

The Man with the Magic Potions

Posted on



An extremely cordial salesman, Sunil never fails to satisfy his customers



The range of kenda that goes into Sunil's unique multivitamin infusion

At 6:30 on a weekend morning, the road is quiet, unsullied by the sounds and smells of the usual workday traffic. Morning walkers pass by at a leisurely pace. All of a sudden, this peaceful scene is disturbed by a flurry of movement at the roadside. As Sunil Kumara begins to unload his plastic pitchers and pots, people gather at his stall, impatient for the potion master to set up shop.

Words Jennifer Paldano **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara

They've come for Sunil's famous 'kenda', a traditional morning drink made from a variety of aromatic and medicinal plants and millets. Sri Lankans have been drinking the stuff for ages, but what was once a trial is now a treat, with skilled chefs like Sunil working their magic and making kenda as delicious as it is healthy.

The hive of activity around Sunil's stall this morning is a familiar spectacle for those that live in the area. Vehicles slow and stop, and loyal customers make their way over to sample his latest kenda creation. You'll spot foreigners among the melee too, led by local guides eager to offer a taste of traditional Sri Lanka culinary culture.

Demand is high, but Sunil never loses his cool, serving kenda, washing the empties and exchanging pleasantries with a steady stream of customers hungry for their first meal of the day. It's a satisfying state of affairs for a man whose day starts at two o'clock in the morning and only finishes once the last drop of kenda is gulped down in the afternoon.

For a first-time visitor to Sunil's kiosk, the word 'multivitamin' has the sound of a mantra, so often, is it recited by the hoard of waiting customers. It's the name of one of his most popular drinks, a unique blend of several herbal soups.

It's not the only local favourite. Unlike most kenda sellers, Sunil serves at least eight

different types of herbal drinks each day, offering remedies for a range of disorders. Who needs protein-infused commercial energy drinks when you can build physical strength and stamina with kenda made from vel penela and kollu (better known as horse gram). Keep sugar at bay with a drink of neeramulliya (marsh barbell) and kurakkan millet, or try bitter gourd soup sweetened with a piece of jaggery. Soothe the irritation of gastritis with kenda made from karapincha, the aromatic curry leaf used to spice up so many Sri Lankan dishes, and the flower of the kitul fruit.

Open seven days a week, Sunil prepares nearly 250 glasses of kenda every day

Garlic kenda helps with body aches, while polpala (*Aerva lanata*) is a cure for urine infections. Sunil cooks up the leaves of the margosa tree that aid in the purification of the blood and prescribes kohila (*Lasia*) kenda for the reduction of toxins in the intestines and the prevention of intestinal disorders. Hathawariya (wild asparagus) is good for cooling the body, and gotu kola fends off sinusitis.

Kenda cooked with coconut milk is a tad too luxurious for the health conscious, prompting Sunil to make his drinks with water instead. The addition of rice – cooked in extra water for easy mashing – makes Sunil's kenda a more substantial meal. A pinch of salt suffices for flavour, but he offers a range of other dishes too, to satisfy the varied tastes of his loyal customers: packets of rice and string hoppers, roti with spicy onion paste, boiled cassava and sweet potatoes. It's an informal operation, with patrons happily helping themselves to provisions while waiting for their kenda to be served.

Open seven days a week, Sunil prepares nearly 250 glasses of kenda every day, selling at least 100 even on those days when the weather gods refuse to smile on his little roadside stall. Reasonably priced at 30 or 40 rupees each, depending on the type of drink, quality is always second to none. Rain or shine, good day or bad, you'll find Sunil there, serving up the drink he knows better than anyone else.

He has just one day off a month, commemorating each Poya full moon day volunteering at the temple in his village. He's happy to offer thanksgiving to the hand that has given him succour

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