

Tangy Tastes Of Sri Lanka



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Perhaps the most anticipated of all fruit seasons in Sri Lanka, Rambutan time is the vibrantly colourful and the enticingly exciting. Awaited by the young and the old alike, it is a period when the roadside stalls around the country display neatly arranged piles of bright red rambutan. A tropical fruit that is native to South East Asia, rambutan has a hairy peel. Breaking it open may seem quite a task, but the sweet, juicy flesh that tastes similar to lychee or even grape is a real reward for the effort. Indeed a true tropical gift, rambutan comes in many varieties; the most popular known as Malwana rambutan is commonly found around the Malwana area. It is a must try for any visitor to the country during the season, which is currently on.

Though not typically Sri Lankan, the notorious odour of durian precedes it and thanks to its attack on the olfactory senses, people either love it or loathe it. The durian season coincides with that of rambutan, but unlike rambutan it is comparatively large in size and has a thorny husk. It has a creamy white flesh, which tastes somewhat similar to custard. Quite similar to jackfruit in appearance, though smaller, it is said that even elephants do not go under durian trees for the fear of the fruits falling on them. But then it is no cause for wonder. Imagine a large, thorny durian falling from 40 metres above!

Though lesser known compared to rambutan or durian, and not so widely available, naminang or nangnang is another Sri Lankan fruit. In the backyard gardens of village houses there is always a naminang tree, which has fruits along its trunk. naminang has an awkward shape and an uneven greenish brown exterior, but when ripe it turns slightly yellow and has a sour sweet taste.

Mangosteen is a seasonal fruit that is commonly found along the southern coastal belt particularly around Kalutara during the season. The fruit has a deep reddish purple rind and inside there are about five to six creamy white segments of peachy texture that are sweet and slightly tangy. The fruit can be broken open by pressing it between the palms and you have to be careful not to spill the juices as

they can leave nasty stains on your clothes.

Gaduguda (langsat) is another seasonal fruit with a yellowish thick leathery skin and looks similar to Longan, its East Asian counterpart. It has juicy, translucent segments that are sweet when ripe.

Jambu also known as water apple or rose apple is another common fruit not only in Sri Lanka but also in many other Asian countries. There are many jambu varieties that range from rose apple, water apple and wax apple that come in different sizes and colours ranging from dark red to pinkish white, the most common is the small red variety. However, all of them have a slightly sweet watery taste. During the jambu season, the trees become heavy with bright red fruits and the ground below it also red with the fallen fruits if not picked in time. Local children climb up jambu trees to pluck them or shake the trunk of the tree to collect the fruits that fall.

Though not as commonly available as it used to be about a decade or so ago, gal siyambala or what is known as velvet tamarind can still be found around schools or in busy towns during the season. Paper cones full of tiny black velvety fruits are a perfect snack for that walk back home from school. It has brownish black shells that pop open and the edible part inside is orangey- brown with a powdery texture and has a tangy sweet taste that you just can't get enough of. Inside there is a hard flat brown seed. Though the edible part of the fruit is really small, its taste is well worth the effort that goes into popping open so many tiny fruits.

Lovi and uguressa are two other local fruits that are quite popular and widely available in season. Lovi is bright red and cherry like. But its soft whitish flesh is sour and astringent and has a few tiny red seeds in the centre of the fruit. Uguressa is a greenish purple fruit like a plum, yet smaller, and is mildly sweet when ripe.

Kamaranka or star fruit is another highly astringent fruit that is found in Sri Lanka. When the fruit is sliced it has the shape of a star, hence the name. When ripe it turns yellow, juicy and sweet.

Biling or bilimbi as it is known, is also quite similar to raw star fruit in taste and is available throughout the year. Another fruit that can be found in the gardens of village homes, the biling tree bears fruit in bunches along the trunk of the tree and the fruit tastes juicy and acidic, thus it is eaten raw with salt. Local

housewives sun dry the excess fruit and prepare it as a pickle.

Passion fruit bears a beautiful white and purple flower and gives life to a seedy yellow fruit with a rich aroma and tangy sweet flavour. It is used in the preparation of many desserts, juices and cordials both in Sri Lanka and in many tropical countries.

Ceylon olive that is known as veralu is another typical Sri Lankan fruit and as the name suggests it looks very much like a green olive and grows in trees that grow tall. Boiled veralu mixed with chillies and salt and called veralu achcharu can be found in shops near schools and is a favourite among school kids.

Along with veralu another fruit that is available in these stalls is amberella, which is also prepared as an achcharu, though not boiled, raw amberella is cut into pieces and mixed with salt, chilli and sugar. It is also prepared as a spicy curry that is a perfect accompaniment with other typically Sri Lankan curry dishes and rice. Enjoying sour amberella with its salty sweet juices dripping along your fingers is truly heavenly bliss. For those who have tasted it, even the thought is a mouth-watering experience. Similar to veralu, raw amberella can be made into refreshingly sweet and sour juice that can be enjoyed at anytime of the day.

Nelli or Indian Gooseberry is available throughout the year and is considered to be a highly medicinal fruit. Nelli is very high in vitamin C and it is said that one nelli fruit has many flavours; sweet, bitter, sour, salty, astringent and even pungent. There are two popular varieties of nelli in Sri Lanka, one is the medicinal variety while the other has a star shape to it. Though both are quite astringent and sour, they rank high among the local fruits.

A pinkish white berry, jamson is sour and has a sticky white sap when raw. It turns blood red when ripe, and can be found in some gardens and is not so popular or well known.

The fruit of the popularly known cashew nuts is cashew apple and it is a by-product of the cashew industry. The fruit turns orange, yellow or even red when ripe, is juicy and sweet and notorious for the stains it leaves.

Though some of these are less well known, these fruits are entwined with life in Sri Lanka. They may not even be readily or commonly available, but these local fruits definitely add flavour and colour to the tropical lives of the locals.