The Hot Spice of Rice and Curry

Posted on

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No one who has visited Sri Lanka can forget our rice and curry. Rice is the staple;

curries of every sort serve to provide the other necessary ingredients for nutrition and taste.

Sri Lankans are anything but undernourished. It is generally understood that the rice must be served in miniature mountains and that the curries, whatever their bases may be, should be hot. ‘Spicy’ does not quite convey the right sensation, and although chilli is a spice of sorts, we use the name to encompass much less violent substances like cinnamon, cardamom, cloves and so on.

The main thing about rice and curry meals is that they are never ever the same in taste. And, for most Sri y Lankans, rice and curry can be downed at ever meal, including breakfast. This has resulted, naturally, in our being obliged to import rice from time to time. However much we grow-and from the air, much of the countryside is a patchwork of green, gold and brown rice-fields-hungry mouths are there for more. To visitors with sensitive palates and delicate digestions, the average home-cooked rice and curry is a test of their taste-buds, nasal nerves and lachrymal ducts. A newcomer to such a repast soon sniffs, sheds copious tears and gasps with the shock of it. So, the more elite and the larger hotels are obliged to restrain their cooks and turn out mild and watered-down versions, scorned by the masses and jeered at by even the hotel staff who, well away from the clientele tuck into torrid platefuls to keep themselves in trim.

Sri Lankans with built-in protection from the curries, are totally miserable if deprived of their favorite food. Huge quantities of the more vital ingredients accompany them to far away lands they may move to and in many overseas workplaces, cooks are shipped out who can keep the curry eaters from Sri Lanka (and themselves) happily supplied with regular quantities of the right tasting stuff.

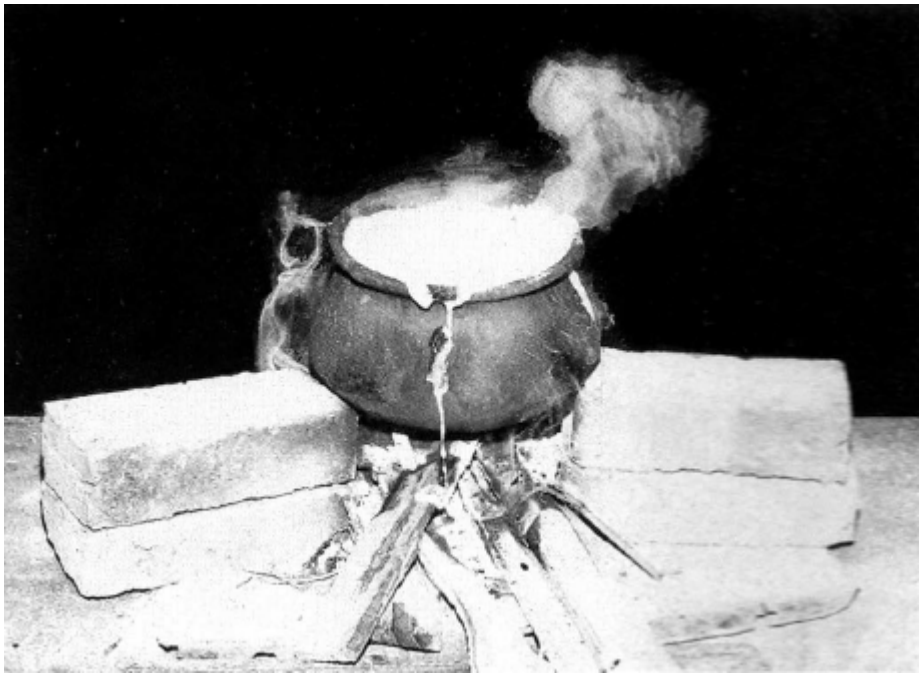
However, nothing can compare with what our local ladies called ‘cookies’ dish up. An American calls quite a different object a cookie, but you cannot call our cookies objects. They are experienced, skilful, buxom ladies who use their hands, mainly, to manufacture an amazing assortment of delicious meals.

Good cookies are hard to find these days, especially in towns and cities where they are unhappy with modern cooking utensils and gadgetry. An average cookie will simply break down when asked to operate an electric or gas cooker or use aluminium pots and pans, pressure cookers and the like.

But give her a nice, cosy kitchen with a wood fire, all the clay pots she needs and

the rudest of utensils-and of course the ingredients – she will, with great regularity, reward you with the most wonderful meals imaginable. One must never interfere with a cookie. Even a gentle suggestion about ho much chilli to add to the fish-curry can earn you a muttered threat or a look of utter scorn. Just leave her alone, or better still, with a male helper. The right kind of male helper does much to improve the flavour but can delay the meal preparations as well. The wrong kind of male helper can ruin a meal. Choose your men with care and if you like, get the cookie’s approval.

An antique coconut scraper with ornate carvings – now a museum piece.



A pot of rice boiling on a typical Sri Lankan hearth.

