

The Art of the Sri Lankan Hopper

Posted on

From the swift swirl of the pan to the gentle cooking over a controlled flame, the Sri Lankan hopper is a dish where simplicity, skill, and patience come together. Here, two hopper connoisseurs – Café on the 5th and t-Lounge by Dilmah – share their stories and secrets behind this iconic Sri Lankan favorite.

Words: Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. Photography: Rasanga Dissanayake and Dinesh Fernando.



An assortment of freshly made hoppers showcases the versatility of the Sri Lankan favorite, paired with rich curries, savory toppings and the classic egg hopper.

Café on the 5th

Swift hands swirl the pan with professional precision. The white batter follows the curve of the pan, barely touching its edges, before the remainder slides gently down to settle at the center. The entire movement takes only a matter of seconds in the hands of a skilled chef. Then comes the waiting – allowing the hopper to cook to that ideal consistency, soft and tender at the center and crisp around the edges.

This is the art of making a Sri Lankan hopper.

Simple in appearance, the hopper demands considerably more skill than its modest ingredients suggest. Rice flour, fresh coconut milk, and salt form the foundation, but transforming them into the perfect hopper requires an understanding of batter consistency, pan movement, batter quantity, and flame heat, and, above all, experience.

Few know this better than Kanthi Jayamaha, founder of Tasty Caterers and the woman behind the hopper range at Café on the 5th.

For decades, Tasty's hoppers have been a favorite in Colombo, sought after by locals and Sri Lankans returning home for a taste of something familiar. For many who live overseas, a plate of hot hoppers is among the foods they look forward to enjoying when they return to Sri Lanka.

At the heart of Tasty's hoppers is an insistence on freshness. The batter is made using freshly ground rice flour and generous quantities of fresh coconut milk, extracted from freshly scraped coconut. There is no powdered milk, no yeast, and no artificial fermenting agents.

"We don't use any powdered milk. It's just fresh coconut milk, scraped and squeezed at the same time, with a few other ingredients such as salt," explains Kanthi.

It is this simplicity that gives the hopper its distinctive character. Yeast, she points out, can sour the hopper, whereas using pure ingredients allows the natural richness of the coconut milk to come through.

Yet ingredients alone cannot make a great hopper.

Making a hopper is a skill developed through practice. The batter must have the right consistency, the correct quantity

must be poured into the pan, and the pan must be turned with just the right movement to spread the batter evenly along the sides. The flame then has to be carefully controlled so that the hopper cooks through without burning.

“You have to have a certain amount of skill in turning the pan correctly to get that proper shape and texture,” says Kanthi.

Even the quantity of batter is judged through experience. With hopper pans generally made in standard sizes, roughly half a cup of batter is used per hopper. The quantity matters because it affects the center’s thickness and the edges’ crispness.

The flame is equally important. Too much heat can burn the delicate crust before the center has cooked, while too little heat can leave the hopper undercooked. Kanthi recommends a controlled medium flame to ensure the hopper cooks steadily and evenly. The pan may also need to be moved around the flame to ensure that the heat is distributed properly.



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Chicken and cheese and cheese topping, garnished with peppers, tomatoes, and chili.



Delicate, golden, and intricate, the hopper is a feast for the eyes – The table is set for a sit-down at Cafe on the 5th.

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From its delicate, lace-like edges to its soft, tender center, the Sri Lankan plain hopper is a work of culinary art.



Crisp, golden hoppers – the delicious range of milk, honey, and jaggery hoppers served at Cafe on the 5th.



Savory Kunisso Sambol reflects the culinary creativity of Café on the 5th.



Peni Appa, infused with treacle and topped with flowing sweetness, is an irresistible

indulgence.

Yet ingredients alone cannot make a great hopper.

A plain hopper generally takes one to two minutes to cook, although this depends on the thickness of the batter. The chef must keep a watchful eye on it, checking from time to time to ensure that the crust does not become overly dark. The edges should develop that characteristic, deeper color, and crispness, but the browning must be even rather than burnt. Patience, therefore, is an essential ingredient.

At Tasty, the skill of making hoppers is valued so highly that Kanthi employs chefs specifically for the task, paying a premium to those who have mastered the craft.

Kanthi's association with hoppers goes back to the very beginning of Tasty. When she started the business 48 years ago, small hopper counters were already part of her outlets. At the time, however, she never imagined that hoppers would become such an important part of the business.

"I never anticipated making hoppers a big business. I believe it has grown to what it is today because of its taste and quality," she says.

The Tasty Hopper recipe itself was developed by Kanthi. She had a specific idea for the hopper she wanted to create and worked with her chefs to bring it to life. Since she could not quite master the technique of turning the pan herself, she would stand beside her chefs and guide them as they experimented with the batter and the cooking process.

It was a process of continual trial and error. If a batch lacked the right flavor or texture, something was adjusted.

The Tasty Hopper recipe itself was developed by Kanthi. She had a specific idea for the hopper she wanted to create and worked with her chefs to bring it to life.

Ingredients were added or reduced until the desired consistency was achieved. Over time, the recipe was perfected.

