

The vanishing Bombai Mutai seller



Naufal carries his goods in a traditional contraption along the streets of Colombo

His brown weather beaten hands deftly place the pink gauzy strands of sweetness between two, thin pink wafers. I see little rapt faces with sparkling eyes standing impatiently in front of him, entranced by the sweet 'sandwich' he is making. I smile when I see eager little hands reach out to take the mouthwatering bombai mutai he holds out to them and savour it as it melts in their mouths. But not only children are fascinated by the fabled bombai mutai seller; adults also delight in the addictive taste of bombai mutai which he has on offer.

Words Imara de Chickera Photographs Indika de Silva and Mahesh Bandara

I gladly take the delicate little sandwich of whisper-thin wafers with cloud-like

floss in the centre, which the bombai mutai seller offers me, and hold it cautiously between my fingers. Then I tentatively bite into my first ever, bombai mutai 'sandwich' expecting a fluffy, sugary-sweet taste. Instead I am surprised by its rich flavour and the variety of sensations that explode on my tongue. First I experience the crispness of the wafer and then the, not-too-sweet, straw-like bombai mutai inside. Its coarseness surprisingly, just melts in my mouth. All the textures and flavours blend into a very addictive combination, and I can't wait to savour the next bite and the next.

Ask anyone who grew up in Sri Lanka about bombai mutai and you would find even grown-up men, with their eyes sparkling brightly, as they are instantly transported into their childhood, where hearing the merry tinkle of the bombai mutai seller's bell and enjoying the uncomplicated sweetness, marks some of the happiest moments in their lives. But sadly the bombai mutai seller is fast becoming a part of yesterday and is more present in memories than in real life. Many sellers have quit, due to the strenuous nature of the job involving miles and miles of walking in the sweltering sun and have turned to selling ice-cream and other more contemporary delights. There are a few who remain loyal to the trade. One seller M L Naufal carries his box contraption that contains the sweet goods as he makes the rounds in Colombo all seven days of the week. The neighbourhoods from Bambalapitiya to Wellawatte are alerted by the welcome tinkling of his bell.

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Haniffa who is known as "Bombai Mutai Uncle" tells me that he works with a family of bombai mutai makers who have been in business for 50 years. The founder was taught the recipe and the art of making bombai mutai by Indian tradesmen. The business is now taken over by his three sons who are faithfully continuing his simple legacy. As it is a very strenuous production process it is generally a male-oriented job. First, sugar and water are heated up in pots until the bubbling concoction becomes caramalised. This is poured into a large metal bowl into which food colouring is poured in, making it a translucent shade of magenta. The bowl is spun around and around and the caramel quickly reaches a pliant consistency. This is scooped up and allowed to cool till it can be touched by bare hands; then starts the strenuous stretching process, while the magenta caramel is still fairly hot. After being repeatedly stretched and twisted it is placed

in a mixture of flour and coconut oil and before it dries out it is pulled and twisted and stretched again for ten minutes in a process which turns it into a straw-like substance. The drier it gets the lighter the pink becomes and then this soft straw is broken into smaller sections and packed in one kilo portions. These are then collected by the sellers who sell it across the island.

Haniffa's day starts at 4.30 in the morning and by 9.30 he hits the road with three kilos of bombai mutai in his blue bucket. With his tinkling little bell, he walks purposefully through the busiest parts of the busy Kinross Beach in Wellawatte. The speed with which he walks is quite astounding; within moments he covers a large amount of ground. Every second is precious to him.

With a warm smile and a friendly word for each customer he brings joy to entire families as he happily serves up his bombai mutai. Being a father of a six year old son and a baby daughter of six months he says the best part of his job is seeing little children run to him and surround him with joy and then devour the bombai mutai he sells. Never stationary in one place, he goes from city to city across the island, including Jaffna and Katharagama. During these periods he makes churches and temples his home and even villagers welcomingly open their doors to this shy, unassuming man with friendly eyes.

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Haniffa says that his trade allows him to see new faces everyday and visit towns and villages across the island. "Being a bombai mutai seller is all I know to do and I'd never want to do anything else," he says simply, with a smile. In a world where everything is changing and nothing lasts forever, the bombai mutai seller and his delicious sweet treat are fast vanishing. But I hope that despite the odds, the merry ting-a-ling of the bombai mutai seller's bell will continue to be heard for many more decades to come.

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