The Oil Of The Isle

Posted on

Pile of split coconuts waiting to be dried and turned into koppara

The chatter of the workmen seemed faint as it echoed through the

obtrusive drone of the enormous machines that dried, cut and crushed the koppara (dried up split coconuts); a peculiar yet sweet aroma emanated from the piles of off-white, powdered raw material lying on the mill floor. As I carefully made my way through the sky-high mounds of dried up coconuts, I listened with awe to the fascinating story behind the making of coconut oil…

Words Kamalika Jayathilaka Photographs Prabath Chathuranga

We drove through voluminous plots of coconut estates in Veyangoda before reaching a solitary oil mill sitting beneath a grove of coconut palms. As we entered the large high-roofed building two mountainous piles of split coconuts greeted us at the door. They were different, not the usual yellowish brown but seemed a darker shade of red and smaller in size. To find answers to the numerous questions that surfaced my mind I approached a mill worker who took us out alongside the building to a shed-like open structure.

Outside this shed – which we soon learned was actually a large furnace where piles of husked coconuts were dried – were the usual yellow brown coconuts that we bring home from the store to make curry. Standing amongst the scattered coconuts were a few men splitting them, their hands roughened by years of hard work. The split halves of coconuts were then piled on the koppara massa (furnace for drying coconuts), on a slab under which a few fires were lit. After being kept on this platform for about three days being constantly turned, the coconut halves are dried up to the required level so that they can be easily removed from the shell, explained the mill worker. After being dried by the fires and having their shells removed, the reddish coconut halves are then named koppara. The removed coconut shells are sent separately to make charcoal and the koppara is then carried in baskets to add to the large piles within the mill.

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Inside the mill the koppara will remain a part of these large piles for close to a month until they reach the right texture and a precise level of crispness. They are then fed through a small hole in the ground: a mouth of a special machine that carries them up through a narrow tunnel-like device that cuts the koppara into tiny pieces by the ‘cutter’ on top. Across from this machine the crushed koppara is then

piled up ready to be fed through to the next machine, which is the drier. The drier has an enormous wood-powered furnace, which sends hot air through a series of pipes that in turn further dehydrates the tiny pieces of koppara.

The koppara is next loaded into the third machine, which crushes and grinds it once, and for the first time very little oil is actually seen dripping out from the bottom of the machine. This however, is nothing like the oil we know. On the contrary, a thick liquid the colour of mud is scantily squeezed out from within. This is then sent through pipes to a large tank in one dark corner of the oil mill. The residue of thick crushed *koppara* is put into another machine; and here, a byproduct is created in the process: ‘punnakku’, which feeds cows. This looks like dark brown sand and is mixed with water before being given to cows. Meanwhile, the once ground *koppara* is sent through yet another machine for the final round of crushing.

Every drop of oil that is produced through each of the machines is sent through pipes into a large storage tank that collects all the oil. Through a pipe that leads out from the tank this oil is pumped through to an intricate filter with a long line of taps that sends little streams of clear golden coconut oil, now filtered and clear, into a deep tray, which leads to yet another tank. Finally, large pipes lead the final, ready to use coconut oil into more storage tanks outside. As we walked out of the mill, one of the workers was pouring oil onto a large barrel tied to the back of a motor-cycle, which would be taking the oil out into the market to be sold.

Among the many products of the ‘Tree of Life’ – the tropical coconut palm-oil plays a significant role in the everyday lives of most Sri Lankans. Even though it was once considered unhealthy due to the high content of saturated fat, it is now believed that this fat is unique and different from any other, constituting a range of health giving properties. “Coconut oil is very good for you; dab some oil on your head when you have a headache, it will disappear in a second”, said the smiling mill owner who soon joined us, confirming my thoughts on its benefits, reminding me that we not only use it in the preparation of food but also as an antiseptic against insect bites, as hair oil and in the making of certain indigenous medicine and a line of other religious and cultural practices making coconut oil a must-have in every Sri Lankan home.

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