



A scrumptious looking bunch of grapes

At the bidding of the person who stood by the door that led to the small vineyard, I paused to take off my slippers before entering. At once my feet sank into the red soil that decorated the ground and I stood there enjoying the cool comforting feel of the soil. Slowly, I let my gaze wander over the vines that wound overhead making a canopy. Sunlight filtered through the green leaves dappling the ground and presenting an enclosed world.

Words Krishani Peiris Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Damith Wickramasinghe

The stark rays of the sun bathed the area as we made our way through a narrow road, bumping and swaying at times. Peering through the window of the vehicle, I beheld a scenery unlike any I had seen before - the entire extent was dotted with greenery and with land plots covered in red hued soil. Many people were visible in these land plots, hunched over and scurrying back and forth, as they toiled and tended the lands in the gathering heat. Passing through this enchanting landscape, we arrived at our destination - a vineyard in the midst of Urumpirai, Jaffna.

Eagerly wandering around the vineyard, I grappled with my overwhelming curiosity and tried to contain my delight at the unbelievable prospect of being in a vineyard right here in Sri Lanka. Separate plots of land each housing a small vineyard fenced in with pol athu (woven coconut leaves) and covered in nets surrounded the area and through the netted covering I was able to glimpse the vibrant green colour of the grapevine leaves. □Presently

stepping through to one of the vineyards, I observed the unfamiliar setting around me. Somewhat thin concrete beams were propped up on the ground providing support while also acting as connectors for the trellis that wove overhead along which the grapevines draped and crept. Unripened bunches of grapes, green in colour, and scrumptious looking ripened grapes with a purplish blue tinge decorated the vines all around. Unable to stop myself, I cautiously reached out and plucked one to savour the taste. A flavour that resided somewhere between sweetness and sourness enveloped my senses and provided a refreshing comfort that quenched my thirst.

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Smiling at my antics, the person engaged in looking after the vineyard explained that this particular variety of grapes is named Israel Blue and is recognisable by the purplish blue hue that adorns its peel. He further explained that there are several different types of grapes used by cultivators in Sri Lanka such as Cardinal, Black Muscat, Muscat MI and French MI. These varieties apparently differ by colour, size and flavour and even in their usage such as being used as fresh fruits or in wine production.

The cultivation of grapes (*Vitis vinifera*) or viticulture has a long history, spanning many thousands of years with the first traces being unearthed in an area known to many historians as the Near East - which originally encompassed the Balkan states of southeastern Europe and later the countries of southwestern Asia between the Mediterranean Sea and India.

The oldest winery found to this date is located in Armenia. Though the cultivation of grapes is believed to have begun in Europe, due to the fruit's ability to adapt to various climates, many countries have been able to dabble their hands in grape production with varying results. Furthermore, the economic lifespan of a grapevine is about 30 years.

Dry zone areas armed with proper irrigation is ideal for viticulture. Well drained soil that is one to two meters deep, endowed with a pH of 6.5 to 7.5 and at least a three month dry spell for pruning are adjudged as ideal conditions for grape cultivation. Furthermore as high temperatures and strong winds can damage crops, measures to protect the plants from these elements are also important.

Presently stepping outside and traversing from one plot of land to the next, I was able to observe the cultivation of grapes during some of its various stages. Peering into an adjacent vineyard, I soon discovered small vines that were about two to three weeks old, slowly creeping upwards draped on the wooden sticks. Another plot of land with the earth freshly turned up and a mound of sand piled in its midst attested to a spot allocated for a new vineyard.

According to our informant, there are several stages that need to be followed in the cultivation of grapes - obtaining cuttings, rooting of the cuttings, planting the rooted cuttings in a trench, building a trellis for each vine, pruning the grapevine and harvesting. The most prominent mode of cultivating plants is through the usage of stem pieces, obtained during the time of pruning. Then these stem pieces are sealed within a container made out of polythene and kept in a refrigerator or a shaded place. During this time the field is prepared according to a system known as the Pandol system and is followed by the planting of the rooted cuttings with proper fertilizer. The pruning of the vines takes place next and ultimately, after about three months, the ripened fruits are harvested from the vines. He further remarked that these methods may vary from one cultivator to the next, as there are several different techniques to cultivate grapes.

Shading my eyes against the bright sunshine that engulfed the area, I took a deep breath taking in the smell of fresh soil mingled with traces of fertilizer. Having learnt the basic intricacies of grape cultivation I found myself in awe of the tremendous dedication needed. Looking around the periphery with the earth covered in rich red soil, perfect for cultivation, it is clear as to why Jaffna has become a haven for grape growers in Sri Lanka.

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