

Tastes to Last

Posted on

Once upon a time when refrigeration was a thing of the future our ancestors dried, smoked, pickled and immersed food in natural preservatives to make them last longer. Salt, tamarind, honey, vinegar, smoke and the sun's rays combined to preserve and create flavoursome dishes for future use. The very essence of traditional preserving methods of the Island pays tribute to diverse and inimitable flavours of Sri Lanka.

By Chamindra Warusawitharana Photography by Menaka Aravinda



'*Goraka*' (Malabar Tamarind) resembles miniature reddish pumpkins when ripe. The reddish tinge slowly turns into jet-black once the '*Goraka*' is separated into slices, smoked over fire for several days and then left to dry in the sun to complete the process. Sri Lankans keep '*Goraka*' pieces in a clay pot with salt.

Similarly tamarind is left to dry in the sun and preserved for later use in a clay pot. Both these ingredients play a dual role in Sri Lankan cuisine. These are the essential ingredients that give the tangy signature flavour of certain Sri Lankan dishes and are essential ingredients in preserving certain food items.

Salty and tangy

Enclosed by the sea from all sides and blessed with waterways snaking all over the land, fish is in abundance throughout Sri Lanka. '*Jaadi*' and '*Karawala*' are preserved fish that offer a piquant and salty zest. Curing '*Jaadi*' is a task that requires immense care and used to be a profession in this Island nation. '*Dodanduwa*' situated down South used to be the '*Jaadi*' hotspot of Sri Lanka. The professional '*Jaa-di*' maker cleans and slices fish into sizeable pieces or lengthwise depending

on the kind of fish used. Then the fish is laid on a layer of salt and 'goraka' in a wooden barrel or a clay pot and topped with another layer of the same mixture. This process continues till the vessel is filled to the brim with fish, salt and goraka. The barrel or the pot is then sealed. After about six months, voilà... a barrel or a pot full of appetising 'jaadi' is ready simmering in a cloudy liquid with its own peculiar smell.

Dry Fish called 'karawala' is another appetite awakener though of a different calibre to that of 'jaadi'. Sun dried fish can be kept for months and it can be made into curries or fried with onions. In fact, fried dry fish with a touch of small but intensely hot chilies called 'Ko-chchi' is a well-loved dish in Sri Lanka. However, 'Ambul Thiyal' a sour fish curry outruns fried dry fish in the popularity contest. Cooked in a clay pot with a mixture of 'goraka', pepper and salt, a batch of this uniquely Sri Lankan fish curry provides a distinctive tangy flavour and richness to the dining table for several weeks.

Unlike, Dry Fish or 'Jaadi' curing meat is an art that is almost a distant memory in Sri Lankan food culture. According to Dr R L Spittle '*Veddhas*', Sri Lanka's original inhabitants practiced the art of preserving meat in honey. This special method of curing meat is probably one of the simplest and the most effective methods used around the globe. Most of the stone caves that were home to '*Veddhas*' had cavities carved in stone. These cavities were filled with honey and sizeable pieces of meat were dipped in the flowing golden honey. Once the cavity is covered with a stone slab the meat absorbs honey and its miraculous conserving powers.



Fish laid out to dry in Kalpitiya

Floury and piquant

Large jackfruit covered with a coarse thick green outer layer and smaller breadfruit

with its eye pleasing green can be found a plenty throughout the Island during their respective seasons. Preserved Jackfruit and Breadfruit are called “Atukos” and “Atudel” respectively. “Atu” derives from the Sinhala word “Atuwa”, which refers to the upper section of the traditional fireplace, Lankawhere preserved food items and cooking pots are kept. To stretch the supply of jackfruit throughout the year it should be harvested before it ripens to achieve the status of a fruit from that of a vegetable. Cutting, cleaning and segmenting jackfruit is a complicated and a sticky process since it also contains a glue like sap when the outer layer is peeled off. Once the whole jackfruit is segmented and relieved of seeds, the segments are boiled and then ex-posed to a shower of sun’s rays till deemed fit to last long. Breadfruit undergoes the same process with less hassle. To make jack seeds last long Sri Lankans simply use white sand and a clay pot. Taking care to remove all traces of moisture from the seeds, they are spread on a thick layer of white sand in a pot. Then the seeds are topped with another layer of sand. This continues till the pot is tightly filled with jack seeds and white sand.

Some Sri Lankans apply the same white sand and clay pot treatment to preserve whole limes for a while. However, Lime pickles dubbed ‘Lunudehi’ is a more popular way of preserving lime. Pierce the limes using a fork. Heat vinegar, salt and sugar in a clay pot. When the mix-ture begins to boil add the limes and leftover juice. Heat until lime rinds turn a grayish brown. Let the mixture cool awhile and pour into a preserving jar and tightly close the lid. Some prudent housekeepers constantly store used lime rinds in a jar filled with salt thus turning out a less complicated and a more eco-nomical version of ‘Lunudehi’.



Astringent

Some Sri Lankans make annual batches of ‘Achcharu’ and Chutney during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year in April. Malay ‘Achcharu’ (pickle) is a recipe the Dutch left behind. How-ever, Sri Lankans all over adopted various versions of this pickle to suit their respective taste buds and regional ingredients. Carrot

, small red onions, green chilies or capsicum and salt are essential ingredients in any version of 'Ach-charu'. Tamarind pulp strained into liquid, vinegar, mustard paste, ginger and garlic paste add their astringent flavours and fragrance to 'Achcharu'. Green mangoes, sour 'ambaral-la' and even the exotic dates make toothsome chutney with the help of the same piquant and salty ingredients used to make pickle and a lot of heating. 'Biling Achcharu' is made of the small tuber shaped 'biling' fruit. Before these small green fruits are pickled they have to be sliced, soaked in liquid salt and then left to dry under the sun. Thus over the decades different generations of Sri Lankans have contributed to create a fusion of flavours that is truly Sri Lankan.

