The Bountiful Banana

Posted on
Sri Lanka is home to a variety of banana types
1. Seeni kesel (sugar bananas)
2. Alu kesel (ash plantain)
3. Ambul kesel (sour plantains)
4. Rath kesel (red banana)
5. Kolikuttu
6. Ambun

From 10,000 BC to modern times, bananas have gladdened Sri Lankan hearts.

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Ask a Sri Lankan what's in a banana grove and expect a lot of answers. For starters, there's the obvious: the delicious fruit, to be had peeled, straight off the tree when ripe. It can also be a smoothie, a dessert, a cake, a snack or a curry. Its peculiar bud-like inflorescence makes a delicious stir fry. It has medicinal properties and is highly nutritious. Its leaves make aromatic eco-friendly plates and food wraps. Its trunk serves a decorative function, especially in ritualistic ceremonies. Its fibres make tough rope and delicate fabrics. And around the banana grove is wrapped a wealth of lore, not least about the origin of this ubiquitous plant.

Technically, the banana is a berry, not a fruit. It belongs to the genus Musa, herbaceous perennials with succulent, fibrous "trunks" that are actually the tightly overlapping pseudo-stems of elongated ovular leaves. The primary stem bears as an inflorescence, usually one, that matures into about as many as 300 bananas, after which it dies. New stems emerge from rhizomes.

Sri Lanka's association with bananas goes back to prehistoric times. Archeoalogical findings show *Musabalbisiana*, a wild seeded ancestor of the hybrids that make up all modern bananas, was part of the diet of Sri Lanka's Balangoda Man who inhabited the caves and jungles of Batadombalena, at the foothills of Sri Pada, in about 10000 BC. It's probably the earliest record of humanity consuming bananas. There is evidence they were cultivated in the Kuk Valley of New Guinea in about 5000 BC, hence it is believed banana cultivation spread across the region.

The armies of Alexander the Great found bananas to be a rare sweetener on their first forays into the Hindu Kush, where they met ferocious resistence and “naked wise men” meditating in banana groves.

Alexander took the fruit to the West in 327 BC. The early traders, first the Arabs and then the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish, realising its value, globalised the banana. Islamic literature shows that the Arab traders dispersed the banana-eating habit along their trade route, including South and West Asia, North Africa and Moorish-controlled Spain. The etymology of “banana” goes back to the Arabic word “banaan” for “finger”. Thus bananas became one of the world’s most cultivated food crops, the staple of nations like Ghana and West Samoa, and the largest export fruit of countries like Brazil, India and Sri Lanka.

As the banana spread across the world, it gathered cultural significance. In Sri Lanka, it was associated with gods and demons. The superstitious believed that, for example, being in a banana grove after sundown would lead to a demonic encounter. Or that a young woman who consumed two fused bananas would give birth to twins. The fleshy trunk is used for ritualistic décor, sometimes as a base for other decorations or by itself in Buddhist and Hindu celebrations. The fruit is an important offering to the gods. Entire trees and bunches of green bananas complete with inflorescence are hung in wedding venues to signify fertility and abundance. On Hindu religious festivals, banana trunks feature amongst the street decorations and adorn temples.

The ability of some banana species to reproduce without fertilisation has led them to become symbolic of the goddesses Lakshmi, Gauri and Durga of the Hindu pantheon. Banana leaves are a fragrant plate on which to serve offerings of flowers, coconut halves and other items to the gods. Across the Palk Strait, the Syro-Malabar Catholic church of Kerala celebrates Epiphany with the Plantain Trunk Feast, called *Pindipperunaal,* where the trunk is decorated with oil lamps and other decorations. Family members circumnambulate the trunk on the eve of the festival singing a Syrian hymn about the “light of God”.

But it’s through the stomach that the banana conquered the world. The variety that first won the West was the Jamaican Gros Michels, introduced to the USA by Lorenzo Dow Baker, who founded United Fruit, now Chiquita, one of the world’s largest producers and distributers of bananas. A blight near wiped out the Gros Michels, and they were replaced by the hardy, yellow Cavendish, the Chinese variety now commonplace worldwide.

