

A Taste That Remains...

Posted on



Scrumptious Kalu Dodol in the making...

The hands that gripped the large wooden ladle strained continuously, stirring the concoction that seemed to thicken as time inched by—minute by minute, hour by hour. A sweet aroma enveloped me hurling me back to the days where I used to sit on a chair outside my house, feet barely touching the ground, twiddling my toes and nibbling on a piece of Kalu Dodol—a treasured memory that refuses to fade away...

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As a child the yearly trip that my family took to Kataragama was always a much looked forward to event. From all the experiences that I have encountered, the most vivid memory is of how the young ones would clamor for Kalu Dodol the moment we enter Hambantota, perhaps the most famous place in the Island for the sweetmeat. I could still remember the joy of biting into the soft dodol and savouring the all too engrossing sweetness.

Passing through the much changed landscape of Hambantota today, yet again I was reminded of these treasured memories and as a row of shops selling Kalu Dodol and other trinkets caught my eye I was compelled to stop to once again sample the all too familiar taste of Kalu Dodol in Hambantota. And to my delight the taste of these sweetmeats have not changed and still held the same rapture.

Dodol is a popular sweetmeat not only in Sri Lanka but also in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Brunei and each country or even region seemed to have their own version of the confection made using edibles well liked in that particular area. A few of these exotic dodol dishes include dodol garut, available in a variety of flavours such as pineapple and chocolate and made in Garut, Indonesia; dodol durian made from durian in Malaysia; dodol nangka made from jakfruit; dodol sirask made from the soursop pulp, a fruit grown in Indonesia; dodol apel malang, made from apple and a specialty of Malang City in East Java; and of course our very own Kalu Dodol.

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Kalu Dodol

Circling the stores of the Dilani Kalu Dodol shop located by the main road, we made our way to the back where an open kitchen stood. Several people were busy, buzzing about while four people were stationed at each of the four cooking pans located on one side of the kitchen. Each of the massive woks or cooking pans— set on a slab made out of concrete with large slots to wedge in the pans snugly—were placed at least a metre or two apart providing plenty of space for the dodol makers to carry on their handywork. From all the workers, one who was busy making the necessary preparations to start cooking up a whole new batch of Kalu Dodol drew our attention and we eagerly set about noting the steps involved.

To make a batch of Kalu Dodol that weighs 40kg, the ingredients needed are miti kiri and diya kiri (thick and thin coconut milk, obtained from the first and second pressings respectively) of 50 coconuts, five and a half kilograms of rice flour and 22kg of sugar. “If we use jaggery, we use about 22kg of jaggery and mix it up with sugar,” explained one dodol maker.

On the other side of the kitchen were several machines dedicated to coconut grating and pressing and several workers were diligently husking, cleaning and then passing the coconuts through the machines to ready the necessary ingredients. Soon a big bucket of thin coconut milk and a small pot of thick coconut milk were set aside to be used for the next batch of dodol.

Now all ingredients were ready for making dodol and after kindling the firewood hearth, the dodol maker poured in about one and a half kilograms of sugar to the pan, shifting the sugar to caramelize from time to time to get the dark colour of dodol. As the colour of the sugar darkened, he poured in half of the prepared thin coconut milk and set about stirring the mixture adding more sugar every now and then to get the right grain. While he was attentively mixing up the concoction, another worker added the five and a half kilograms of rice flour into the bucket where the rest of the thin coconut milk remained, before pouring the whole mixture into the pan. Reducing the heat of the firewood, Ajantha now slowly mixed the ingredients. After a while the mixture started to bubble and boil over indicating that the rice flour has been properly cooked. At this point the pot of thick coconut milk was added along with the rest of the sugar. Then started the most arduous task of all as the dodol maker set about stirring the mixture of Kalu Dodol for what seemed like an eternity

when in reality it was only about three hours. Never showing any sign of fatigue he stirred continuously and patiently until the right consistency was achieved.

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Drawing closer to the work station, we peered in to see the concoction bubbling merrily. However, the heat emitted from the stove compelled us to move away to a comfortable distance amidst the sweltering heat of the arid weather. As the mixture thickened and took on the telltale colour of Kalu Dodol, the stirring became harder requiring much effort and strength and admirably the effort put in by each worker did not falter, keeping up with the vigour demanded.

For the final touches ground enasal and even thinly chopped up kadju (cashews) were added and then after stirring the Kalu Dodol mixture for a few more minutes, it was served into a tray using the wooden ladle. Oil seemed to bubble over to the top and the dodol makers explained that most times the Kalu Dodol is kept aside in the store for about two to three days till the oil settles in. And that is when the sweetmeat is considered to be best consumed.

Nibbling on a freshly made piece of Kalu Dodol, I settled on a chair by a corner observing the workers who strained hard at times lifting on their toes and pushing at the wooden ladle with all their might. Here I closed my eyes and let myself drift away to my childhood to once again enjoy that feeling and to relish in the unchanged sweet taste of Kalu Dodol...

