of wickedly tempting toffees and sweetmeats.

Words Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena



Cadju toffee - a nut-filled butterscotch toffee

Some people just love toffees. Brad Pitt gave Angelina Jolie three pounds of toffees as a wedding gift. For those of us in Sri Lanka, there is always Mum's toffee jar packed with delicious squares of melt-in-the mouth treats.

The one we had as children is an unforgettable page from my past. The tall jar, perched on a shelf beyond reach, was always topped up with sweets - usually milk toffee or coconut rock - to be distributed one a piece after lunch. But that was not all it held: Sri Lanka is a confectioner's dream with an array of toffees as sweet as sin. There was plenty of variety in that jar.

Milk toffee was the usual culprit Mum used to satisfy our sugar cravings and reward us for good behaviour. She made them herself from condensed milk and lots of sugar, flavoured with vanilla or almond. Sometimes she threw in a bit of butter for a smoother texture. I would watch her melt the sugar in a large pan, and lightly caramelize it over the fire before pouring in a thick stream of condensed milk. It takes a lot of skill to make milk toffee - a strong arm to stir the gooey mixture quickly over the hot stove to prevent lumps from forming, and a sharp eye to know exactly when to take it off the heat.

Milk toffee is delicious plain or embedded with chopped roasted cashews or dried fruits like dates or raisins

She was expert at toffee making, and I watched and waited impatiently for her to pour the mixture into a waiting greased bowl so that I could then lick off the leftover toffee stuck on the wooden ladle and get the scrapings off the pan. Milk toffee is delicious plain or embedded with chopped roasted cashews or dried

fruits like dates or raisins. Milk toffee with bits of chopped dry dates is exquisite. An interesting variation was potato fudge, prepared similarly to toffee but with an additional ingredient - mashed potato - and more butter.

Common too was coconut rock, also homemade. This is a heavenly preparation of fresh grated coconut flavoured with vanilla or almond essence and sugar. These are really sweet, with a ratio of one and a half to two portions of sugar to one of coconut. The mixture is made attractive with food colouring. Ground cardamom and cinnamon add a bit of spice.

Mum would melt the sugar in a little water, mix in fluffy white fresh coconut, flavour it and stir until the mixture began to harden, then pour it onto a flat greased surface. She heated a large section of banana leaf over an open flame and used it to flatten the mixture before cutting the toffee into cubes. The rock took an hour or two to harden. Of course, I claimed all the crumbs. A bit of butter in the mixture made it smoother.

Aggala, aluwa and weli thalapa are traditional sweets that usually make an appearance on festive occasions like Sinhalese New Year

While milk toffee and coconut rock were the treasures of our home, there were plenty of other candies that made their way into that jar. One was *cadju* toffee, which though never prepared at home was also always available, probably brought as gifts by visitors. *Cadju* toffee is a deliciously addictive nutty butterscotch filled with chopped roasted cashew nuts or peanuts. They are available in thin slabs in packets of ten or more at most grocery stores and supermarkets.

Along with *cadju* toffee came another traditional favourite - *thalaguli*, delightful delicacies made of ground sesame seed. Though not technically a toffee, which is crunchy and chewy, *thalaguli* is nevertheless a sweet treat. It's prepared by pounding together lightly roasted sesame seeds and *kithul* palm jaggery in a pestle and mortar. The pounding releases an oil that binds the two ingredients. The mixture is formed into small cylindrical shapes or balls.

A somewhat healthy way to satiate one's sweet tooth because they get their sweetness from raw sugars

Today, like *cadju* toffee, *thalaguli* is available in supermarkets and grocery stores. Back then, however, it was more difficult to come by. Jinadasa's *thalaguli*, purchased from a famous confectioner with a sales outlet along Kandy Road, was a household name. Any road trip between the hill capital and Colombo would include a compulsory stop at Jinadasa at Warakapola to stock up on *thalaguli* and other traditional sweets like *aggala*, *aluwa* and *weli thalapa* for oneself and to gift to others. Jinadasa still operates at Warakapola, but these sweets can be bought anywhere today.

Aggala, *aluwa* and *weli thalapa* are traditional sweets that usually make an appearance on festive occasions like Sinhalese New Year. They are all prepared with rice flour. And there's something else – they have a sharp peppery edge; think chilli-chocolate. *Aggala* is prepared with roasted rice flour and palm treacle seasoned with pepper and salt. The contrast between the pepper and the sweet treacle is delectable. *Aluwa* is a heavenly preparation made of roasted rice flour, ground spices like cardamom and cinnamon, and ground cashew, sweetened with coconut or *kithul* treacle. It too is seasoned with salt and pepper. The roasted rice makes it very fragrant and the ground cashew crumbles in the mouth, releasing sweet, spicy and peppery flavours. *Weli thalapa* is a soft pebbly sweet prepared with rice flour, coconut and treacle. All three are a somewhat healthy way to satisfy one's sweet tooth because they get their sweetness from raw sugars.

Last but not least were the preserves of *dosis* that filled the toffee jar – usually *puhul dosi* or winter melon preserve, which is sweet, succulent and fibre-rich. Sometimes we had ginger preserve wrapped up in paper to look like candy, which my grandmother in particular loved. Coated with sugar, they were a wonderful way to give oneself a sugar rush.

Today's toffee jars are more likely to be filled with high-fibre energy bars. But those jars of old topped up with toffees of all kinds were a delight. Raiding one was the sweetest of sins back then.

Weli Thalapa

- 500 g rice flour
- Half a coconut, very finely grated
- Water for mixing flour
- 750 ml coconut treacle

- 128 g sugar
- Crushed cardamoms

Sieve the flour into a large bowl and add in the very finely grated coconut. Mix the flour and coconut with a little water to make a fine crumbly texture, gently using your fingers to break up the flour mix. There should be no large lumps that would interfere with an even steaming of the mixture. If the particles become big, sun dry the mixture a little and then break them up. Steam in a pressure cooker for 15 minutes, then switch off the heat and leave the pan aside with the lid on for half an hour to 45 minutes.

Meanwhile, put the coconut treacle into a large heavy bottomed pan and bring to a boil. When it is bubbling, add the sugar, stir and wait till it bubbles again. Then take it off the fire. Add the crushed cardamom to the hot treacle. If you wish, you can also add a little vanilla flavouring.

Now add the flour mixture and stir gently until the liquid is evenly distributed. When all the liquid has been absorbed by the steamed grains, you can place it on a wooden board or a weli thalapa laala (a special jack wood board made for the purpose). Shape it with a heat-treated banana leaf. Leave it for a few minutes to settle, then cut into squares. Set aside to cool. You can store weli thalapa for five to seven days in a fridge or five days at room temperature in an airtight container. Recipe from Chitra Surasena.