Banana gourmands will find a visit to Sri Lanka exciting. The island boasts a great variety of bananas and an impressive banana cusine. Broadly, there are three banana types: the stubby, yellow mysore; the mid-sized kolikuttu, and elongated Cavendish. *Ambul* (sour) plantains and *seeni* (sugar) plantains are mysore bananas. The kolikuttu includes *kolikuttu, suwendel, puwalu* and *rath kehel.* All except the latter yellow when ripe. *Rath kehel* is red. The most common is the Cavendish which includes *anamalu, ambun, bim kehel, nethrapalam* and *dole.* Unlike the common Cavendish, they are extremely flavourful. Some *seeni* and *suwendel* are so close to the wild varieties, they still have seeds. The best way to sample them is to visit a wet market and buy some yourself. However, make sure to inquire whether the fruits and blossoms are free of pesticides, the use of which is widespread.

Most of Sri Lanka's bananas are best enjoyed raw when ripe. The *kolikuttu* is an elite banana, the choice for offerings and festivals. *Ambul* is a substitute. *Anamalu* is used to flavour cakes, breads, desserts and smoothies. As for spicy banana cuisine: the centrepiece is the *alu kesel* (ash plantains), although *mondan, ela mondan, atamuru* and *kithala* are also used for cooking. *Alu kesel* is wonderful, curried, tempered, and fried into spicy wedges. The peel, the flower and even the bark lends itself to a delicious mixed stir-fry. Banana leaves, washed, dried and heated, are used as wraps when cooking delicacies like lamprais, a delicious rice dish introduced by the Dutch.

You can tank up on bananas without worrying about your waistline. Nutritionally, bananas pack a punch, being full of potassium, magnesium, phosphorus and vitamins. On the carb count, the banana provides resistent starch, a type that bypasses the small intestines and is digested in the large intestines. Thus they aid digestion and are very filling, probably another reason why they won't make you fat. The goodness of bananas has made them suitable for ayurvedic treatments for conditions like dysentry, diarrhoea and digestive disorders, nervous ailments and even heart health. It is said that smoking banana peel gives a hallucinogenic high. Importantly, bananas contain lectins, bio-active proteins linked to cancer reduction.

With so much going for bananas, one wonders whether Balangoda Man realised the bounty in his hands, as he chomped on them millenia ago.

Unusual treat: Kesel bode

Kesel bode (banana pith) curry is highly recommended by indigenous medicine practitioners for its cooling effects. *Alu kesel* (ash plantain) pith, the core of the

trunk, is the preferred choice, and usually available in private gardens soon after the fruit is harvested. As the tree then dies, it is felled and the pith, usually the section in the lower half of the trunk, from centre to ground level, is cooked into a delicious curry. Preparation: Pare the pith until it is about one to an inch and a half in diameter. Prepare a bowl of diluted coconut milk seasoned with salt and tumeric. Finely shred the pith, which discolours quickly when exposed. Add it to the milk. Add in the other ingredients, which should have been prepared in advance: dry mung fried and ground, small thin pieces of potato, unroasted curry powder, dill seeds, sliced green chillies, sliced shallots, sliced garlic, curry leaves, a stick of cinnamon. Mix and bring to a boil on medium heat. Then add thick coconut milk, increase heat and leave to simmer for a few minutes. Goes well with rice, thosai or rotti.*(Recipe courtesy of Chitra Surasena)*

Try Out: Kesel muwa

Kesel muwa (banana blossom) curry is prepared with medium-sized ambul or *alu kesel* blossoms, the other varieties being too bitter. The flowers are best picked when the plantains have plumped out but are still unripe. Preparation: Pare off any loose petals and wash well in tap water. Prepare a clay pot or saucepan of thick *(miti)* coconut milk with a dash of tumeric and salt to taste. Finely shred the *kesel muwa* and add it to the seasoned milk. Add a piece of soaked *goraka* (gamboge), sliced onions, sliced garlic, curry leaves, pandanus leaves, dill seed, sliced green chillies, chilli powder, unroasted curry powder, and a stick of cinnamon. Mix it up well and cook over light heat for 10 to 15 minutes. Increase heat and allow to simmer. In a separate pan, temper sliced onions, curry leaves, chillies and roasted curry powder. Add the *kehel muwa* mix to it and stir for a few minutes.*(Recipe courtesy of Chitra Surasena)*


EXPLORE