



Premaratne hard at work stirring the hopper mixture

A tantalising aroma of freshly made hoppers drifts out from the little shop tempting passers by. If any of them peeped in, they would be greeted by a scene of feverish activity. A man stands surrounded on three sides by rows of gas cookers. His hands whirr busily between the cookers, 30 in all, mixing, pouring and removing freshly cooked hoppers; he doesn't stop even for an instant. It seems impossible for one human being to manage it all at once, but somehow he does.

Words Deepal Sooriyaarachchi Photographs Mahesh Prasantha

Although it's fun to eat hoppers it takes time to prepare them and making hoppers with just the right crispy flavour is not an easy task. But one man has turned hopper making into an art. Premaratne Perera may possibly be the fastest hopper maker in Sri Lanka, and perhaps the world. On the day that we visit his small shop in Dehiwala, he is already hard at work and barely has time to talk as he moves between his array of cookers. In front of him is a huge dish containing the hopper mixture. Using a coconut handle spoon he ladles the mixture into a 'thachchiya' (pan), swirls it around and places it on the cooker. He repeats this in rapid succession for all the cookers, then moves around, checking on the consistency of the hoppers and removing the cooked ones with a dexterous flick of his wrist. A tempting little mountain of hoppers, their crusts gleaming with a golden sheen, pile up in front of him.

This hopper business is a joint venture for Premaratne and his wife Nilanthi. Together they work as a team to keep it flourishing; she is the 'public face' of their business, talking to customers and taking orders as he makes the hoppers. While he works, she tells us the story behind this special hopper maker.

Premaratne's story is also as interesting as his hoppers. About fifteen years ago Premaratne was trying many small businesses with little or no success. Finally he started a little grocery but that too was not doing well. He then started selling tea and snacks also at the grocery, yet success was not on his side. One day he had the idea of making hoppers. But he did not know how to do that. When he was tossing this idea in his mind he asked an elderly woman who dropped into his grocery, how to make hoppers. This lady gave him the recipe.

Whenever a visitor wants to try unique Sri Lankan food items one obvious choice of every host is to offer some hoppers. Hoppers are made with rice flour and coconut milk. A few decades ago hoppers were more a rural food item sold at wayside boutiques. Hoppers are usually eaten for breakfast or at dinner. In the past it was common to call such places "Appa Kade" or hopper boutiques. The preparation was also different. Instead of the common gas cooker of today it was the usual hearth lit mainly with coconut leaves to get a moderate heat. In addition to the pan on which the hopper was done there was another clay pot with some burning coconut husks that was placed on the pan thus the hopper was cooked in between two fires. Hoppers made that way are said to be tastier than the hoppers made in the present way on the gas stove.

He and his wife tried to make hoppers according to that recipe for five days and found it was going well. He decided to sell hoppers from the sixth day. As he was just getting ready to cook his hoppers in the evening, the same old woman appeared from nowhere. She was his first customer. She bought two hoppers for two rupees and wished Premaratne all the success and went away. He could not believe his eyes when as the old woman was leaving the grocery there was virtually a line of people to buy hoppers from him. That was the last he heard from that old woman. He does not know where she is now.

The trend continued. He and his wife continued to work hard to produce the quantity while maintaining the quality. A good hopper must be light, crispy, creamy in taste, presentable and must have the unique hopper aroma. To maintain these qualities there are no short cuts. For instance Premaratne grinds his rice at home so the purity is maintained. If rice is ground at a commercial grinding place there is a chance of rice flour mixing with other batches of rice thus contaminating the flour and resulting in the spoiling of the taste and the quality.

As the demand increased Premaratne found he could not cope and he wanted to make more hoppers faster. He experimented with increasing the number of gas cookers and learnt the

The Fastest 'Hopper'

finer points of how to work with multiple cookers. Today he uses 30 cookers. It is a treat to see him move from one cooker to another pouring the mixture, checking the progress of another and removing the cooked crispy hoppers. His target is to increase the number to 50. Even otherwise there is none who matches his productivity in Sri Lanka. He therefore is the fastest hopper maker in Sri Lanka and thus perhaps the fastest hopper maker in the world.

Premaratne attributes his success to the commitment to the quality and consistency of his product. He does his job with passion and he is proud of his product. He is a devoted Buddhist who practices meditation regularly; this, he says is the reason for his happiness and success.

As night falls, a steady stream of customers arrive at the Premaratnes' shop. Small children, working women on their way home - everyone it seems, wants hoppers for dinner. Premaratne's wife hands a customer a bag filled with hot, steaming hoppers, straight from the fire. He breaks off a piece of golden brown crust and nibbles it, an expression of contentment spreading over his face as it melts in his mouth. Perfection indeed.

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