Tropical nectar of the Gods

Posted on
The toddy tapper climbing the first coconut tree

Arrack, Sri Lanka’s national drink, is the world’s only naturally fermented alcoholic beverage. Simply harvested from the stems of the coconut palm, a host of different fermentation techniques creates a range of beverages that compare favourably with whisky, brandy or rum.

Words and Photographs Kurt Rolfes

The toddy tapper makes his way up
to tap the flower stems

Years ago, when I first arrived in Sri Lanka to stay with my daughter, she said, “Dad, we’ve been invited to a beach party this weekend”.

Travelling about a half hour south of Colombo, we arrived at a little café bar on a stretch of palm-lined beach in Mount Lavinia. I was introduced to around a dozen of our host’s relatives, each of whom had brought a different type of Sri Lankan drum, and soon learned that drumming is a big part of Sri Lankan culture. Most of our host’s relatives were either current or past members of cultural drum groups.

As exotic rhythms began to fill the tropical air, I noticed a large wooden picnic table with several buckets of crushed ice, a case of ginger beer and other mixers, and five or six vessels that looked like standard square Scotch whisky bottles.

Having had a closer look I asked my daughter, “What’s arrack?” “It’s the Sri Lankan national drink” she said, “made from coconut toddy.” Coconut toddy I had sampled in Singapore and Malaysia, but this was something new! “But be careful,” she cautioned. “Some of it can reach 90 per cent alcohol.”

Throwing caution to the wind, I filled a large glass with ice, and poured in equal parts arrack and ginger beer. What a delightful drink, I mused. And mused, and mused and mused through four more. The last couple of glasses must have been the high proof stuff for the drum beats got louder and more provocative and the last memory of my first Sri Lankan drum and arrack beach party was dancing in the surf.

And that, as my daughter has reminded me ever since, was my inglorious introduction to Sri Lanka’s national drink.

Over time, I’ve refined my appreciation and consumption of arrack through trial and tipple, and have also conducted considerable research into its production and history. Arrack is the world’s only naturally fermented alcoholic beverage. It is derived from sap collected from the cut flower stem of a coconut palm *(Cocos nucifera)* and begins its transformation to arrack as fermented coconut toddy.

Every day at dawn toddy tappers, usually working on the coconut-rich south-west coast of Sri Lanka, will climb the first tall palm in their coconut grove to collect the sap, which has dripped overnight into a clay pot hanging beneath each cut flower stem. This toddy is deposited in a clay collection pot strapped around the waist.

Then, like a tightrope walker, the tapper makes his way precariously to the next tree on connected ropes which are usually at least 10 metres off the ground. These hemp ropes can tie as many as 20 trees together in an ingenious coconut tree collection web. He only needs to climb the first tree and then travel from tree to tree on the connected ropes until his collection pot is full.

Each tree can produce several litres of toddy per day

Just before dusk each day, he travels the same route of ropes to trim the end of each flower stem with a sharp knife to promote the flow of coconut nectar into the suspended pot for collection the following morning.

Each tree can produce as much as several litres of toddy per day. This toddy is poured into wooden barrels made of local teak or *halmilla* wood located at a nearby collection point, where it begins its fermentation. When the alcohol content reaches between five and eight per cent, it is then transported to the distillery to begin the final fermentation process before being distilled. This is also the window in which the toddy itself is ready for drinking. Within hours it has reached about the same alcoholic content as beer or wine. For thousands of years, fermented toddy has been a popular drink throughout most of tropical Asia.

Once it arrives at the distillery and the ideal alcoholic content has been determined, it’s ready to be distilled in a two-step process using either a pot still, continuous still or a combination of the two.

A ‘low wine’ is produced in the first step, of between 20 and 40 per cent alcohol. The final step results in a distillate of between 60 and 90 per cent alcohol. The majority of arrack is between 33 and 50 per cent alcohol, which is similar to most internationally distilled liquors.

The entire distillation process is completed within 24 hours. Various blends of coconut arrack are then possible. The extracted spirit may be sold raw, repeatedly distilled or filtered, or transferred to halmilla barrels for aging for up to 15 years. This aging in wood and consequent blending determines the colour, flavour and fragrance of the final product.

Arrack is certainly the most highly favoured and consumed alcoholic beverage in Sri Lanka and is classified in three categories: premium aged arrack has been aged in barrels for up to 15 years after distillation; the premium clear variety is not aged but is distilled or filtered several times to soften its taste; and common arrack is usually mixed with cheap neutral spirits.

Coconut arrack is usually consumed neat, on the rocks or with ginger beer, or other mixers such as cola, lemonade or tonic. It can also be substituted in cocktails that call for whisky, brandy or rum. The final aged product, in my well-earned opinion, compares in quality and taste to any similarly distilled, stored and aged spirit. And usually at half the price!

So enjoy the Sri Lankan national drink, but proceed with caution, as with any alcoholic beverage. Or you may end up like I did on my first taste, dancing to the beat of drums in the pounding tropical surf and not remembering a damn thing after that.