The pan itself also plays a role in the making of a good hopper. A well-seasoned pan allows the hopper to come away easily once cooked.

Kanthi recommends rubbing the pan with an egg to smooth and season it. A new pan can be seasoned by cooking an egg in it and then rubbing the egg around the surface. Then comes the defining moment: the swirl.

The batter is poured into the hot pan and swiftly rotated so that it travels around the sides, leaving a thin layer along the edges. The remaining batter gathers naturally in the middle. This movement determines the shape and texture of the finished hopper and cannot easily be taught from a recipe alone.

It has to be learned through repetition. For an egg hopper, timing becomes even more important. The egg is not added immediately. The hopper is first allowed to cook for a little while before the egg is introduced. Adding the egg too early, while the batter is still raw, can result in a soggy center. Once again, the chef must rely on experience to judge precisely when to add the egg.

Of course, preferences differ. Some diners enjoy a softer, almost runny center, while others prefer their egg hopper more thoroughly cooked. The beauty of the hopper lies partly in this versatility.

The result should be a hopper that is medium-crisp – firm enough around the edges to hold its shape but not so thin that it crumbles before it reaches the mouth. The center should retain a pleasing softness without becoming excessively heavy. While the plain hopper remains a classic, Kanthi has taken the humble dish considerably further at Café on the 5th.

The café's range of savory and sweet hoppers reflects her instinct for creating food that is both familiar and inventive. Eggs are incorporated into the batter for the savory and sweet varieties, while the plain hopper is made without eggs to cater to vegetarian customers.

The filled and topped varieties are designed to be satisfying on their own, making them a more convenient and cost-effective meal. Among the savory options are hoppers topped with jackfruit curry, chicken and cheese, and kunisso (tiny shrimp), while the sweet selection includes kiri (milk), jaggery, and pani (treacle) hoppers.

Kiri and pani hoppers, in particular, have become favorites among Tasty customers

and are now closely associated with the brand.

The concept is simple: rather than ordering a separate curry or several accompaniments, diners can enjoy a hopper with a generous filling at its center and order additional plain hoppers to eat alongside it.

Kanthi believes this is particularly convenient for families and mothers preparing meals at home. The filling at the center serves as the accompaniment, while additional plain hoppers can be enjoyed alongside it. The best way to eat these filled hoppers is perhaps the most uncomplicated – fold or wrap them and eat them much like a wrap, allowing the filling and hopper to come together in every bite.

The hopper may be made from just a handful of ingredients, but there is nothing simplistic about making a good one. It is the consistency of the batter, the movement of the pan, the quantity poured, the heat of the flame, and the timing of the cooking that collectively determine the final result. That is why the Sri Lankan hopper is more than a recipe. It is an art passed down through practice and perfected through experience.

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For Kanthi, the journey from a small hopper counter at Tasty's early outlets to the extensive range served at Café on the 5th has been guided largely by instinct – understanding what people enjoy and creating variations without losing the essence of the original.

And perhaps that is why the hopper has endured. It can be enjoyed at a roadside eatery or a sophisticated café, for breakfast, dinner, or an evening snack. It can be plain, egg-filled, sweet, savory, crisp, or soft at the center. Yet whatever its variation, it remains unmistakably Sri Lankan.

At Café on the 5th, Kanthi's interpretations add new dimensions to an old favorite, while the fundamentals remain unchanged: fresh ingredients, a well-made batter, a perfectly seasoned pan, and a chef who knows precisely how to swirl it. Because when it comes to making a truly good hopper, there are no shortcuts. There is only skill, patience, and the perfect swirl.

t-Lounge by Dilmah

At t-Lounge by Dilmah, the chefs demonstrate that a good hopper cannot simply be mixed, poured, and cooked. The process begins hours before the batter ever reaches the flame.



Different in flavor yet united by one iconic form, t-Lounge's sweet hoppers, from top: mango, raspberry jam, salted caramel, and strawberry and cream.

"The best food takes time to prepare," and in the case of the hopper, that patience begins with the batter. At t-Lounge, the initial mixture of wet rice flour, salt, and sugar is allowed to ferment for around three hours. Water is added sparingly. The result is a thick batter that is covered and left to rest.

This first stage is important. The fermentation helps develop the hopper's character and, according to the chefs, contributes to the tiny holes that appear at the center as it cooks. Once the batter has fermented, the next stage is perhaps the most intuitive part of the process: adding coconut milk.

There is no fixed quantity of coconut milk that can simply be followed from a recipe. Instead, it is added gradually, with the chef judging the consistency as the batter changes.

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At t-Lounge by Dilmah, this respect for the traditional hopper is combined with an imaginative range of toppings designed to turn the humble dish into something that can be shared and enjoyed in different ways at breakfast.

Thick coconut milk is added little by little, along with a small quantity of baking soda, and the batter is then allowed to rest for another 30 minutes to an hour.

This is where experience becomes invaluable. The chef must recognize when the batter has reached what they describe as the right “padama” – a consistency that is thin, light, and almost glossy.



The beloved egg hopper as served at the t-Lounge.