A cookie settles down to her own meal in a clay adiwalanda seated in front of the fireplace in the kitchen.

Multitudinous articles and many books are in print which concern rice and curry food. The main thing is that rice and curry means simply more rice than curries. More curry than rice is a very unhappy and civilised sort of offering to a nervous eater. The average rice and curry, Sri Lanka style must have at least five different additions, not all of them curries to interest a Sri Lankan. More fastidious gourmets insist on ten. I know families in the Deep South who literally conceal miniature mountains of delicious brown, unpolished rice with an incredible assortment of curries, all of them with liberal proportions of chilli.

A basic rice and curry requires one fish (or beef or chicken) curry, two different vegetables, one portion of fried crispy stuff like papadam, a mallum of chopped leave and coconut and a gravy or hoddha, of spiced and cooked coconut milk. In addition, there is dhal (lentils) and a fiery coconut sambol with plenty of chilli, juice and a fragment or two of the prized Maldivian fish. You can then toss a fried egg on top of all this and tuck a bit of lovely mango chutney in a corner. If there is some

room on the plate (and in your tummy) a slice of deep fried fish can help and just for a variety a banana.

Ripe bananas of the sweet or sour-sweet variety are very popular with rice and curry eaters who like to combine sweetness with hotness and also suffer less from the fiery chilli. Southerners will toss buffalo curd along to help with the digestion.

And rice itself comes in a variety of forms. There are several varieties of Oryze sativa, which is what the botanists call this useful form of grass, and addicts are choosey about what should be placed in front of them. Some like the red-brown unpolished sort which has a lot of taste and built-in protein, others want slender pure-white grains, and there are some who will not touch a plateful unless it is of the very delicate and rounded pearly ‘samba’ variety. It is supposed, and I am inclined to agree, that the majority of Sri Lankans who are working have developed taste-buds of exceptional durability because of their addiction to chewing betel. Betel leaves are almost as an important a crop as spices, and chewing these with the addition of leathery tobacco, slaked lime and perhaps a clove or two provides one with a particularly durable tongue and mouth. This means that in order to taste food and drink more than the average quantities of sugar, salt, spices and, of course, chilli must go into each meal. It also means that one can drink hotter tea or coffee than most and also warm water to wash down the meal.

But all said and done, when you see Sri Lankans with a remarkably· large proportion having healthy bodies, shocks of black hair and those flashing smiles and lovely teeth, it could well be that this is due to, naturally, rice and curry! Where does a newcomer to Sri Lankan fare start? Much depends on his previous experimentation with exotic foods: Mexican is reasonably hot, as are too Indian and certain Indonesian offerings as well as Thai. Seasoned Sri Lankans have no difficulty in consuming vast quantities of these foods and also treating them with good-natured contempt.

Next, wangle an invitation to a private home in a small town and have a try. Chances are that the hosts are sympathetic and mindful of their guests’ reactions. And they are probably aware of spectacular after-effects described by former guests. So the real fiery stuff is still a few leagues away.

After a week or so of this, there will possibly be some adventures with the digestive system, but life would be ever so dull without internal upheavals, wouldn’t it? When one is really seasoned, so to speak, it is time for the real thing.

