The Leafy Plate

Posted on



If you ask most Sri Lankans what their favourite meal is, they'll probably tell you it's rice and curry. But a meal is more than just food, it's how it's packaged and presented as well. And for many Sri Lankans their rice is tastiest when eaten not on an ordinary plate, but on a banana leaf or nelum kole (lotus leaf). Similarly many sweets are baked wrapped in kenda kole (kenda leaf), an example of how Sri Lankans have incorporated the natural world into their cooking.

Words Duruthu Edirimuni Photographs Mahesh Prasantha

Sri Lankan history has left its imprints and authenticity in its spicy and aromatic cuisine, while gaining recognition and popularity as being one of the world's finest. Historians say that many of its foods are influenced by the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Malays, the Arabs, and the South Indians, all of whom have left their culinary

impression in the island.

While in the countryside, people tend to cook and eat mainly traditional foods, hesitating to try foods characteristic to other cultures, they also have still preserved the more ecologically sensitive practices of ancient communities such as the custom to cook and eat traditional foods in ‘disposable’, ‘degradable’ plates and bowls. The most famous of such throwaway plates are banana leaves, kenda leaves and nelum (lotus) leaves which also serve many purposes in Sri Lankan cooking shedding some light on this local serving tradition. While easy to cook with, cleaned banana leaves, which could be disposed of after the meal, were traditionally used as an alternative to plates. Futhermore when hot food is served on these leaves, it would impart a distinct aroma and taste to the food. Banana leaves are still utilised on auspicious and festive occasions but are much less common otherwise. The use of banana leaves as a “biological plate” has gained much popularity in many restaurants in the island as well.

Though its use has declined now, the time when banana leaves came into their own used to be during the paddy planting and harvesting seasons back in the day. During these times, lotus or banana leaves were the ideal container in which to serve meals for the hungry workers who worked outdoors in paddy fields for long hours and in some villages the practice still prevails.

When hot food is served on these leaves, the leaves add aroma and taste to the food.

Lamprais, which are parcels of fragrant rice, curries and accompaniments, wrapped in a banana leaf and baked, is a favourite prepared by the burgher community and a popular urban dish. Before using the fresh banana leaf as a wrapping, passing it over a flame to soften and make it flexible will also render a better taste. Alternatively, blanching the leaves in boiling water for a few seconds renders it pliable for easier handling as well.

One of the signature dishes in the South is fish baked in banana leaf with olu rice, which is technically not rice but seeds of a native lotus flower. The neutralising gotu kola sambol on the side makes this dish truly Sinhalese.

Banana and Kenda leaves are also seen used as a wrapping for grilling food and as such it contains the juices and prevents the food from getting burnt.

Another two unusual types of food which are made with the aid of kenda kole are halapa and vandu aappa. Halapa in particular will intrigue anyone who is not used to eating it. It is a flat sweet wrapped in the leaf which must be peeled away to taste the sweet. The unique flavour of the Kenda leaf is infused in to these sweets, which give them a characteristic taste.

There is also a procedure as to what is to be served where and when on an ubiquitous leaf. According to many historians initially this procedure was thought to be for some superstitious reason but it does have a practical purpose. According to the traditions of the Central Province, the broader side of a leaf is to be placed to the right since most of us use our right hands and it would thus be easy to eat from the wider end. The tip of the leaf would be to the left of the person eating so that the white tender part of the leaf will be outward and slightly green part inward. Generally hot food is served inside and the green part will bear it. Banana leaves impart a subtle sweet flavour when food is served or wrapped in them. Salt, pickle, fruit, parippu (dal/lentils) all have their own places reserved on the banana leaf but the nelum and kenda kole aren’t used as such.

Banana and Kenda leaves are also seen used as a wrapping for grilling food and contain the juices and prevent the food from getting burnt whilst at the same time giving off a faint flavor.

Banana leaf, according to historians is hygienic and has medicinal value tested over centuries. Furthermore oil does not stick to the banana leaf as opposed to a plate.

Banana leaves serve many purposes in Asian cooking, from adding flavour to foods cooked within them, to simply being used as a colourful and exotic background for serving-plates and party platters.

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