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A touch of imagination transforms the traditional hopper – t-Lounge’s savory selection features Katta Sambol, cheese, Seeni Sambol, egg, cheese and chicken, and Ambul Thiyal (sour fish).



A classic Sri Lankan canvas for endless creativity – The sweet and savory hopper range at t-Lounge.

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Caramel topped with nougat – The many faces of Sri Lanka's beloved hopper.



A touch of elegance brings excitement to the traditional hopper, adding a dramatic

flourish to a familiar Sri Lankan favorite.

It is this consistency that ultimately determines the hopper's delicate crust.

Coconut milk is also central to its flavor. The initial batter is deliberately kept thick, and water is used sparingly to avoid diluting the richness of the coconut milk. An egg may also be added, primarily to help the cooked hopper release smoothly from the pan.

Once again, the lesson is clear: making a hopper is not simply about following a list of ingredients. It is about knowing what the batter should look and feel like.

Then comes the moment that gives the hopper its characteristic shape.

The chefs at t-Lounge demonstrate the swift movement required to swirl the batter around the pan. The batter must travel quickly around the sides, leaving a thin layer before settling towards the center. It is a movement that looks effortless in the hands of an experienced chef but requires considerable practice. The pan itself is equally important. At t-Lounge, the pans are carefully seasoned, and the chefs offer an unusual but practical tip for preparing one: first polish the pan with sandpaper, then rub it with salt, and finally season it with an egg. A properly prepared pan allows the hopper to release easily once cooked.

Before pouring the batter, the chef checks the pan's heat by holding a palm above its surface. If the heat can be felt at a short distance, the pan is ready.

When the batter hits the surface, the gentle hiss confirms that the temperature is right. But even then, the work is not finished.

The batter must be stirred regularly while making the hoppers because the thicker portion can settle at the bottom. The consistency must remain uniform from one hopper to the next.

Too thick a batter can cause the hopper to stick to the pan, making it difficult to remove. Yet a batter that is too thin can also create problems. The chefs recommend gradually adding more thick coconut milk until the desired consistency is achieved. There is, in other words, a narrow sweet spot between too thick and too thin – and finding it is part of the craft.

The egg hopper presents another challenge.

At t-Lounge by Dilmah, the chefs have their own approach. Rather than allowing the egg to remain concentrated at the center, they spread it over the hopper's surface so it cooks more quickly. They also reduce the amount of batter used so that the center does not become excessively thick.

This is important because a thick center takes longer to cook. By the time it is ready, the thinner edges may already have become overcooked or burnt. Spreading the egg and reducing the batter quantity allows the entire hopper to cook more evenly.

It is another example of how the making of a hopper involves constant judgment. Even a familiar favorite such as the egg hopper can be adapted according to the chef's technique and the desired result.

At t-Lounge by Dilmah, this respect for the traditional hopper is combined with an imaginative range of toppings designed to turn the humble dish into something that can be shared and enjoyed in different ways at breakfast.

The savory selection includes six varieties: ambul thiyal, the classic Sri Lankan sour fish preparation; cheese; spicy chicken; seeni sambol, the sweet-and-spicy onion relish; katta sambol; and the ever-popular egg hopper.

The sweet selection is equally enticing. There is mango compote, raspberry jam made in-house, and strawberry and cream, with strawberries first coated in sugar and finished with snow powder. There is also pol pani, combining grated coconut with treacle; chocolate ganache with cream; and salted caramel with nougat.

Take the time to prepare the batter, learn to read its consistency, master the pan, and respect the flame. Once those elements come together, the humble hopper becomes what it has always been – one of Sri Lanka's most distinctive expressions of culinary craft.

Together, the range demonstrates just how versatile the hopper can be. The familiar crisp shell becomes a canvas for flavors that range from deeply Sri Lankan to indulgently sweet.

Yet whatever the topping, the foundation remains the same: a carefully prepared batter, fresh coconut milk, the right consistency, and a chef who knows exactly how to handle the pan. The Sri Lankan hopper is often celebrated for its simplicity, but that simplicity is deceptive. Behind every perfectly shaped hopper is a process that begins hours earlier and involves fermentation, judgment, preparation, and precision.

The chefs at t-Lounge by Dilmah make it clear that there is no single shortcut to perfection. The batter must be watched. The coconut milk must be added carefully. The pan must be seasoned. The heat must be judged. The batter must be swirled quickly and evenly. And once it is on the flame, the hopper must be watched until the crust reaches that unmistakable golden-brown crispness.

It is a labor of love, but also a skill that can be mastered with practice.

Perhaps that is what makes the Sri Lankan hopper so special. It is humble enough to be made in a home kitchen, yet nuanced enough to challenge an experienced chef. It can be served plain or transformed with an egg, savory toppings, or sweet indulgences. It can be breakfast, a snack, a meal, or something to share.

Ultimately, the secret is not complicated: take the time to prepare the batter, learn to read its consistency, master the pan, and respect the flame. Once those elements come together, the humble hopper becomes what it has always been – one of Sri Lanka's most distinctive expressions of culinary craft.

Café on the 5th

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