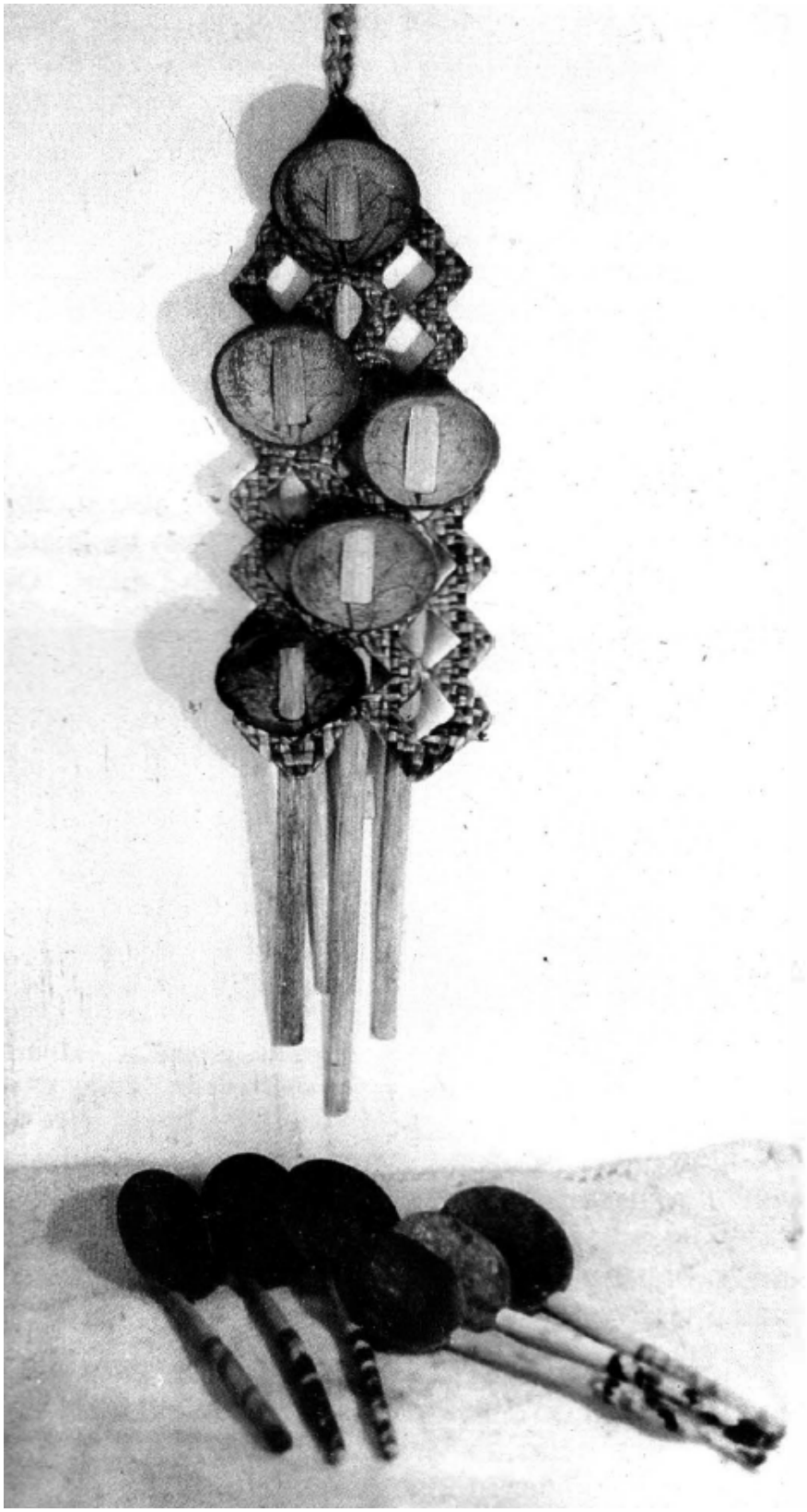
Enter one of the many small hotels along busy bus-stands or suburban street junctions and prepare for your Baptism of Fire.

And there are hotels and hotels. In the Deep South the fare is violent but varied and lavishly endowed with fish and coconut. In the hill country, vegetables and dried fish predominate. On the south and south-western coasts one often gets in addition to fish – prawns, crabs, squid and perhaps even octopus, curried of course.

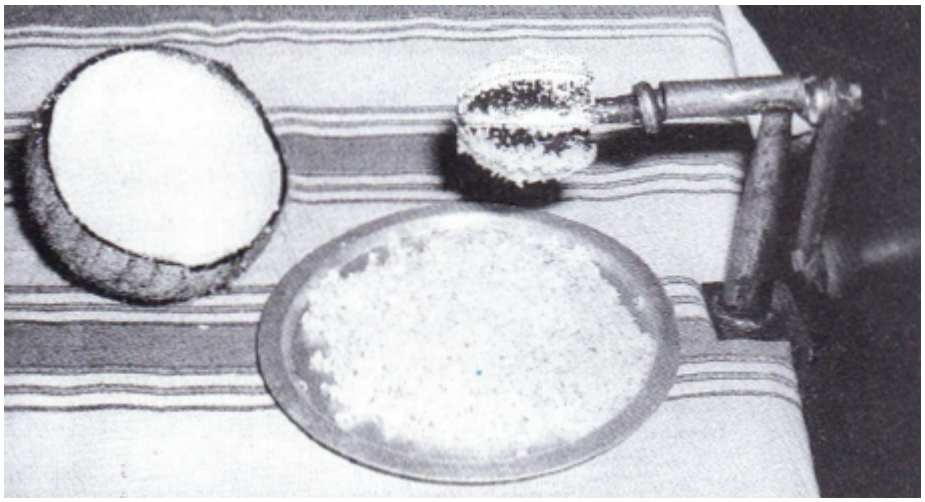
Up, North, the coconut percentage drops, the vegetables are less varied, but a lot of onions and chillies help make crab and chicken more exciting.

In wilder spots, game is surreptitiously sold as beef. It is more than usual to get chunks of venison, wild boar and naturally buffalo on your plate. There is nothing quite like fried dry buffalo strips lavishly dusted with chilli.

The combinations are endless and a Sri Lankan with an adventurous spirit and Spartan digestion may not be able to savour them all in a lifetime. Needless to add, there a good many centenarians around and they have all attributed their longevity to rice and curry. Lots of it!



Ladles made of coconut shell, which are used in Sri Lankan kitchens.



A modern coconut scraper for easier and quicker work in the kitchen (Suresh de silva)

Clay pots and covers used in the traditional Sri Lankan kitchens