The Gourmet Locales Of The Streets

Posted on



Roast chicken stand on Abdul Hameed Street

Sri Lanka has a unique culture of street food, differentiated mainly by city of origin and sale. A fact that reflects in the slight differences of preparation and presentation, based on the region the said food is found in. Elements of the area the food draws its roots from inevitably finds its way into the dishes that are sold widely throughout the Island.

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Commercial districts are most likely to be heavily populated with street food vendors, as is evident on any journey to Pettah, which inevitably crosses paths with the said population in folds of ten. I stood testament to this claim as I made my way

through the weaving streets which completes the spider web that is Pettah. The hustle of my surroundings were no light matter with hosts of people making their way to the bus stands and train stations on their way home, evidently the peak time for street food sales.

Sago is a type of starch extracted from the pith of various tropical palm stems, a popular food item in Sri Lanka consumed in different forms including the congee preparation

My first encounter with a street food vendor came at the end of Sea Street, where I happened upon a sago congee stall. Sago is a type of starch extracted from the pith of various tropical palm stems, a popular food item in Sri Lanka, consumed in different forms including the congee preparation. A brief conversation with the vendor revealed that he has been in the business for 23 years, a phenomenally long life span for a simplistic occupation. The simple stall was a mobile one, fitted with two large containers to hold the ingredients and an umbrella canopy. The enthralling display of him pouring the gooey congee from one glass to another prior to serving it, is in itself an art form.

My second stop was at a vendor who had on display a much larger variety of food items largely composed of crisps and a variety of nuts. The enticing selection on offer, emanated a savoury aroma and promised much in the way of taste judging from its mouthwatering quality. In fact the smell of the crisps frying in the back of the stall attracted many customers into the by-lane from the main street. The structure which was an affixed one with its intense fluorescent light was a contrast to the simplicity of the sago congee stall. Peanuts, cashews, fried manioc crisps and savoury mixtures were stacked neatly, with smearings of chillie and salt – indeed a spicy treat for the taste buds.

“Ada” is actually a traditional Kerala delicacy involving rice parcels encased in a dough made of rice flour

A small stall on the edge of the pavement, sheltered by a large umbrella as most of these structures, were caught my attention. A simple glass shelf upon a wooden table was the entirety of the stall but an extensive range of food items were on offer. Pancakes made into small rolls with a Pani pol stuffing, Lavariya, Ada, Seeniku and a host of other food items were available in the shelf and I proceeded to taste the few items that I was introduced to just then, having seen most of the others before. The majority of these food items are derived from other more popular dishes

in neighbouring countries, I came to learn following a brief chat with the friendly proprietor who proceeded to explain that Ada is actually a traditional Kerala delicacy involving rice parcels encased in a dough made of rice flour. Most of these food items also had a sweet taste except for the Samosa that was available. The Samosa, a triangular patty stuffed on occasions with vegetables, mutton or fish as they were on this occasion were a popular food item, sold across the Island. As I watched in envy, three youngsters walked away with a bagful of Samosa, disappearing into the crowded street.

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Abdul Hameed Street in Pettah is filled to the brim with street vendors serving a wide variety of foods that would require much time to taste and comment on. Highlight food items included a stall of pickles, which I later found out has been in operation at the exact venue for more than 25 years, passed down generationally as a family enterprise. Mango, guava and Ceylon olives were popular delicacies, served in small polythene bags with the addition of chillie, salt and vinegar. Achcharu, pickle typically made with unripe fruit is largely popular throughout the Island and I know this from personal experience having been an avid fan of the pickle in my school years. The temptation clearly hasn’t ceased over the years considering I proceeded to taste as much of the varieties on offer as I could. The fragrance of the fruits always attracts a flurry of customers as was evident from the queue lining up near the stall.

A few feet from the pickle stall I came upon a more established, larger scale street food vendor, who served staples as opposed to snacks and savouries. The stall was run amok with waiters rushing to serve the hungry customers who had before them a range of food items in the range of string hoppers, hoppers, Parata and even rice, served with beef tripe curry, roast chicken, mutton and prawn curry among an unimaginable number of others. My attempts to taste the cuisine was ill fated, not being able to pick out one from the choices on offer, let alone eat all of it. The smell of roasting chicken guided a major proportion of passersby into the stall for a taste of their favourite indulgence.

As I bid farewell to the streets buzzing with activity way past sunset, I left behind me a larger part of the Sri Lankan street food industry unexplored, but the little I saw of it holds great promise of being an integral part of cuisine, which lends to the

country’s identity.

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